

# ***Production, Interaction, and Collapse: Celebrity Public Persona from the Perspective of Para-social Interaction Theory***

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**Abstract:** Based on the perspective of para-social interaction theory, this paper analyzes the logic of production, interaction, and collapse of the celebrity public persona. From the perspective of the establishment of celebrities' public persona, it pays attention to the integration of celebrity's own resources and advantages from the perspective of capital. From the perspective of the persona interactive, social media with emotion is used and communicated. From the perspective of the persona collapse, this paper probes into the reasons why the actual behaviors of the celebrities are divorced from the persona. The collapse of the celebrity persona will not only lead to the crisis of career development of celebrities, but also cause the crisis of fans' identity and social disorder.

**Keywords:** Para-social interaction, Fans, Celebrity public persona, Social media.

## **1. Introduction**

Public persona, i.e. character design or character set, originated from the Japanese animation industry and refers to the life background, character traits and appearance design of the characters in the game. Later, it was widely used to express the characters' characteristics in the film and television industry, and then developed into the character setting referring to the celebrities, i.e. the celebrity's character, style, etc. Everyone has a so-called personality mask. The personality mask is one side of a person's public display, which is the demarcation point between the inner world and the outer world of an individual.

The celebrities public persona is based on the celebrities' existing abilities and resources. Public persona determines whether a celebrity's personal image displayed to the audience is humorous, sedate, or elegant. The celebrity's personality directly determines the fan base they can attract. With the development of the times, the group of fans is changing all the time. Different audiences face different types of media figures. For example, celebrities with different personalities have different fan bases. The reason why fans are attached to celebrities and develop para-social interaction relationships is because fans have different social needs. Some fans are face-judgers and tend to have attachment and affection for celebrities with pretty faces, such as KUN and Theo. While some fans are attracted to talented celebrities, such as Degang Guo and Mini Yang. Therefore, it is very important to decide the target fan base.

In the entertainment circle, many celebrity cases are related to their public persona. The main reason why most fans choose to take off their fans is also closely related to the celebrities.

Therefore, this article attempts to study the celebrity persona and explore its mystery, in order to be able to connect the audience and the media figures to think together, and try to use para-social interaction theory to explain the reason why celebrities create persona and its impact.

The research question in this paper is: from the perspective of para-social interaction theory, how does the celebrity persona produce and shape, how does it interact with fans and collapse?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Para-social Interaction Theory**

In 1956, American psychologists Horton and Wohl first proposed the concept of para-social Interaction to describe the relationship between media users and media figures in the *International Journal of Social Psychiatry, Mass Communication and para-social interaction: A Survey of Distant Intimacy* [1]. In the process of para-social interaction, audiences often have some attachment to favorite TV roles, entertainment celebrities, news anchors and other roles, and exhibit an imaginary interpersonal relationship. Horton and Wohl discover the attachment relationship between the audience and the media figures through the TV viewing situation. They observed that when the news announcer finished the evening broadcast, he would usually say "good night" and the audience would involuntarily reply "good night", just like between family members and lovers. Horton and Wohl distinguish between the two concepts of social relations and para-social interaction, and then extend to the connection between the audience and the mass media figures. The proposal of relevant concepts has triggered more and more researches on para-social interaction theory. With the development and progress of the times, the research focus of scholars has turned to media figures and audiences and the interaction between them.

### **2.2. The Para-social Interaction between the Audience and Media**

In para-social interaction, the definition of media figure is relatively broad. The host of radio and television stations, movie celebrities, and virtual characters in cartoons and movies can all be called media figures. Audiences connect with media figures through a variety of social media. In this process, the audience "unconsciously merges into the actions of the characters in the program and the internal social relations and creates a sense of intimacy." [1]. Merton and others have studied this social psychological phenomenon and further put forward the concept of virtual social etiquette, that is, virtual friendship between individual listeners and media figures. When the real intimate relationship cannot meet the social needs, people will look for intimate relationship in the virtual social platform. The relationship between audience and media figures is a kind of para-social interaction relationships. The media image in the traditional sense is shaped according to the fixed media concept. Due to the limitation of the platform, resulting in the lack of interaction, the media figures almost present the prescribed concept of "guest and self", and the audience naturally accepts the presentation of the specified objective image [2]. Media figures will also show some specific behaviors when they engage in para-social interaction with the audience, so as to achieve some of their goals, such as obtaining public recognition and obtaining commercial value.

Research shows that the deeper the relationship between the audience and the media figures in para-social interaction, the easier it is for them to have social relationship, thus changing some behavior of idols. For example, purchase related brand products, pay close attention to the idol's dynamic, unconditionally support the idol's speech and behavior, etc. Some researches focus on how the media figures manipulate and control the audience when they engage in para-social interaction with the audience. Marwick and Boyd argue that on social media, audiences and media figures are connected by the content created by social media technology. The innovation of the platform enables the original traditional strictly controlled media figures to have open and friendly

communication with the audience. As a result, fans' loyalty and dependence on the media figures are further strengthened and a quasi-social attachment is gradually formed [3].

### **3. The Establishment of Celebrities Public Persona from the Perspective of Para-social Interaction**

The past idol era can be understood as "I provide an idol, and you like my idol". However, the present era of celebrity staffing has turned the past supply into demand: "I will provide a celebrity who meets the needs of the people you need". Secondly, the public persona of celebrities began to tend to the "people-friendly" setting. For example, Gabrielle's "national daughter" title, Cheng Xiao's title "Barbie on earth", and so on. Third, the celebrity public persona shows the trend of being the same as their plays. For example, in the funny life TV series "iPartment" and Michael Chen's "good man" Zeng Xiaoxian, Michael Chen is also required to present the style and behavior of "good man" in real life. Fourthly, with the continuous development of social media, fans and celebrities can communicate and communicate online. The last difference is in refinement of fans and celebrities. Celebrities are based on typology and are finely divided. For example, "strong women" can include "learning bully" but not limited to this. Similarly, the fan base is being refined. Fan groups of celebrities of different ages have unique names for the celebrities themselves. Such names reflect fans' individual intimacy with celebrities, such as "mom-like fan", "girlfriend-like fan", "sister-like fan" and so on [4].

#### **3.1. Production: Integration of Celebrity's Resources and Advantages from the Perspective of Capital**

Generally speaking, the entertainment company is responsible for the celebrity. When a celebrity enters the company, the agent inside the company will produce and mold the celebrity's personnel [5]. For example, a celebrity needs to know his own resources and abilities. Celebrities have a preliminary understanding of themselves and fully understand the abilities they already have, such as superb acting skills, humorous personality and pretty face. Angelababy has successfully entered the entertainment circle with her Sino-German mixed-race family background and superior genetic resources, and has gained a lot of appearance-like fans. In 2003, Angelababy began to model for a photography salon. In the following years, she not only signed a contract with a Japanese agency and became the exclusive model of the trend magazines Ray and Dear, but also made her mark in the model industry by participating in numerous fashion shows and magazine shooting. From this we can see that Angelababy has a clear understanding of his appearance. Appearance can also be a manifestation of strength. However, under the same conditions, celebrities with rich growth experience are more likely to receive attention. For example, for the exploded on the Internet recently, Will Liu's early acting experience did not give him recognition and attention from the audience. As a result, he gave up being an actor and spent more time in the fitness industry. He made use of his 30 years of experience as a fitness trainer and the personal trainer of many celebrities to attract attention on the internet. As many as 100,000 people watch his exercise live every day.

For another example, celebrities need to establish different and hard-to-imitate content based on their own advantages. The uniqueness of the content of communication is an important factor in the establishment of human beings. The key point of being a celebrity is to have a bright spot and have the characteristics that can make the audience shine at the moment. In the mainland entertainment circle, Seven Tan's "baby face" has brought her numerous film and television resources and big brand partners. The 25-year-old, who plays a high school student in "My Best Summer" with a youthful face, has no sense of resentment. In the play "Go Ahead", the 30-year-old actress plays Li

Jianjian in high school, which also makes the audience sigh over the superiority of her original face. This trait of hers is incomparable to other celebrities in the entertainment circle. After she has established her own personality, even if some junior celebrities want to follow the same path as her and play roles that differ greatly from her own age, she is still the weathervane in this field and the existence that other celebrities cannot surpass.

### **3.2. Interaction: The Use and Communication of Social Media with Emotion**

The combination of content and resources has become the final step in the establishment of a celebrity persona. After identifying the existing resources and capabilities, and creating the content, the basic structure of the celebrity persona has been formed. Next, the celebrities need to publicize according to their own characteristics and content, such as playing in TV plays, participating in variety shows, talent shows, etc., and making use of such communication methods to make the audience aware of and pay attention to them, so as to increase their popularity. Now, almost all the entertainment celebrities have Weibo accounts. The celebrities can use the personal profile on the Weibo account to let the audience have a preliminary understanding of themselves, and further promote the consolidation and stereotype of human design.

The communication between fans and celebrities can be "cloud communication" like online emotional labor [6], or face-to-face communication, such as fan meetings or concerts. High EQ is often an important factor in determining para-social interaction between fans and celebrities. If celebrities can communicate with their fans and show their high EQ performance at the same time, it will make it easier for fans and idols to have a para-social interaction.

Weibo is a platform with interactive function. In such a platform, fans and celebrities can realize one-on-one interaction, which plays a role in promoting the para-social interaction relationship between fans and celebrities. As users of Weibo, fans often tend to pay attention to favorite content or interested bloggers, thus forming a certain preference bias, and thus forming a para-social interaction relationship with celebrities [7]. Fans pay close attention to the blogger's Weibo developments and comments, and establish an imaginary close relationship with the blogger by way of praise and comments. Similarly, long-term attention may also bring numbness and disgust, thus disrupting the para-social interaction relationship between the two. Once the audience is no longer interested in a blogger's speech and posting style, the quasi-social relationship between the two will be interrupted. At this time, the language used in the celebrity's articles and videos published on Weibo has become a key factor in determining fans' preference. For example, a celebrity who often publishes videos or articles on public welfare publicity on Weibo is more likely to attract more fans' attention because fans appreciate the quality of being helpful. Vice versa: if the language used by the celebrities when releasing the Weibo news is inappropriate or contains sensitive words, such articles are likely to cause dissatisfaction among fans and even public anger, and even cause the celebrities' fame to plummet.

### **3.3. Collapse: The Actual Behavior of Celebrities is Divorced from Human Assumptions**

The media image needs to meet the psychological changes of the audience in each period and the emotional needs of the audience. Celebrity image first became the emotional key to opening the hearts of fans, and para-social interaction started from this. After attracting the audience's attention, the celebrity image must further meet the group's substantive needs, so that fans can form a habit of paying attention to it. At this time, para-social interaction has a deeper meaning. In order to maintain the life cycle of this virtual society, the requirements of image construction are also raised. Due to the special background of the information age, interactive communication has further deepened the "imaginary" relationship between para-social interaction and each other, which

requires the celebrities to spread their images in a more detailed way to induce more communication behaviors [8].

Celebrity public persona usually maintains a consistent style of form. For example, Mini Yang has always been the image of a "strong woman" in the eyes of fans, so in various variety shows attended by Mini Yang, she usually shows an image that she can do anything and do it well. In the competitive variety show "We Are the Champions" released a month ago, Mini Yang's image in the competitive part of the game is exactly the same as her label "strong woman". Moreover, from the perspective of her words and deeds, she is always maintaining her personal image in front of fans, including in competitions such as e-sports, where the team is considered as the primary winning factor. Mini Yang takes into account the interests of the team and the emotional changes of the team members all the time, reflecting her thoughtful and meticulous manner. There are many people in the entertainment circle who set up celebrity cases of failure. Kiku is a typical example. Kiku's image in the eyes of the audience tends to be cool, beautiful and powerful. The TV series "Novoland The Castle in the Sky", "Legend of Yun Xi", "The Blooms at Ruyi Pavilion" and "In a Class of Her Own" starred by Kiku made the audience couldn't help admiring her acting skills. She sang episodes for the TV series starring her and released the song "Love on the Rocks" which made her become the 84th of Forbes China Celebrity 100. In various variety shows, such as "Youth Periplous S2" and "Happy Camp", all highlight her elegant temperament. But not long ago, her image was unanimously questioned by non-fans. Some netizens have revealed that the photos of Kiku's early singer selection are far from what they look like now. In her early photos, there were prominent cheekbones and sunken faces, but now her face has smooth lines and has no previous facial problems. Therefore, many netizens suspect that she has undergone plastic surgery. Since then, her audience has completely collapsed, and many fans have cancelled the following as a result, thus reducing the degree of quasi-social relationship between her and her fans. Some "anti-fans" even expressed their dissatisfaction by making a series of spoof expression packages about Kiku's face changes. Kiku's personal image when attending variety shows or in public places is elegant and graceful. She eats carefully and eats slowly. However, the photos of her private life exposed by the so-called "anti-fans" and "sasaeng fans" are quite different from those in front of the camera. The reason why the audience cannot accept her behavior is not because they are extremely dissatisfied with her private life, but because the image she has established for herself and the image she is known to the public have been suppressed and questioned. The audience could not accept the change in their own perception of Kiku, so she not only lost countless fans in the short time of the photo exposure, but also had nearly 200,000 "anti-fans". Such incidents made it difficult for her to establish an image in front of the screen, which led to the disintegration of the para-social interaction she once established with her fans.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, celebrity public persona is set as the starting point, from the perspective of para-social interaction, in-depth analysis of the celebrity's fans in the process of para-social interaction behavior and changes. In order to meet the needs of all aspects of the audience, celebrities need to establish brand trust through people's design, attract more fans and improve commercial value. One of para-social interaction's most important aims is to establish connections between audiences and media figures. While making profits during their stay in para-social interaction, the celebrities should also provide fans with emotional and value satisfaction. The establishment of celebrity's self-identity is beneficial to prolonging para-social interaction's cycle. Therefore, what the celebrities need to do is to increase their exposure, attract fans to rely on them emotionally, continuously meet fans' emotional needs, imagine para-social interaction with fans through social media, improve their value and deepen para-social interaction.

Although para-social interaction appears to be a one-way output from fans, if we analyze it deeply, we can find that celebrities are not only accepting fans' pursuit and affection, but also changing some behaviors to cater to fans' taste. And celebrities can make the para-social interaction cycle between them be extended by changing their behaviors. In order to make themselves more in line with the wishes of fans, the celebrities will set up a positive and positive persona and maintain their image in public and in front of the camera. In this way, fans will not change the image of the celebrities they like, and they will not cancel the following. Such a situation is beneficial to the celebrities, because once the image "collapses", the celebrity image in the eyes of the audience no longer exists. Under such circumstances, it is basically impossible for the celebrity to regain the audience's original cognition. It is extremely disadvantageous to the celebrity's career development. In the entertainment circle, there are some celebrities who are in such a situation and cannot turn over. The larger the fan base, the faster the information will spread. The news of the celebrity persona's "collapse" will spread quickly in the entertainment circle, which is why most celebrities find it difficult to change what the audience has already decided, and then regain the acceptance and recognition of the audience by changing their original persona. The virtual network provides a platform and promotes the relationship between celebrities and fans in para-social interaction, but at the same time it is also the root cause of the destruction of the relationship between the two in para-social interaction. The development direction of public opinion is in agreement with the cognitive direction of the audience, so that the celebrity whose persona collapses can no longer re-establish his set and profit from it.

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