

Zhenyu Zhang*

Para-kin relationship between fans and idols: a qualitative analysis of fans' motivations for purchasing idol-dolls

<https://doi.org/10.1515/omgc-2023-0019>

Received March 15, 2023; accepted July 17, 2023

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to examine how “mother fans” impact on the existing patterns of parasocial relationships between fans and idols and to gain deeper insights into the motivations underlying the purchase of idol dolls. Additionally, by including the experiences and perspectives of male idol fans, the research seeks to broaden the understanding of fan behavior and enhance comprehension of the motivations driving idol-doll consumption.

Design/methodology/approach: Taking idol-doll buyers as research objects, this research conducted textual analysis and in-depth interviews to explore fans' motivations for purchasing idol dolls.

Findings: Idol doll purchases are driven by emotional attachment, particularly among mother fans who seek to establish a sense of control and maintain a mother–child relationship. Additionally, buying idol dolls can also serve as a disguise for girlfriend fans to cover up their romantic fantasies about their idols. Moreover, idol dolls serve as semiotic identifiers, attracting like-minded fans and gaining community recognition. It should be noted that male idol fans, who are considered deviant from the masculine normative, face scrutiny in female-dominated communities, needing further proof of authenticity.

Practical implications: This research promotes understanding the motivations behind idol-doll purchases and can assist marketers in catering to the emotional needs of fans, particularly mother fans, by designing and marketing dolls that resonate with their desired sense of attachment.

Social implications: By recognizing and emphasizing the positive aspects of fan activities, this study contributes to the ongoing process of de-demonization and

Article note: This paper is based on the author's master thesis in The London School of Economics and Political Science. This article underwent double-blind review as other articles.

***Corresponding author: Zhenyu Zhang**, Penn State University, University Park, 16802-1503, USA, E-mail: zqz5438@psu.edu

normalization of fandom. Additionally, this research also seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the struggles and emotional needs of the Chinese young generation.

Originality/value: This study explores the under-researched mother-fan group's emotional needs and their motivations of purchasing idol-dolls. It also acknowledges the distinct perspectives and experiences of male idol fans, providing a fresh and unique viewpoint on idol-doll consumption.

Keywords: China; generation Z; idol-dolls; mother fans; para-kin relationship; participatory culture

1 Introduction

Since 2016, idol dolls¹ based on celebrities' appearances have been marketed as a new means for Chinese fans to express their strong affection for their beloved idols, leading to the creation of a new Chinese fandom community. On Weibo (one of the most popular social media platforms in China), the online community for idol-doll-creators, buyers, and idol fans now has amassed more than 460,000 followers and is highly female-dominated. On this platform, it is common for fans, who may have a vast collection of idol dolls, to post adorable photos and share their experiences in dressing up and applying makeup to their "babies." According to the latest consumer report, among the idol-doll players, the post-2000 generation represents the highest proportion, reaching 43 %, followed by the post-1995 generation ranks second, with a proportion at 26 % ("2021 Cotton Doll Players Insight Report" 2021). Thus, Generation Z, individuals, individuals born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s (Priporas et al. 2020), actively engages with idol-doll purchases through interactive social media platforms.

In the era of participatory fandom and fan economy, fans' consumption preferences and their perceived relationship with idols have become subjects of academic research. The way fans interact with celebrities has been defined as parasocial interaction—the nonreciprocal, imaginary interaction between fans and media personae (Liebers and Schramm 2019; Yan and Yang 2021). In recent years, fans actively engaging in the parasocial relationship fantasize about a close kinship with idols, assuming that they could control, or at least have a noticeable degree of influence on their idols. On Chinese social media, there is a trend where fans,

¹ Idol-cotton-dolls originated in South Korea and are now popular in East Asian countries. Idol dolls often feature intricate detailing, including accurate facial features, hairstyles, and outfits that resemble the idols' iconic looks. Some idol dolls also come with additional accessories, such as stage costumes, musical instruments, or props associated with the idols' performances.

especially females, refer to themselves as idols' mothers, aunts, or sisters. While previous research has extensively examined parasocial relationships based on heterosexual norms and fans' romantic fantasies about idols (i.e., "girlfriend/wife fans" of idols), little has been known about "mother fans",² a new and burgeoning form of fan–idol relationship—"para-kin relationship".

This research employs textual analysis and conducts in-depth interviews to explore the motivations for purchasing idol dolls. It examines the para-kin relationship between "mother fans" and idols to better understand fans' motivations. This study also aims to investigate how Gen Z seeks emotional console, recognition, and acknowledgement within the fan community through the purchase of idol-dolls. Additionally, the findings of this research could advance the existing fandom studies regarding parasocial relationships between fans and idols. It could shed light on the struggle and emotional needs of the Chinese young generation, as well as the expression of contemporary Chinese women's sexual desires.

2 Literature review

2.1 Participatory fans and Gen Z

Fans are individuals with a deep, positive emotional conviction about someone or something famous (Duffett 2013). They actively shape their own culture by reconstructing elaborate interpretations of their cult objects (Jenkins 1992; Lewis 1992). The emergence of the Internet has empowered fans, transforming them from passive consumers of media products to active participants in (re)creating and sharing new content (Burgess and Green 2009).

The Internet and social media have played an integral part in the expansion and the accelerated growth of participatory fans (Zhang 2015). Previous studies have shown that Generation Z, as a group of young people who are being tech-savvy from a young age, can utilize social media platforms proficiently to create and share expressive animations, music (videos), reimagined stories, and other forms of art related to fandom (Djafarova and Bowes 2021; Reinikainen et al. 2020). In China, fans have grown from a powerless marginalized subcultural group to the third power in the entertainment industry (Wang 2019). Fan voting now plays a decisive part in Plebiscitary TV, where idol candidates compete with each other to win the chance to perform on the stage. Moreover, fans also participate in online collective activities

2 "Mother fans," refer to fans (typically female fans) who are co-cultivating idols/celebrities as their elder female relatives. They claim themselves as mother of the idol and are indulgent to idols, taking them as cute, innocent kids who need their extra care (Yan and Yang 2021).

such as massive purchases of idol-endorsed products and managing comments to defend their idols (Zhang 2019). These fan activities require a huge investment of time, money, and energy, through which fans gradually develop a strong attachment to the idols they love. Moreover, occasionally, a two-way interaction might happen. That is, celebrities sometimes would interact with fans via social media, which could significantly increase fans' stickiness to idols (Frederick et al. 2014). It should be noted that while many studies have examined the shift in fandom activities to a more digital and interactive form (Doherty 2020), this research plans to focus more on Gen Z's material practice as fans.

2.2 The relationship between fans and Idols

Fans may fantasize that they are having an intimate relationship with celebrities. The virtual interactions between fans and idols via new media platforms result in the formation of "virtual intimacy" and parasocial attachment, which represents a strong emotional bond (Stever 2017; Wu 2020).

Many fandom studies on parasocial relationships have discussed "girlfriend/wife fans", who take themselves as idols' girlfriend or wife. This relationship is based on heterosexual norms and fans' romantic fantasies about idols. It is also worth noting that, recently, a relatively new form of fans, "mother/sister/aunt fans", have become popular. They are co-cultivating idols as their elder female relatives, who are indulgent to idols, taking them as cute, innocent kids who need their extra care (Yan and Yang 2021). Unlike other fans, instead of creating digital content, such as fan fiction, songs, or videos, their major creations are idols per se. In the process of fostering idols, para-kin fans are highly self-organized with clear divisions of duties and responsibilities and a strong dedication to action-taking (Yan and Yang 2021). Previous research on mother fans, though scarce, has revealed the reasons why fans claim themselves as idols' mothers. However, the application of parasocial relation theory to explain the popularity of this specific fan type has not been explored (David et al. 2019; Xu and Meng 2021).

2.3 The motivations behind fans purchases

2.3.1 Fans as collectors

Building upon Bourdieu's (1984) theories of cultural and social capital, Fiske (1992), in his analysis of fan culture, put forward the concept of "popular cultural capital". The term "subcultural capital" (Thornton 2001) is also widely used to describe the

knowledge and tangible objects that fans own. “Subcultural capital” allows them to maintain interpersonal connections, as well as gain social status and prestigious privileges within fan communities (Baym 2000; Napier 2007). Therefore, as a form of valuable cultural capital, fans collecting cult films, TV merchandise, and idol-related products could be frequently observed. It is also argued that fans collect with the intention of searching for authenticity, the establishment of meaning, and the construction of identity (Geraghty 2014). They wish to be an important part of the entertainment history and want to “redefine it by amassing a collection that represents considerable financial investment and signifies their own cultural capital” (Geraghty 2014).

2.3.2 Psychological benefits

2.3.2.1 Pursuit of psychological gratification

Psychological benefits, including but not limited to a sense of fulfillment, recognition, and gratification, are important incentives for fans to purchase idol-related products. Fans, as individuals or communities, always need a vent to express their worship, admiration, and infatuation for celebrities. The purchase of spin-off products could be considered as fans’ consistent and intense emotional investment in their idols (Santero 2016). More importantly, through their purchase, fans are convinced that their monetary devotion would somehow benefit their idols in terms of winning a reputation or higher status in the competitive entertainment industry. This sense of mission and fulfillment gives fans the belief that their efforts are recognized and vital for idols, fulfilling their need to be needed (Wang 2014). This sense of accomplishment, in turn, would drive them to make additional purchases.

2.3.2.2 Fans as a community

Fans’ purchases could help them in opening up conversations, which may evolve into closer social ties. The ownership of high-quality idol-related products, as the embodiment of authenticity and loyalty of fans, is the best entrance ticket for fans to enter the core of the fan community (Zhang 2021). In addition to establishing mutual emotional attachments and social connectedness, fans also form collective memories via their communal purchase practice (Wang 2014). There are many cases where fans buy a large number of albums, movie tickets, or products endorsed by their idols collectively to show their unity and solidarity.

2.4 Conceptual framework

This research aims to explore idol fans’ motivations behind their idol-doll purchase practices. This study will be based on the fruitful findings from previous studies of

fan-idol relationships and fans' consumption practices. It exclusively focuses on a distinctive type of fans—fans who buy idol dolls—so as to support a more focused study that does not intend to generalize findings to other fan groups.

Previous research on fans' consumption practices usually divides motivations into “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” ones and roughly sums it up as the pursuit of “sensory pleasure” or a sense of “fulfillment” (Zhao and Wu 2021). This study emphasizes the significance of a specific fan identity (i.e., mother fans) in shaping fans' consumption practices. It also examines the emergence and popularity of “mother fans” or “mothers of idol dolls” within the theoretical framework of the Para-kin relationship.

2.5 Research objectives

The prevalence of mother fans signals a new mode of fans' consumption practices and inspires the researcher to reexamine the existent research patterns of parasocial relationships between fans and idols. The main research question is: what are fans' motivations for purchasing idol dolls? This research takes a step forward to investigate the role of “mother fans” in contributing to the idol-doll community by answering the sub-question: why do fans claim themselves as “mother fans” and what are their emotional needs?

Building the connection between the emergence of mother fans and the popularity of idol dolls is an intuitive decision. To be more specific, mother fans usually refer to themselves as their idols' mommy, while idol-doll buyers also refer to themselves as moms of the baby and treat the baby doll as if it were a real person. Exploring the emotional needs of mother fans and how they differ from that of girlfriend fans could provide a clearer understanding of fans' motivations for purchasing idol dolls. In addition, the motivations and emotional needs of male idol fans will also be examined, as they may provide a completely different perspective to explain their idol-doll buying behavior.

3 Methodology

This research combines textual analysis and in-depth interviews to understand the driving factors for fans' idol-doll purchase practices and the para-kin relationship between fans and idols. Official media articles serve as a natural field for observing how Chinese mainstream culture interprets the popularity of mother fans and idol dolls, enabling the research to be contextualized in a broader social background. In-depth interviews of these fans provide rich details that help explain the formation of para-kin relationships, as well as their attitudes and reactions towards the criticism from the mainstream culture. By combining both these two research methods, a more nuanced understanding of fan culture could be achieved.

3.1 Rationale for the methodology used

Textual analysis of articles published by Chinese official mainstream media provides a concrete socio-cultural context to understand the current situation of fan groups in China. As a qualitative method that focuses on the underlying cultural assumptions of a text, textual analysis helps in understanding how Chinese mainstream culture conveys its core value and ideologies, and how it interprets fan culture through texts (Fürsich 2018). However, depending solely on mainstream discourse is insufficient for gaining a profound and comprehensive understanding of the intricacies and subtleties of fan culture. This is particularly true in the context of this research, which aims to explore fans' implicit motivations for purchasing idol dolls. Therefore, to find out fans' practices, expressions, and interactions that occur beyond the dominant narratives presented in mainstream sources, semi-structured in-depth interviews thus were conducted.

Semi-structured interviewing was chosen for this study due to its proven versatility and flexibility, allowing for adaptation based on the study's objectives and research questions (Kallio et al. 2016; Kelly 2010). Furthermore, the open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews facilitates in-depth discussions, allowing respondents plenty of room to speculate and express their opinions (Berger 1998). This approach thus could enhance our understanding of fans' personal experiences and their attitudes and reactions to mainstream culture's criticism. In short, semi-structured in-depth interviewing has the strength in penetrating "the defenses people put up to prevent their hidden feelings and beliefs from coming to light" (Berger 1998, p. 55), which is helpful in revealing fans' motivations that they probably are not conscious of and thus could contribute to this study.

3.2 Data collection & analytical strategy

3.2.1 In-depth interviews

3.2.1.1 Sampling & recruitment

The first step of conducting a qualitative interview is defining the study population (Robinson 2013). Given that male fans are always neglected in idol-fan studies, male idol-doll buyers are also included in this research. As aforementioned, 69 % of the idol-doll buyers are Gen Z. Additionally, according to Lyu and Zhang's research on Weibo and fandom (2019), 96.2 % of fans are under the age of 39. Therefore, to ensure a more representative sample, this research planned to include the younger

generation in China as the research objectives. Online recruitment and snowball sampling were both adopted. The recruitment was posted publicly on “super-topic for cotton-dolls” on Weibo. Thanks to participants’ social networks, more qualified volunteers were found to be interviewed. In total, 10 female and 3 male idol-doll buyers participated in the study and twelve of them are members of Gen Z. The profiles of the interviewees can be seen in Appendix A in the supplementary material.

3.2.1.2 Interview topic guide & analytical strategy

Interviews are divided into four sections: (1) Demographic information and fans’ purchase experiences, (2) Fans’ motivations behind the idol-doll purchase and their perceived relationship with idols, (3) Mother fans’ emotional needs, and (4) Fans’ perception of the fan community and male idol fans. Detailed interview questions are listed in Appendix B.

Following the instruction of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, a thematic analysis was employed to code and analyze the transcripts. Preliminary anticipated themes and inductive themes were identified through inductive and deductive analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Based on transcribed interviews, distinctive inductive codes were generalized and then categorized into recapitulative themes to reflect the most salient issues that occurred in the database (Attride-Stirling 2001; Braun and Clarke 2006). A table summarizing the codes and (sub)themes can be seen in Appendix C.

3.2.2 Text retrieval

Fan communities as subcultural groups always face criticism and exclusions from the mainstream culture. By comparing the analysis of the official media reports on idol-doll fans with the interviews with these fangirls, we can summarize what has been overlooked and misunderstood about idol-doll purchases.

Nine articles published between 2018 and 2022 by Chinese official media agencies, such as The Paper, Xinhua Net, and China Youth, are chosen for the analysis. Drawing on a thematic approach, languages that mainstream media outlets used to describe, judge, or criticize “mother fans”, “fan culture”, and “fan purchase practices” are inductively identified and then categorized into specific themes (Clarke and Braun 2017). A table summarizing the titles, publication dates, and resources of the articles can be seen in Appendix D.

3.3 Ethical considerations, limitations, and reflexivity

All the participants signed informed consent forms to ensure that they participated in the interview with full knowledge of the risks and benefits of the research. They can refuse to answer questions if they feel uncomfortable, because some questions about expressions of sexual desire and sexual orientation can be sensitive for some interviewees. Moreover, detailed information and answers such as the idols interviewees are idolizing, interviewees' dissatisfaction with members in the fan community, and their comments on mainstream media's reports on fandom-related issues will not be shared with anyone outside of this research. Pseudonyms were also given to ensure respondents' confidentiality. The quotation of all anonymized information and content in this research has been approved by all the interviewees.

In terms of limitations of this research, first of all, the quality and reliability of interviews may vary, given that respondents may withhold or change ideas, and sometimes they may deny the underlying linkage between their thoughts and practices (Berger 1998). For example, one interviewee said that "I do not want to get married and have kids, but I do want something to keep me accompanied. That's why I buy idol dolls." But when I asked, "do you think idol dolls are the substitute for family members?" She answered, "no, I think it (buying idol dolls) is just a random hobby."

The second limitation lies in the demographics. Although about 60 % of the idol doll buyers are adults, teenagers (aged from 13 to 18) also play an important role in the idol-doll fan community. However, teenagers are not included in the study because it is difficult to obtain parental permission and adolescent assent (i.e., an affirmative agreement to participate). Some questions about the expression of love or sexual desire for idols may not be appropriate to ask (Blake et al. 2011). A larger sample involving more adolescent participants is expected for future research on similar topics, which provide a more complete understanding of motivations behind fans' idol-doll purchases.

As for the research reflexivity, as a member of Gen Z as well as an idol-doll buyer who has basic background knowledge about idol-cotton-doll consumption and fan culture, the researcher has been observing mother fans' purchase practices for a long time. The shared socio-cultural background and experiences helped the author reach out to reliable respondents and gain trust from them, thereby enabling the author to further probe into their underlying motivations. However, due to the researcher's strong resistance to the stigmatization and criticism of fangirls from mainstream media, the researcher may at times have failed to remain neutral and may have unintentionally expressed her own opinions during the interview.

4 Results and discussion

This section presents the key findings uncovered from the thematic analysis, which could be divided into two major themes, (1) Mother fans' emotional needs and (2) recognition from the fan community.

4.1 Mother fans' emotional needs

According to the textual analysis of 9 selected articles, mainstream media simply interprets fans as consumers, focusing on their economic significance and ignoring their emotional needs. There is also a tendency to criticize fans' consumption and fan community. That is, the purchase of idol dolls, as a specific form of the fan economy, is negatively framed as "irrational consumption by immature and fanatical (female) fans". Moreover, idol-fan culture is seen as "distorted", "chaotic" or "out of control", and the fan economy under this circumstance is interpreted as a way of "exploiting fans" and thus "should be limited". For this research, it is necessary to de-stigmatize idol-fan culture and understand the struggles and emotional needs of mother fans, as this could help uncover fans' motivations for purchasing idol dolls.

4.1.1 Love, reliance, and a sense of control

All the female interviewees in this study define themselves as a "mother fan" or at least the combination of "mother fan" and "girlfriend fan". The formation of the "mother-son" relationship can be traced back to the idol selection mechanism that exists only in the East Asian entertainment industry, which is known as the "idol-raising mechanism". Idol candidates are usually between the ages of 14 and 18. The age gap makes the mother-child relationship more real. Moreover, idol candidates could not have won the opportunity to officially perform on stage without the constant support and monetary investment of fans. Fans witness them grow, improve, and finally make their official debut. "It is like investing your time and money to help your own child finish elementary, middle, and high school, and finally succeeding in sending him to a prestigious university. You would be very proud of him ... You feel you are needed by these cute and young boys." Hu (Interviewee 4) said. That is, fans engaged in this para-kin relationship are highly participatory and deeply involved in every step of the idol's career planning. Such a fantasized relationship involves a new level of affinity that goes beyond the romanticized parasocial relationship, as they believe they are "very devoting" and not like "teenage girls who love idols just because of their handsome looks" (Interviewee 2). Usually, fans create

fan videos, fiction, music, or other digital products to express their complex feelings toward idols (including but not limited to admiration, worship, love, etc.). However, mother fans, as a new form of fans, need a new carrier to show their perceived mother–child relationship.

“I would not say everyone who buys idol dolls is a mother fan, but I am pretty sure every mother fan wants idol dolls. It is almost common sense that mother fans should have idol dolls, otherwise how could they be identified as mothers?” Said Hu (Interviewee 4), who claims to be a “pure mother fan” that has no imagination about having a romantic relationship with her idol. That is, as a tangible product that fans can interact with, idol dolls have become the new media for mother fans to express emotional attachments to their idols. It is commonly seen in the mother fan community that fans would give their idol dolls cute nicknames, dress them up, take them out and take pictures of them, and also talk to them. The interactions with idol dolls also invoke fans’ childhood memories of playing with Barbie dolls. Although the interviewees admitted these two toys do share some similarities, they insisted that idol dolls carry different emotional attachments—“I think when I dress up or put makeup on the Barbie, I am hoping that I can be as beautiful as her. But when I play with my idol doll, I feel like I am taking care of a real baby (Interviewee 3).”

In addition to affection or the so-called maternal love, mother fans also seek a sense of control over idols. The desire to determine and even control idols’ on-stage costumes, career paths, and relationships could be commonly seen in mother fans. If their beloved idol/son does something that disappoints them, such as smoking, dating a girl, or getting bad grades in school (some idols are under 18), mother fans would complain that the idol was just “creating the illusion of being a well-behaved child for fans” (Interviewee 4). However, idol dolls, cute cotton toys that share similar characters/appearances with idols, are always under mother fans’ control. “The doll can be dressed up as you like” and “the doll will never let you down, it will always be the cute baby,” said Zixuan (Interviewee 10), who owns more than 10 idol dolls. In short, having an idol doll compensates for fans’ unrealistic expectations and their loss of control over idols.

4.1.2 Fans’ romantic fantasy

As noted at the beginning of this section, female fans could be mother fans and also girlfriend fans at the same time. This is because entertainment companies would intentionally shape the sex appeal of idols, as part of the fan base is teenage girls and female adults would also be attracted to young, handsome boys. It should be noted that the companies are supposed to pay attention to whether these idols are over 18 years old, otherwise, they will be bombarded by fans’ criticism. The duality of identities makes the motivations for purchasing idol dolls more complicated.

Some mother/girlfriend fans take idol dolls as children of themselves and their idols, thus reinforcing their imagined romantic relationship with celebrities. However, fans sometimes would limit fandom-related elements of their identity (as girlfriend fans) to avoid associated stigma (Johnston 2015), because girlfriend fans are often referred to as “girls with unrealistic daydreams.” According to Tianshuang (Interviewee 8), “expressing your sexual desire for idols is acceptable ONLINE, but you definitely would not want to do that in real life. That would make me feel so ashamed.” Interviewee 5 also stated with certainty that “the so-called maternal love towards idols is just a disguise of fans’ sexual desire for idols. For me, dolls are more like our children, and my idol and I are a married couple. I would say most fangirls want to be idols’ ‘girlfriend’ instead of their ‘mother.’”

In other words, fans’ claims of “maternal love” toward their idols might not be true, and having idol dolls probably is a way to conceal their obsession with celebrities, which is based on heterosexual imagination. This phenomenon can be linked to the oppression of personal expression of sexuality in Asian countries, especially for unmarried females (Lin 2018). The stigma associated with expressing sexual desires further supports this notion that marriage continues to be the only legitimate context for the expression of female sexuality in China (Zarafonetis 2017). The mother-child relationship is considered a substitute for fangirls’ imagined romantic relationship because fans who refer to themselves as “mothers” are considered more “realistic and rational” (Interviewee 5). In addition, being a mother usually has the positive connotation that they are selfless and willing to make sacrifices for their children. With the cover of “devoted motherhood”, fans are free to express their love for their idols because, in the eyes of outsiders, their feelings now have nothing to do with the unrealistic, shameful sexual desire.

4.1.3 Loneliness, stress, and overwhelming expectations

Among all the interviewees, 9 out of 13 are single, including one that has never been in a relationship. Although the majority of respondents think idol dolls can serve as a companion or comfort to make them feel less lonely and stressed, having idol dolls is still not considered a substitute for a real intimate relationship. “They (idol dolls) are more like substitutes for pets, which means they are supplementary to our life rather than a necessity,” said Joyce (Interviewee 7). “Neither is getting married or having children,” she added.

When asked about parents’ opinions about having idol dolls, Ting (Interviewee 9) answered, “My parents have unrealistic expectations for me ... I am almost thirty and I play with idol dolls all day, which bothers them a lot. They think I am wasting my time and I should focus on more important things.” By “important things”, Ting’s parents meant “dating a good guy” and “thinking about marriage”. But Ting insisted

that “I just simply do not want to get married. This has nothing to do with me having idol dolls ... Having idol dolls is JUST a hobby, like painting or playing the piano.” She also added, “It is not a virtual world like video games ... We (idol doll fans) have lots of offline activities where we could make new friends.” For fans like Ting, the lack of understanding of the idol doll community by those close to them, such as parents, partners, and friends, plagues them. “It (misunderstanding) is also the source of my loneliness. That’s why I spend even more time with friends in our community.” Ting said with a sigh.

It is surprising that while around half of female interviewees showed their reluctance to perform their reproductive role in real life, they are never tired of role-playing as moms of idol dolls. Lin (Interviewee 6) said, “this phenomenon is so ironic and it is hard to explain. Maybe it is because we have been brainwashed for a long time ... ‘Motherhood is the fulfillment of womanhood’. I believe every girl has heard this kind of nonsense.” It is true that, in today’s China, although the rigid social and ethical norms regarding romantic relationships or marriage are being replaced by new values that allow for much greater individual variation, some patriarchal norms and procedures still prevail. The great majority of Chinese still consider it not just a filial duty but an unquestioned part of life to have at least one child, and it is mainly women’s responsibility for bearing and rearing children (Santos and Harrell 2016).

In short, for female fans, in addition to satisfying their emotional needs, perhaps social expectations also have unconsciously influenced their purchase and self-positioning in the idol-fan relationship. Interestingly, all the male fans said they had never related purchasing idol dolls to real-life issues like marriage or having children. Neither did they fantasize about having a relationship with idols. “I would not say it is impossible that male fans love idols in THAT way. But I think most fans, no matter female or male, purchase idol dolls because of their cute looks. It is just a hobby,” Xu said. Male fans are more worried that they might be made fun of or discriminated against, as “playing with dolls is more like a girl thing (Interviewee 12).” This concern will be discussed in the next part of this section.

From the interviews, it is found that there is a standardized norm for men and women to follow in China, and anyone who deviates from this track will be defined as “abnormal”. For women, not being willing to get married or claiming they do not want children, is considered “irresponsible” and “childish” and “they will regret it one day” (Interviewee 9). For men, if their hobbies or habits deviate from traditional masculinity, they will also face discrimination. The societal expectations of “following traditions” and “leading a normal life” put tremendous pressure on young people (Interviewee 13). To temporarily escape from the stressful reality, they have taken up niche hobbies, but it is also because of being in a marginalized community that they continue to be subjected to constant new pressures.

4.2 Recognition from the fan community

Idol dolls could also be the trigger for fans to start a conversation or make a new friend in the online community. If mother fans happen to have the same idol dolls, they assume they have similar aesthetic tastes. “Some people like the idol with glasses, others like the idol in suits. Some people like their idol when he smiles, others may like him playing poker face. That is why idol dolls always have different costumes or facial expressions ... Fans can always find their favorite one. I feel excited if someone has the same preference as me, especially when my favorite one is the unpopular one,” Cai said. That is, having the same idol dolls means fans are not just individual fanatics, but members of communities with shared norms, values, and interpretations of idols. More importantly, even if fans have very uncommon preferences, they can still find like-minded people with the help of idol dolls, the semiotic identifier that represents their special interests.

It should be noted that, for male fans, gaining recognition is more difficult. In real life, they face the same criticism as male idols that they are “not manly enough.” In September 2021, the Chinese National Radio and Television Administration released a notice to ban “effeminate” aesthetics in entertainment shows, which reflects the unshakable dominance of hegemonic masculinity in China (Song 2022). Male fans who have idol dolls, as a typical type of men who deviate from the masculine normative, therefore try to seek acceptance from the online fan community. “My parents think it (playing with idol dolls) is girly and sissy. But it is just a normal hobby. Why can’t men have idol dolls? ... It is always easier to make friends online. At least they understand me and do not judge me,” Dahan said (Interviewee 11).

However, in the female-dominated fan community, male fans’ authenticity and loyalty are more likely to be doubted. Another female interviewee pointed out that “some male fans are not even real fans. They (fake male fans) just want to pick up girls or enjoy extra attention from girls ... It is an invasion of our (female fans’) space.” But she also believes the idol-doll community is very inclusive. “We welcome male fans who love idol dolls. I have excellent male friends online. What I am trying to say is ..., it is not only about how many idol-dolls you have. Fans could easily tell who is a fake fan. What really matters is one’s attitude.” Moreover, although male fans do not call themselves “mother fans,” they still feel “flattered” when female fans call them “male mommies.” “I think when they think of us as ‘mothers’ and call us ‘sister,’ they actually think of us as true idol doll lovers, and they treat us as a member of the community,” Dahan (Interviewee 11) said.

In short, fans purchase idol dolls because they can serve as symbols of their fan identity and aesthetic taste, thereby helping them better integrate into the fan community. But having idol dolls is just the first step. To gain recognition from the group, fans should remain authentic and sincere.

5 Conclusion, implications, & future research

This research sets out to explore fans' motivations for purchasing idol dolls and investigate the emotional needs of mother fans. The analysis of the "mother-child relationship" contributes to existing research on parasocial relationships between fans and idols and enhances our understanding of fandom consumption preferences among Generation Z in China.

The key findings can be summarized as follows. First, fans purchase idol dolls out of their emotional attachment to idols. Mother fans, who have a deep affection for idols and seek a sense of control over idols, make up the majority of idol doll buyers. They take idol dolls as the new carrier for their perceived mother-child relationship between fans and idols. Second, buying idol dolls can also serve as a disguise for girlfriend fans to cover up their romantic fantasies about their idols. Third, fans purchase idol dolls because they could make people feel less lonely and stressed. But they are not considered a substitute for a real intimate relationship. For female fans, social expectations, such as getting married and having children, also have unconsciously influenced their purchases. Moreover, because idol dolls are the semiotic identifier that represents fans' authenticity and interests, they could help fans attract like-minded people and gain recognition from the community. It should be noted that male idol-doll fans, who are considered deviants from the masculine normative in the real world, also face stricter scrutiny in the online fan community dominated by females. For them, having idol dolls is just the beginning, and being accepted by the community requires more solid evidence of their authenticity as fans.

As for the implications of this study, first, it enhances the understanding of the motivations behind idol-doll purchases, which can be valuable for marketers. They can use this insight to cater to the emotional needs of fans, especially mother fans, by designing and marketing dolls that create a strong sense of attachment for them. Second, by recognizing and emphasizing the positive aspects of fan activities, this study contributes to the ongoing process of de-demonization and normalization of fandom. Third, this study acknowledges the unique perspectives and experiences of male idol fans, and thus calls for forming a more inclusive and supportive space that embraces diverse fan identities. Last but not least, exploring idol-dolls, as carriers of fans' affection to idols, holds cultural significance in understanding the dynamics of this global cultural phenomenon. On one hand, idol-dolls serve as a globally recognizable cultural currency and social identity signifier, connecting fans from different parts of the world and manifesting their shared emotional attachments. This fosters cross-cultural interactions among fans. On the other hand, utilizing idol-dolls can lead to more effective communication strategies for both foreign and domestic idols to engage with their fan bases, enhancing fans' loyalty and fostering connections

between celebrities and fans worldwide. In conclusion, given the widespread influence of idol culture on a global scale, studying idol-dolls offers valuable insights into this cultural landscape.

In short, this study sheds light on the dynamics and complexities of fan behaviors and their relationships with idols through the lens of idol dolls as materiality carriers. The findings and insights will contribute to the broader discussion on fandom and Generation Z, as well as fans' material practice. During the interviews, fans' implicit dissatisfaction with sexism, the patriarchal hegemony, and toxic masculinity in China could be sensed but was not systematically discussed in this study. Therefore, more studies could be conducted to explore Chinese fans' reactions or resistance to the hegemonic gender norms in the patriarchal society.

References

- Attride-Stirling, Jennifer. 2001. Thematic networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research* 1(3). 385–405.
- Baym, Nancy. 2000. *Tune in, log on: Soaps, fandom and online community*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Berger, Arthur Asa. 1998. *Media research techniques*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Blake, Diane, Celeste Lemay, Margaret Kearney & Kathleen Mazor. 2011. Adolescents' understanding of research concepts: A focus group study. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 165(6). 533–539.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Braun, Virginia & Victoria Clarke. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2). 77–101.
- Burgess, Jean & Joshua Green. 2009. *YouTube: Online video and participatory culture*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Clarke, Victoria & Virginia Braun. 2017. Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12(3). 297–298.
- David, Kristi, Mary Myers, Stephen Perry, Valerie Gouse & Celeste Bishop Stein. 2019. Examination of insecure attachment and the potential for parasocial parental attachment to a favorite celebrity through attachment theory. *North American Journal of Psychology* 21(2). 387–406.
- Djafarova, Elmira & Tamar Bowes. 2021. 'Instagram made me buy it': Generation Z impulse purchases in fashion industry. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 59(1). 102345.
- Doherty, Bethany. 2020. "Tap, Tap, Tapping on the Glass": Generation Z, Social Media and Dear Evan Hansen. *Arts* 9(2). 68.
- Duffett, Mark. 2013. *Understanding fandom: An introduction to the study of media fan culture*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Fiske, John. 1992. The cultural economy of fandom. In Lisa A. Lewis (ed.), *The adoring audience: Fan culture and popular media*, 30–49. London, New York: Routledge.
- Frederick, Evan, Choong Hoon Lim, Galen Clavio, Paul M. Pedersen & Lauren M. Burch. 2014. Choosing between the one-way or two-way street: An exploration of relationship promotion by professional athletes on twitter. *Communication & Sport* 2(1). 80–99.

- Fürsich, Elfriede. 2018. *Textual analysis and communication*. Oxford Bibliographies. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0216.xml>.
- Geraghty, Lincoln. 2014. *Cult collectors: nostalgia, fandom and collecting popular culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Johnston, Jessica Elizabeth. 2015. Doctor who-themed weddings and the performance of fandom. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 18. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0637>.
- Kallio, Hanna, Anna-Maija Pietilä, Martin Johnson & Mari Kangasniemi. 2016. Systematic methodological review: Developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 72(12). 2954–2965.
- Lewis, Lisa A. 1992. *The adoring audience: Fan culture and popular media*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Liebers, Nicole & Holger Schramm. 2019. Parasocial interactions and relationships with media characters—an inventory of 60 Years of research. *Communication Research Trends* 38(2). 4–31.
- Lin, Zhongxuan. 2018. Individualizing the sexual revolution in China: Staging, enjoying, and experiencing sexuality. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 24(4). 446–462.
- Lyu, Peng & Yuan Zhang. 2019. Sociological interpretation of “Fan Quan” culture of teenagers. *China Youth Study* 19(05). 64–72.
- Napier, Susan Jolliffe. 2007. *From impressionism to anime: Japan as fantasy and fan cult in the mind of the West*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Priporas, Constantinos-Vasilios, Nikolaos Stylos & Irene Kamenidou. 2020. City image, city brand personality and generation Z residents' life satisfaction under economic crisis: Predictors of city-related social media engagement. *Journal of Business Research* 119. 453–463.
- Reinikainen, Hanna, Jaana T. Kari & Vilma Luoma-aho. 2020. Generation Z and organizational listening on social media. *Media and Communication* 8(2S1). 185–196.
- Robinson, Oliver C. 2013. Sampling in interview-based qualitative research: A theoretical and practical guide. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 11(1). 25–41.
- Santero, Nicole. 2016. “Nobody can #DragMeDown”: An analysis of the one direction fandom's ability to influence and dominate worldwide Twitter trends. (Publication No. 10147467). University of Nevada Doctoral dissertation ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Santos, Goncalo & Stevan Harrell. 2016. *Transforming patriarchy: Chinese families in the twenty-first century*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Song, Geng. 2022. “Little fresh meat”: The politics of sissiness and sissyphobia in contemporary China. *Men and Masculinities* 25(1). 68–86.
- Stever, Gayle S. 2017. Parasocial theory: Concepts and measures. In Patrick Rössler, Cynthia A. Hoffner & Liesbet van Zoonen (eds.), *The international encyclopedia of media effects*. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell.
- Thornton, Sarah. 2001. *Club cultures: Music, media and subcultural capital*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Wang, Mengchu. 2014. *The motivations for sharing fan-generated digital content in online fan communities*. London School of Economics and Political Science Master's thesis Media@LSE.
- Wang, Yixuan. 2019. 建构与赋权:网络粉丝社群的文化再生产——基于鹿晗网络粉丝社群的实证研究[Construction and empowerment: Cultural reproduction of online fan community—an empirical study based on Lu Han's online fan community]. *Academics* 36(11). 151–158.
- Wu, Weihua. 2020. 身体迷思、族群狂欢与虚拟亲密关系:“女友粉”的媒介社会学考察 [Body myth, tribe carnival, and virtual intimate relationship: The media sociological studies of the girl-friends fans]. *Journal of East China University of Science and Technology* 35(3). 32–43.
- Xu, Jing & Fanrong Meng. 2021. 数字化抚育:“妈粉”媒介实践中的“母职”再造 [Digital parenting: The reinvention of “motherhood” performed by “mom fans” in the media practice]. *Journal of Research* 11(1). 59–74+123–124.

- Yan, Qing & Fan Yang. 2021. From parasocial to parakin: Co-creating idols on social media. *New Media & Society* 23(9). 2593–2615.
- Zarafonetis, Nicole. 2017. *Sexuality in a changing China: Young women, sex and intimate relations in the reform period*, 1st edn., vol. 1. Routledge.
- Zhang, Hongwei. 2015. 参与式生产:文化产品生产的转向与变迁 [Participatory production: Turns and changes in cultural products' production]. *Journalism and Communications* 28(11). 109–117+128.
- Zhang, Yating. 2019. 明星人设的构建与颠覆 [The construction and subversion of the celebrity hypothesis —A study on the ynamic behavior of fans to obtain pleasure]. Central China Normal University Master's thesis. CNKI.
- Zhang, Zhenyu. 2021. *Material practice of self-giving fans? A qualitative analysis of fans' motivations for producing idol-cotton-dolls*. London School of Economics and Political Science Master's thesis.
- Zhao, Shuguang & Xuan Wu. 2021. Motivations and consumption practices of fostered idol fans: A self-determination theory approach. *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 38(1). 91–100.
- Weidian. 2021. 2021棉花娃娃玩家洞察报告 [2021 Cotton doll players insight report]. Sohu News. <https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/2022-01-19/doc-ikyamrmz6089508.shtml> (accessed 28 July 2023).

Supplementary Material: This article contains supplementary material (<https://doi.org/10.1515/omgc-2023-0019>).