# The Impact of the Formation of Virtual Intimate Relationships Between Generation Z Women and Idol Drama Stars on Their Behavior in the Internet Era

**Jiahang Hu[1,a,*]**

[1]*School of Management, Hangzhou Dianzi University Information Engineering College, Zhejiang, China*

*a. 229380433@hziee.edu.cn*

*\*corresponding author*

*Abstract:* Generation Z is a young group born together with the Internet, and some scholars call them "DigitaI Natives." They are curious about everything and are willing to try new things and cultures, such as the stargazing and trendy drama culture that has emerged with the development of mobile networks. After being exposed to these new cultures can observe that there is a growing number of women who believe that they have a quasi-intimate relationship with male idol stars. At the same time, these quasi-intimate relations have begun to influence their behaviors and thoughts. This study focuses on the impact of the quasi-intimate relationship between Generation Z women and male idol drama stars on their behaviors through in-depth interviews with the help of social identity theory and doing gender theory. The discussions categorize these Generation Z women into three types: person being reinforced, conflictors, and person being trapped. Based on the study results, it was concluded that quasi-intimate relations have a tremendous and profound impact on young women who follow celebrities in many ways.

*Keywords:* Generation Z, social identity theory, doing gender theory, quasi-intimate relation, idol

## 1. Introduction

This study observes that with the rapid development of the Internet in mainland China, a variety of new idols have emerged with a vast number of fans and significant social influence, and who influence the habits and thinking of their fans. Among the fans of these idols, there is no lack of "girlfriend fans" who call their favorite idols "boyfriends." Especially in 2018, relying on the hot fan economy, many talent shows and idol dramas have created many "phenomenal" idols, so 2018 is also known as "China's first year of idols." According to statistics, in that year, among the total number of fans who followed the microblogging of entertainment stars, female fans accounted for 61.1%. Among all female fans, "girlfriend fans" accounted for 42.5% of the total female fans. This phenomenon is pronounced among young groups such as Generation Z college students [1]. In a study of 6,845 Generation Z college students, Huang Yuanyuan found that 64% of women adore movie and TV stars and believe that there is a quasi-intimate relation between them and that women are more involved in idols and less rational than men [2]. The above data shows that Generation Z women's

stargazing is universal and widespread. Studying young women's reactions to emerging culture and its impact on themselves is significant. Moreover, it is also this part of the idol drama male star chasers based on worship or other influencing factors, it is easier to produce social relations and socialized star chasing behavior with their idol's social group of fans, and such social relations and behaviors tend to deepen the identification and quasi-intimate relation of the "girlfriend fans" to the idol in the opposite direction, which in turn affects their behavior. Therefore, given the characteristics of the socialization of stargazing in the Internet era, this study mainly takes the social identity theory as the leading theory. Since the group under study is female, the study also combines the theory of gender. While relying on the above theories, the study analyzes the roles played by Generation Z women in chasing stars in the Internet era, the strategies they adopt in chasing stars, and their impact on themselves through in-depth interviews. This study aims to explore the impact of socialized and organized stargazing on Generation Z women's quasi-intimate relationship with idols in the absence of regulation and guidance in the entertainment and fandom in China.

## 2.    Literature Review

The study of quasi-intimate relation first originated in 1956, when the American psychoanalysts Donald Horton and Richard Wohl proposed the theory of so-called para-social relationship to describe the unilateral, imaginative interpersonal relationship that develops between recipients of media and the media characters they consume (celebrities, public figures, or TV drama Characters) develop a one-sided, imaginative interpersonal relationship, i.e., a special social relationship in which one party devotes time, interest, and energy to treating the other party as their friend without the other party knowing it [3].In the case of "girlfriend fans," this particular social relationship becomes one in which one partner treats the other as intimate without the other partner's knowledge. Some scholars have also defined this phenomenon. According to Hu Mengyuan, in the Internet era, the interaction between idols and fans fuels the imagery of a very intimate relationship between fans and idols. Therefore, it also defines this relationship as a quasi-intimate or para-social based on imagination [4]. When fans establish a quasi-intimate relationship with their idols, their behavior will be influenced to a certain extent. Wu, C. Through a systematic analysis, it is concluded that those who have a quasi-intimate relationship with their idols are significantly influenced and changed in their views on choosing a spouse, love, marriage, and sexuality [5]. Jing Zhang pointed out that due to the cohesive and social characteristics of "fan" communities, fan groups are susceptible to external influences and stimuli and are prone to triggering cyber violence that involves fans, which tends to last longer, spread more widely, and have a worse impact [6]. At the same time, some scholars have also researched the consumption concepts of fan groups with a quasi-intimate relationship with idols. Tong Qi argues that in the present time, when the Internet is highly developing, the consumption concepts exhibited by fans are not only self-conscious and frenzied but also collective and data-based [7]. Meanwhile, research on social identity theory has been conducted by Brown: social identity theory is the primary process in the study of social identity, and this theory has been developed since Tajfel first proposed it in the early 1970s [8]. Tajfel has since further interpreted the theory by arguing that social identity is established by three items: social categorization, social comparison, and positive distinctiveness [9]. Furthermore, Hogg and others added the premise and implications of social identity, i.e., the basic premise of social identity theory is that people possess information about the categories to which they belong, such as gender, nationality, political stance, and team. Membership in each of these social categories persists in the individual's mind as a social identity that describes and specifies the individual's attributes as a group member. Various social categories or social groups influence how members should think, feel, and act [10]. Zhang Yingrui's study explains how social identity affects people's self-esteem and conflictual behaviors. It argues that individuals identify themselves with the group to which they belong through social categorization and develop in-group preferences and out-

group biases. Individuals increase self-esteem by achieving or maintaining a positive social identity, and positive self-esteem results from favorable comparisons between the in-group and the relevant out-group. When social identity is threatened, individuals use a variety of strategies to increase self-esteem. Individuals who are overly attached to their group and experience intergroup differences in their search for positive social identity and self-esteem are prone to intergroup prejudice and conflict [11]. The above theory is a good illustration of social identity theory. However, since this study deals with gender, it would be biased to attribute women's influence on quasi-intimate relationships between idols to social identity alone. Therefore, this study still needs to draw on the Doing gender paradigm, which sees gender as a performance or behavior that we perform because of moral duty, not as ourselves. The primary representative of this paradigm is West and Zimmerman, whose study distinguishes between sex, sex category, and gender. Sex is the so-called biological sex. The sex category is sometimes not the same as biological sex. However, due to the pressure to display "the need to gain acceptance," there are constraints on gender-related behaviors, clothing, etc. Gender embodies these constrained behaviors, and people often acquire gender categories by doing gender [12].

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Method Process

This study adopts the interview method as the research method, a method that can provide information about the participants' subjective perspectives and ways of thinking and can add questions at any time according to the interviewees' topic shifts as the interview proceeds, further exploring them and making the information obtained richer, more comprehensive and more precise. For this reason, this study interviewed 25 unattached Gen Z women between the ages of 15 and 29 who are working or studying in the service industry, education industry, college students, high school students, marketing industry, and other positions in Zhejiang province, including family members, personal contacts, and classmates. Not only that, but this study also conducted a diffuse survey from these contacts, which allowed this study to gather a broader range of respondents of different types and occupations to ask questions through social networks. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, and this study designed 20 questions throughout the interviews, which were threaded by some vital guiding questions. These guiding questions corresponded to each of the five themes that were intended to be explored: (1) whether or not respondents would be prone to develop a quasi-intimate relationship with a male star while watching idol dramas; (2) whether or not respondents quasi-intimate relationship with a male star had an impact on themselves; (3) how the existence of a quasi-intimate relationship would cause respondents to react to external stimuli; (4) what kind of strategies respondents would adopt to maintain a quasi-intimate relationship with a male star; and (5) what impact socialized stargazing has had on respondents.

### 3.2. Research Processes

The study chose Zhejiang as the place of investigation for this study. Zhejiang is one of the provinces in China with a large population base and a highly developed Internet and economy, and these characteristics strongly attract young people from neighboring provinces. According to the survey, during the latest seventh population census in 2020, the total population of Zhejiang Province was 64,568,000, with 30,888,000 females and 5,169,000 young females between the ages of 15 and 29, accounting for 16.7% of the total female population [13]. According to another survey, as of November 2022, the size of Internet users in Zhejiang Province reached more than 55 million people, with an Internet penetration rate of 84.2% [14]. With such a large number of young women and such a high Internet penetration rate, many young women can quickly come into contact with Internet

stargazing and participate in related activities through various channels, directly or indirectly, which means that the phenomenon of Generation Z stargazing in Zhejiang is representative. The categorization of Generation Z stargazers in the following section also represents the entire group of young stargazers in China to a certain extent.

### 3.2.1. Person Being Reinforced

Social identity theory, which has evolved since its early formulation by Tajfel in the 1970s, holds that individuals increase their self-esteem by achieving or maintaining a positive social identity. Positive self-esteem stems from favorable comparisons between in-groups and out-groups. The "girlfriend fans" often believe that their boyfriend (idol) is the embodiment of perfection, and they are proud of being his "girlfriend." "By comparing their idols with other similar groups, if their idols are superior in every aspect, the self-esteem of the fans, as "girlfriends" who have a quasi-intimate relationship with their idols, is also affected to a certain extent. The "Person Being Reinforced" generally believes that their "boyfriends" (idols) are perfect, and their fan clubs are also very rational and civilized. The idol stars they follow have more significant social influence, higher education, vital business skills, and affinity than other idols. There is also a strong comparison at the fan base level with some immature, more aggressive, or low-quality fan groups. These favorable comparisons reinforce the self-esteem of these "Person Being Reinforced."

However, as the interviews progressed, this study found that it reinforced self-esteem for Gen Z women who have quasi-intimate relationships with idol stars and their gender. This type of "Person Being Reinforced" mentioned in the interviews that in their favorite idol dramas, there are two types of female protagonists: one is the "Cinderella waiting to turn the tables" type, and the other is the "Snow White" type. "No matter which type it is, the male role is always that of a "knight" who protects the female, and there is no idol drama where the female protects the male unless they have a sister-brother relation. Human society as a whole has been repeatedly emphasizing that women are weak and need to be protected, and the emergence of idol dramas has reinforced this point. The idol dramas have reinforced this point. The male "chivalrous" image of idol dramas reinforces the image of the male as a strong man and the female as a soft and fragile woman. When Gen Z women have a quasi-intimate relationship with a male idol drama star and put themselves into the role of the female protagonist, their gender will be affected, i.e., women will become more inclined to make themselves weak and vulnerable to be protected by men. The interview data also confirmed this. This group of "Person Being Reinforced" pointed out that when they watched idol dramas, when the female protagonist encountered any problems, the male protagonist would always come forward to help her out. Therefore, in real life, when this group of "Person Being Reinforced" encounters complex problems, and a man is willing to help them, they are more likely to rely on men's help. At the same time, when they encounter difficulties and there are men around them, but the men are not willing to take the initiative to help them, they will feel lost and begin to reflect on whether they are not weak or pretty enough. Hence, they are more inclined to show themselves as weak and pretty regarding their image management.

Through the above study, it is easy to find that many young women of Generation Z, when watching idol dramas, will put themselves into the role of the idol drama heroine and gradually develop a quasi-intimate relationship with the male idol drama star. When such a relationship is developed, some of the "Person Being Reinforced" will use the favorable comparison between similar groups to strengthen their self-esteem. In contrast, others will be affected by this quasi-intimate relationship, subconsciously reinforcing the doing gender, affecting their approach to problems when encountering them.

### 3.2.2. Conflictors

Social identity theory suggests that individuals will use various strategies to raise self-esteem when social identity is threatened. When individuals are overly enthusiastic about their group, believe that their group is superior to others, and experience intergroup differences in their search for positive social identity and self-esteem, it is easy to cause intergroup prejudice and conflict. The inherent characteristics of Generation Z young people, i.e., their strong personalities and self-concepts, tend to magnify prejudice and conflict. They tend to be antagonistic to opinions that are not to their liking.

A common phenomenon mentioned by the" Conflicts "in the interviews was when someone said that their "boyfriend" (idol) was not as good as another idol or the honor that belongs to their "boyfriend" to someone else. They will fight back, trying to convince the other person at first, but when they realize they cannot, they do not hesitate to get into a heated online argument. They believe that if they are identified as their "boyfriend's" (idol's) "girlfriend's fan," then they will do this kind of behavior to anyone who wants to do it. They also pointed out another common problem: they are calm and gentlewomen daily, but when insulting or degrading their idols, they become "aggressive."

The expected behaviors of the conflicts are an excellent example of how the conflicting behaviors of "girlfriend fans" can be influenced by their over-enthusiasm for their idols or their loyalty to their in-groups. Such positive distinctions often lead to intergroup prejudice and conflict. Their identity identification also influences the standards of how they think, feel, and act.

### 3.2.3. Person Being Trapped

Based on social identity theory, Yingrui Zhang et al. suggest that social structure describes inter-group status relationships, including the motivational strategies of low-status and high-status group members to maintain their status. The social identity process regulates the relationship between low-middle-status and high-status groups. The lower the subjective identity status of the group, the less positive social identities. Individuals' subjective strategies in the face of adverse social identity can be categorized into social mobility and social change [11]. In terms of idolatry, through interviews, this study found that individuals with low to medium status generally choose the social mobility strategy. It is this strategy that makes some young Generation Z women with a lower status in the group bound to idolized male stars and constantly dedicating their time, money, and energy to their "boyfriends" (idols) to improve their status, making them de facto "Person Being Trapped."

Due to their low social status or conservative consumption habits, the low-status "Person Being Trapped" in the fan base does not invest much money and energy in chasing idols, which results in their low status within the social structure of the fan base. However, due to the existence and progression of a quasi-intimate relationship with their idols, they would like to rise to a higher status through social mobility with more aggressive star-chasing strategies. It is precisely because of this progressive demand that she is gradually bound to her idol and gradually changes her consumption habits and mindset.

The high-status "Person Being Trapped" in the fan base tend to have higher social status or more open consumption habits, and they will generally actively maintain their high status, even if the cost of maintaining this high status sometimes becomes unbearable, they will choose to overspend themselves rather than accepting the fall of the class. All of the above cases point to the fact that social structures among fan groups lead to different groups taking different measures to elevate or maintain their hierarchies. These measures are based on their dedication to their idols, which is often the fans' own money, energy, emotions, etc. Moreover, due to the influence of the quasi-intimate relationship with the idol, fans will be less sensitive to their dedication, even if this dedication is hard to come by or relies on overdrawing their ego, meaning that in the process, their sensitivity to money

and their consumption philosophy are affected, and even "anomie" to a certain extent. This influence and "anomie" are also bound up with the need to maintain status and the need for social mobility.

## 3.3. Findings of the Study

Through the above research, it is possible to classify the types of Generation Z "girlfriend fans" and analyze the influence of these different types on the behavior or concept of the "girlfriend fans" themselves. In this case, the "Person Being Reinforced" affects their self-esteem by positively comparing themselves to different social groups of fans, and at the same time reinforces the doing gender due to the nature of idol dramas, i.e., women are weak and need to be protected by men. The "Conflicts," on the other hand, are influenced by inter-group prejudices that affect the behavioral norms of "girlfriend fans," making them prone to conflicts and confrontations with groups with which they disagree. The "Person Being Trapped" is bound by social structures within the fan group and the progression of quasi-intimate relationships with male celebrities to continue or further strengthen their celebrity-following strategies, influencing their consumption habits and attitudes towards money.

## 4. Conclusion

The findings of this study are that the existence of quasi-intimate relationships between young women of Generation Z and their idols has a multifaceted and profound impact on their behavior. In addition, this study analyzes the online fan communities established by idol drama fans through the Internet. It exposes the inherent characteristics of such virtual fan communities and the social impacts of such communities on Gen Z women within them, i.e., Gen Z women will be affected by the in-groups in terms of self-esteem, gender, conflicting sexual behaviors, consumerism, etc., after establishing a quasi-intimate relationship with their idols. This study makes up for the fact that the research on online virtual fan communities still needs to be made mature. At present, the lack of reasonable regulation and guidance in the entertainment industry in mainland China will inevitably lead to some chaotic phenomena in the pursuit of stars, and the impact of these chaotic phenomena on the youth or teenagers of Generation Z will be enormous. Therefore, in the future, the regulation of the entertainment industry in mainland China will become an issue that cannot be ignored, and future research should start from the perspective of social identity and focus more on how to correctly guide Generation Z women in chasing stars.

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