

Utopia under digital emotions: how can parasocial relationship be healthy?

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Abstract

In the digital age, parasocial relationships—one-sided emotional connections formed with virtual entities such as idols or game characters—have emerged as a significant sociocultural phenomenon. This study explores how such relationships can develop healthily by examining their manifestations in virtual idols and B-girl games (e.g., romance simulation games). Through in-depth interviews (N=22) and participant observation in virtual idol communities and popular B-girl games, the research analyzes gender dynamics, capitalist influences, and emotional dependencies inherent in these interactions. Findings reveal that parasocial relationships fulfill psychological needs for companionship, identity projection, and escapism, particularly among younger generations. However, risks include over-reliance on virtual interactions, blurred boundaries between economic consumption and intimacy, and potential detachment from real-world relationships. The study emphasizes the necessity of fostering self-awareness, moderating engagement, and implementing platform regulations to balance virtual and real-life social experiences. By advocating for ethical design, cultural inclusivity, and societal guidance, this research proposes pathways to ensure parasocial relationships enhance, rather than hinder, emotional well-being in an increasingly digitized world.

Keywords

Parasocial relationships, Virtual idols, B-girl games, Digital intimacy, Emotional well-being, Virtual reality

Background

Problems and phenomena

Parasocial relationship usually refers to an imaginary intimate relationship constructed in cyberspace or a virtual environment, which is different from a real intimate relationship, but through frequent interactions and exchanges, the two parties form a special connection psychologically, which may occur between a fan and a virtual idol, or between a player and a virtual character, or even between two virtual characters completely generated by a computer algorithm. This relationship may occur between fans and virtual idols, between players and virtual characters, or even between two virtual characters generated entirely by computer algorithms. The rapid changes in Internet technology have provided strong technical support for the development of virtual relationships. From the early instant messaging software and social network platforms to today's short video platforms and virtual social platforms, the Internet has provided people with diversified communication channels and methods. These platforms not only break the limitations of time and space, enabling people to keep in touch with others at anytime and anywhere, but also enhance the stickiness and interactivity between users through rich functions and interactive forms, such as liking, commenting and sharing.

With the accelerated pace of society and the increasing pressure of life, more and more people are seeking to find emotional support and social satisfaction in the virtual world. In real life, due to work, study and other reasons, people may face problems such as small social circles and few social opportunities, while the virtual world provides a relatively free and equal social environment, making it easier for people to establish connections and share their lives with others. Parasocial relationship satisfies people's psychological needs to a certain extent. In the virtual world, people are free to express their thoughts and emotions and engage in in-depth communication and interaction with others. This kind of communication not only helps to relieve loneliness and pressure, but also makes people feel understood, accepted and supported. In addition, parasocial relationship provides people with a way to escape from reality, enabling them to obtain a temporary relief and relaxation in the virtual world. In modern society, with the acceleration of globalization and cultural diversification, people have developed a strong interest in emotional expression and socialization in different cultural contexts. The virtual world provides a communication platform for people across cultural and geographical boundaries, enabling them to understand and contact different cultures and people more easily, thus promoting the development of parasocial relationship.

There are many ways to form parasocial relationship - on social media platforms, people communicate with others through text, pictures, videos, etc. and gradually build an intimate relationship. This relationship may be based on common interests, values or life experiences. Although the two parties may not have met in real life, they are able to share each other's lives, emotions and thoughts through online communication, forming a virtual intimate relationship; in some online games, players can build an intimate relationship with other players through in-game interactions and communication. They may team up together to complete tasks, share game strategies, exchange life trivia, etc. Although this relationship is established in the virtual game world, it can also bring emotional satisfaction and a sense of belonging to the player; in the behavior of stargazing, stargazers can obtain emotional support and satisfaction to a certain extent by establishing a parasocial relationship with their idols, especially when they encounter difficulties or stress in real life, this relationship may become a source of comfort and strength for them to seek, and by focusing on the idol's growth history and success stories, stargazers may be inspired and motivated to pursue higher goals in their own lives and careers (吴炜华, 2020).

In addition, another emerging parasocial relationship is on the rise, provoking our thoughts - with the development of virtual reality technology, virtual idols and B-girl games are gradually becoming a new form of entertainment. The former by following the virtual idol's social media account, watching its live broadcast or video content, etc., so that people have an emotional connection with it, even if the virtual idol is not a real person, but fans can often get emotional support and satisfaction from it. According to a report published by AiMedia Consulting, the virtual idol industry is showing strong growth in China. the market size and core market size of China's virtual person-driven industry will be 186.61 billion yuan and 12.08 billion yuan, respectively, in 2022, and are projected to reach 640.27 billion yuan and 48.06 billion yuan, respectively, in 2025. The production technology of virtual idols, as an emerging media innovation, has been widely spread in the society and boldly attempted by more and more innovators. This has led to a massive expansion of the virtual idol industry. The latter, as a relationship simulation game for female players,

provides players with a unique experience of parasocial relationship. Players can usually choose or customize their characters at the beginning of the game, including appearance, personality and other characteristics, while the game usually contains a rich plot and storyline, in which players deepen their emotional connection by participating in the development of the plot and experiencing various events and challenges with their virtual characters. As one of the important classifications of female-oriented games, the market scale of B-girl games has continued to grow in recent years, with a user scale of more than 300 million, and market profits reaching tens of billions of dollars. The survey shows that the audience groups of virtual idols and B-girl games are mainly young people (post-90s and post-00s), who have high interest and acceptance in new technology, new media and secondary culture, and also show certain consumption ability and psychological needs.

Theoretical basis

The theory of anthropomorphic social relationship was first proposed by psychological researchers Horton and Wohl in 1956 to describe a special relationship formed between viewers and media characters. This relationship is characterized by the fact that the audience is unilaterally familiar with and understands the media figure and creates an emotional connection to it, while the media figure usually can only speculate on the audience's reaction and adjust its behavior accordingly. Thus, the proposed social relationship is a unidirectional, non-reciprocal, and similar to real social interactions.

In the context of virtual idols, an emotional connection similar to real social interaction is established between fans and virtual idols. Fans gradually develop emotional identity and dependence on virtual idols by watching their live broadcasts and video contents and participating in social media interactions. Although the interaction between virtual idols and fans is often one-way, i.e., virtual idols interact with fans through preset scripts and algorithms, fans can still gain a sense of fulfillment and belonging from such interactions. Fans will express their love and support for the virtual idol by leaving messages, liking and sharing, etc. Although these behaviors cannot get a direct response from the virtual idol, they can still stimulate the emotional resonance and engagement of the fans. Virtual idols provide fans with a platform for role projection and self-realization. Fans can project their values, expectations and dreams onto the virtual idol, and realize their wishes and pursuits by supporting the virtual idol. This process of role projection and self-realization helps fans find a sense of belonging and self-worth in the virtual environment.

B-girl games, as a kind of relationship simulation game for female players, provide players with a unique experience of parasocial relationship. In the game, players can play the female protagonist to interact with various male characters and relationship simulation. This kind of relationship simulation satisfies female players' pursuit of romance and sweet emotions, enabling them to obtain emotional satisfaction and support in the game. The plot selection and characterization in B-girl games provide players with a rich interactive experience. Players can choose different dialogue options and plot branches to shape their own character images and establish different emotional relationships with male characters, and this process of plot selection and characterization enhances the players' sense of dedication and immersion in the game, which makes the parasocial relationship more real and deeper. B-girl games also provide

players with a social experience. Players can exchange ideas and share plot progress with other players in the game, thus establishing a special social relationship. This social experience helps players find like-minded friends in the game and enjoy the fun of parasocial relationship together. At the same time, the plot and character images in the game can also trigger players' emotional resonance, making them more deeply involved in the game.

Social Identity Theory was proposed by Tajfel in 1978, the core idea of the theory is that individuals, through the cognition of the characteristics of self and existing group members, will automatically belong to a group with similar characteristics and behave similarly to members of that group. The theory suggests that individuals are striving to maintain and enhance their self-esteem, and that social groups, as well as members within the group, assign either positive or negative value connotations to individuals, which inevitably affects their social identity. In parasocial relationship, social identity theory is equally applicable. Individuals in the virtual environment, through interaction and communication with others, gradually form a perception of self and the group to which they belong, and then generate social identity.

Fan groups of virtual idols often share common interests, values and behavioral norms. Fans form a close group bond by participating in virtual idol-related activities, discussions and sharing. This sense of belonging to the group enables fans to find resonance and identity in virtual idols, thus satisfying the need for self-identification. As fans say, “It's like a dream world, all the people are screaming” (赵云泽 & 陈科宇, 2024). Meanwhile, in the virtual idol's fan base, fans make social comparisons among themselves, i.e., comparing their own preferences and level of commitment with others. Through social comparison, fans are able to clarify their position and role in the group, thus further strengthening their self-identity. At the same time, fans will also look for others similar to themselves through comparison, forming a closer group connection.

Similarly, groups of players of B-girl games often share common codes of behavior and norms. These norms may include in-game etiquette, communication styles, etc. By adhering to these norms, players are able to show that they belong to the group and gain recognition and respect from other players. This adherence to group norms and codes of conduct helps to strengthen players' group identity and self-identity.

Literature Review

With the popularization of Internet technology, the online service industry has seen a rapid change. Intimacy is no longer confined to the real-life sphere, but has become an emotional commodity to be traded on the Internet platform. Marx summarized the nature of man as “the sum of all social relations” in his essay “Outline of Feuerbach”. The rise of virtual idols and B-girl games, as a reflection of contemporary people's state of being, spiritual needs and value orientation, essentially expresses contemporary people's desire for a qualification and dominant ability to create, accept and enjoy culture (曾一果 & 王可心, 2024).

Virtual idol is not a new thing or concept, and its birth can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s, but due to the advancement of technologies such as AI, AR, VR, 3D motion capture and holograms in recent years, and in the context of the industry where real idols are constantly collapsing the house, the virtual idol industry, one of the main tracks of the meta-universe, has begun

to emerge, leading the new trend of consumption of China's entertainment and cultural groups, and in recent years, virtual idols have appeared on a wide scale in China and their influence has risen steeply, providing prerequisites for virtual idol worship. At the same time, as more and more celebrities fall from the altar due to tax evasion, sexual assault and other misconducts and illegal behaviors in reality, the phenomenon of emotional migration of fans is becoming more and more common. Emotional displacement is a coping strategy for the legitimacy crisis and emotional emptiness triggered by the “collapse” of idols (高浩 等, 2023).

Virtual idol is a kind of perfect artifact built on technology and imagination, which embodies human's efforts to overcome their physical limitations by using technology. By projecting their ideal selves on virtual idols, seeking affirmation, and placing their faith in virtual idols, contemporary people aspire to find a sense of belonging and identity in virtual idol worship. In a sense, virtual idol worship reflects the process of contemporary people's pursuit of human nature. However, the virtual idol is still an ideal self, which is only a kind of fantasy of the worshippers, and the intention of pursuing human essence in virtual idol worship leads to the development of alienation of essence.

As a new medium, the influence of B-girl games on intimate relationships cannot be generalized, and it is especially necessary to clarify its influence mechanism and deeper meaning. Individuals may turn to virtual intimate relationships to obtain emotional satisfaction when they encounter frustration in real intimate relationships, and the B-girl love game, which is detached from the characteristics of the real physical context, to a certain extent constructs the individual's understanding of self and expectations of others in intimate relationships. Some scholars have further pointed out that in the “post-modern” society, intimate relationships have gradually changed from stable love relationships to short-lived love events (affair). This “postmodern” concept of love emphasizes instant emotional satisfaction, but avoids the commitment of a long-lasting relationship. When this concept permeates consumer culture, the marketplace becomes a natural substitute for intimacy, and B-girl games fit this trend, allowing players to obtain transient and consequence-free emotional fulfillment in the virtual world (尹金凤 & 陈梓潇, 2024).

From the enthusiastic pursuit of virtual idols and the deep immersion in B-girl games, we cannot help but trigger a profound reflection on how parasocial relationship can develop healthily. This not only concerns the emotional support and social experience of individuals in the virtual world, but also touches on a wide range of issues related to human emotional expression, social interaction, and mental health in the context of the blurring of the boundaries between reality and the virtual.

On the one hand, virtual idols and B-girl games provide a virtual space for individuals to release their emotions and explore their self-identity. Here, people can get rid of all the constraints in real life, freely establish intimate relationships with virtual characters, and experience different emotional journeys. However, the over-reliance on such parasocial relationship may also lead to a decrease in an individual's interpersonal ability in reality, or even a psychological tendency to escape from reality. Therefore, how to maintain a good connection with the real world while enjoying the fun brought by parasocial relationship has become an urgent problem to be solved. On the other hand, the healthy development of parasocial relationship also needs to pay attention to the diversity, inclusiveness and safety of its content and form. In the shaping of virtual idols and the plot design

of B-girl games, the diversity and differences of individuals should be respected to avoid the transmission of stereotypes and discrimination. At the same time, platforms should also strengthen the supervision of parasocial relationship, ensure the safety and privacy protection of user information, and prevent the spread and abuse of undesirable information.

In addition, from a social and cultural point of view, the healthy development of parasocial relationship also requires the joint attention and guidance of all sectors of society. Education, media, enterprises and other parties should work together to enhance public awareness and understanding of parasocial relationship, advocate healthy and rational virtual social behavior, and jointly create a positive and healthy virtual social environment.

Research methodology

In-depth interviews

Through the method of in-depth interviews, we attempted to obtain the “real” experience of the interaction from a subjective point of view. The researcher recruited through WeChat questionnaires and used snowball sampling methods. The original plan was to recruit 26 people to develop parasocial relationship, but considering the diversity and representativeness of the sample, the final sample size was 22, of which 12 were male and 10 were female, with ages ranging from 18 to 24, and the interviews centered on the following questions:

Have you been playing any B-girl games or following virtual idols recently?

How did you start to get in touch with and like B-girl games or virtual idols?

What do you think are the similarities and differences between parasocial relationship and real intimacy in B-girl games?

What elements of parasocial relationship do you find most attractive?

What kind of resources do you need to develop a virtual intimate relationship?

What is your favorite virtual character in a B-girl game (virtual idol)? Why?

Have you ever felt a strong emotional resonance with a virtual character? Please share your experience.

How do you think the plot and characterization of B-girl games affect your values or emotional outlook?

Have you been immersed in virtual intimate relationships for a long time, and do you feel that this has had an impact on your real life?

Are you worried that over-reliance on parasocial relationship will have a negative impact on your mental health or interpersonal relationships?

How do you think B-girl games and virtual idols will develop in the future? How will they continue to influence people's lives?

Do you have any other opinions or experiences you would like to share about B-girl games and virtual idols?

Participant observation

The participant observation method focuses on the in-depth study of the life situation of the

research object, can carry out covert observation while participating in the process of the daily social life of the research object, and focuses on observing the development process of the intimate relationship between the fans and the virtual idol, the relationship between the person and the event, and the combination, etc., from an insider's point of view. The researcher chooses the social media accounts of a specific virtual idol community (Lotte Yi & Hatsune Miku) as the research scenario to observe the interaction between virtual idols and fans. For B-girl games, the researcher chooses popular B-girl games (Light & Night Love & Love & Deep Space) and observes the plot, character design, and interaction within the game.

When choosing the research subjects, the researcher considered the representativeness and diversity of the samples to ensure the universality and accuracy of the research results. In designing the research program, for virtual idols, the researcher took the route of watching live broadcasts and participating in fan community discussions on a regular basis, and recorded the observations. For B-girl games, the researcher experienced the game in depth, choosing different plot branches and character interaction methods in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of parasocial relationship within the game.

Data analysis

Gender characteristics: Due to the unique positioning of B-girl games, the research subjects involved in this section are all female, and at the same time, we find that males dominate in terms of virtual idols, and virtual idols will appear in a wide range of male desirability representations, or the commodification and mass production of certain femininity, so that it can be said that a variety of femininity representations are manipulated to become the idealized objects of male consumers. This suggests the migration of male-dominated gender discourse in the real world to the virtual mediated space, as well as the conceptual bias that occurs under the inertia of male production (付森会, 2024).

The logic of capital: Through analysis, we find that players of B-girl games become “free emotional laborers” of game capital through their emotional labor and consumption behaviors. Players' investment in the game, whether in time or money, is no longer just an economic act to maximize efficiency and output, but a means of expressing and proving personal emotions. The investment in parasocial relationship, including time, money, and emotions, and in-game consumption behaviors, such as purchasing virtual goods, rewarding, and subscribing to virtual idols, reveal that the boundaries between economic activities and intimacy are becoming blurred.

Emotional dependence: Studies have shown that engaging fan participation behavior increases stickiness and emotional energy, thus forming the “interaction ritual chain” proposed by Collins, so that short-lived emotions in a single encounter can be accumulated and brewed in continuous interactions, which can be transformed into a long-term and stable intimate relationship. There is a significant positive correlation between the frequency of game use and the degree of social relationship between female game players and male game characters. The higher the frequency and the longer the time of game playing, the deeper the degree of anthropomorphic social relationship with male game characters. The emotional connection between the two groups of people who are enthusiastic about virtual idols is affected by four factors: loneliness, attractiveness, length of

interaction, and media demand, and the virtual idol, a special media character, fills the lack of emotions in real life to a certain extent, and the two sides keep each other company and promote each other.

Reflection on results

Through the research, we can clearly perceive that the development of a virtual intimate relationship is also a game for the brave, and many people invest in it without caring about the benefits, or even reckless, but they still take it seriously. We can see that the multiple interactions of both virtual idols and B-girl games provide contemporary people with emotional support and the possibility of reconstructing gender and interpersonal relationships, but at the same time, they also bring about the negative impacts of capitalization of intimacy, polarization of emotions, and the dissolution of real interactions.

Virtual idols and B-girl games are first and foremost commodities that are produced, marketed and sold for profit. This structural contradiction determines that neither virtual idols nor B-girl games can be eternal, but can only become pop culture symbols for a period of time, a cultural experiment that hosts the utopian ideal of fans (傅善超, 2023). Although this ideal utopia collapsed, this event still has positive cultural significance. We can see the utopian ideals of equality, respect, friendship, and positivity of the new generation of Internet users and their efforts to put them into reality, as well as the sincerity and hard work of Nakazono to gain the recognition and support of the fans, and the negotiation and compromise between the planning and operation team as the capitalist and the conflict between the capitalist and the Nakazono to bring serious effects to the virtual idol (刘胜枝, 施丙容, B.R., 2022).

Considering the current situation, it is worthwhile for the society to think about how to make the healthy development of parasocial relationship. First of all, at the level of the individual, it is necessary to enhance self-awareness, make clear the difference between parasocial relationship and real intimacy, and avoid projecting the emotions of the virtual relationship to the real life; set up a “cell phone-free time”, focus on face-to-face communication with the people around them, and reduce the dependence on virtual interaction. Setting “no cell phone time”, focusing on face-to-face communication with people around us, reducing the reliance on virtual interaction, and letting the inner self return to peace; at the same time, we should pay special attention to the principle of moderation, as over-investment of time and money not only misses out on the beauty of the real life, but also may bring about social detachment and economic pressure. Virtual platforms as intermediaries should strengthen the regulation of parasocial relationship services to prevent high consumption, pornography, fraud and other chaotic phenomena, and maintain a good digital order, as Hegel said, order is the first condition of freedom. Society should enhance contemporary people's knowledge and understanding of parasocial relationship through education and publicity, help set up rational and healthy values, develop their emotional world freely, encourage contemporary people to combine online communication with offline interaction, deepen their emotional ties through offline activities, and enhance their real-life social skills, so as to make the bridge between the virtual and the real stronger.

Happiness is not what you have, but what you experience, every smile, every tear, every

bravery, every impulse, are our precious memories, as Tagore said, “If you shed tears because you lost the sun, then you will also lose the stars.” The virtual world can be the extension of the real world, the real world can be the foundation of the virtual world, let us find a balance between the virtual reality, and cherish the light of every emotion.

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