

From “King & Queen” to “Brothers & Sisters”: The generational difference of idol worship in China

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Abstract: Studying the intergenerational differences in idol-chasing among young people is an important perspective in sociology and cultural studies for revealing social changes, especially for China, which has undergone significant social changes since the reform and opening-up policy. This article examines the idol-chasing experiences, cognition, and attitudes of Chinese individuals born in the 1990s and those born after the 1990s during their youth. The study found that although both generations hold a generally negative attitude towards idol-chasing, the younger generation engages in more diverse and active idol-chasing activities, and pays more attention to the community building among fans. The previous generation of young people’s interest in entertainment stars has not completely faded, but the new generation of young people have little understanding of their parents’ idol-chasing experiences. These findings reflect the changes in Chinese social structure, culture, and values.

Keywords: Idol chasing; intergenerational difference; youth; China

Introduction

In recent years, China has witnessed a rapid growth in fandom culture, particularly among young people. However, this phenomenon has not been uniform across different generations. Over the past four decades, the transformation of fandom in China has been shaped by the country’s socio-economic development, political changes, and technological advancements. In the 1980s, the concept of fandom emerged in China along with the opening-up policy and economic reforms. During this time, the Chinese youth were exposed to imported pop culture from the West, Japan, HK and Taiwan, such as music, movies, and animation, which led to the birth of the first generation of fans. These fans were characterized by their enthusiasm for foreign cultures and their preference for Western styles. In the 1990s, the emergence of the internet brought a new wave of fandom culture in China. Online forums and communities provided a platform for fans to connect and share their interests. The second generation of fans was born during this period, characterized by their obsession with domestic pop culture, including TV dramas, idol groups, and celebrities. The third generation of fans emerged in the 2000s, with the rise of social media and mobile technology. These fans were more diverse and had broader interests, ranging from traditional cultural forms to subcultures like cosplay and anime. With the advent of the digital age, fandom in China has become more sophisticated and complex, reflecting the country’s changing social and cultural landscape.

Yue and Yan (2007) conducted a series of analyses on idol worship among Chinese adolescents. They argued that idol worship among Chinese youth in the 1970s was essentially a form of “role model worship” with a strong emphasis on ideological education, attribute-focused sociological learning, and attachment. It promoted a more rational, practical, and non-emotional approach to viewing idols, with comprehensive identification and imitation of their content. The common characteristics of idols were their ordinary appearance, ordinary life, outstanding deeds, self-discipline, and strong spirit of self-sacrifice. Since the mid-1980s, with the continuous development of high technology and mass media, popular culture has become increasingly popular, and “tri-star idols” represented by “singers, actors, and sports stars” have increasingly dominated the market of idol worship among adolescents, becoming the center of their spiritual and emotional world. These idols usually have the characteristics of youth, beauty, outstanding personality, full of youthful vitality, and even rebelliousness. “Tri-star worship” contains certain value content, but the main content is the appreciation and imitation of the external image of idols. From the 1980s to the end of the 1990s, as the social elements transitioned from homogeneity to heterogeneity, people’s choice of idols also shifted from passive acceptance to autonomous pursuit.

Looking at the generation of new century, Zheng (2007) conducted a questionnaire survey to analyze the idol worship mentality, behavior, and cognition of fans of Li Yuchun, the winner of Chinese grassroots singing competition show “Super Girl” in 2005 and known for her unique androgynous appearance and style. According to her findings, fans believed that the distance between idols and audiences had been reduced, making idols more approachable. They even considered Li Yuchun to be their own embodiment, which led to their affection and care for her rather than worship. These fans exhibited deep involvement behavior, which involved spending more money and time to support their idol. Their behavior was more like “worshipping” than simply “following” a star, as they were concerned about Li Yuchun’s success and actively supported her, which was not seen in traditional star chasing. The most representative feature was their participation in a large number of offline follow-up activities, and they did not consider their behavior to be extreme, but rather “fashionable”. They almost never rejected the idea of their idol going down the commercial route and even tried to eliminate the idol’s “grassroots image”. De Kloet (2012) also concluded that Super Girl also led to the formation of numerous fan-based communities supporting the different candidates. These communities, in contrast to the individualized star-struck behavior of the past, have a government-like structure and division of labor across administrative and even national borders, using the latest online platforms to promote and organize their actions.

While young people’s star chasing has received a lot of attention, the situation of middle-aged and elderly people - who were once young - in this regard has been overlooked. The accelerated pace of population aging has made the behavior and mentality of middle-aged

and elderly people more significant to society, and the development of media has made it more convenient for them to relive their youthful enthusiasm. Older fans approach works from different perspectives. They detach themselves from busy lives and once again have personal time to chase stars. Older fans may feel that their psychological age is younger than their actual age due to their fan practices. On the other hand, adult fans hold themselves and others accountable to age norms, struggle to justify and maintain fan practices given normative life course restraints, experience lingering shame and stigma surrounding fandom in ways unfamiliar to younger fans, and struggle to make new meanings out of fan texts and fan pleasures given cognitive and bodily aging, and their own impending mortality (Harrington and Bielby, 2010).

The generational differences in relation to star-chasing and celebrity culture in the West has been examined. Younger generations, such as Millennials and Generation Z, have grown up in a digital era with widespread access to technology and social media. This has significantly shaped their engagement with celebrity culture. They are more likely to actively follow and interact with celebrities through social media platforms, participate in fan communities, and consume celebrity-related content online. In recent years, there has been a rise in the influence of celebrities as social media influencers. Younger generations tend to view celebrities not only as entertainment figures but also as influencers who shape trends, fashion, and lifestyle choices. This influence is particularly pronounced among younger demographics who are more likely to adopt the preferences and behaviors of their favorite celebrities. Also, younger generations have shown a greater interest in celebrities who use their platform to advocate for social causes and promote activism. They are more likely to support celebrities who align with their values and take a stand on issues such as climate change, social justice, and equality. This trend reflects the growing desire among younger generations for authenticity and social responsibility from celebrities.

While star-chasing and celebrity culture still hold popularity among younger generations, there is also a growing sense of critical awareness. Younger individuals are more likely to question the authenticity and motivations behind celebrity personas, demanding transparency and genuine engagement from their favorite stars. This generation is often more skeptical of traditional media narratives and seeks out alternative sources of information and diverse perspectives. Another trend among younger generations is the aspiration to become celebrities themselves. With the rise of social media influencers, individuals seek to build personal brands, monetize their online presence, and gain recognition and success similar to their celebrity idols. This entrepreneurial mindset is driven by the opportunities presented by the digital age and the desire for personal fulfillment and financial independence.

From “Kings & Divas” to “Sisters & Brothers”, the generational difference in fan behavior over the past half-century is evident in the nicknames of entertainment icons. The differences between old and new fans are not just fodder for chat, but also have serious academic and social implications. Studying the generational differences of fandom in recent China is of great significance to sociology. It provides insight into how cultural preferences and identities are shaped by social, economic, and political factors. Moreover, it sheds light on how the younger generation in China constructs their sense of self and their relationship with the world, which has implications for understanding the country’s future trajectory. By examining the generational shifts in fandom, researchers can gain a better understanding of the dynamics of cultural consumption and production in contemporary China.

Methods

For the survey of this project, that is, to explore the intergenerational differences in star-chasing among people of different ages, we adopted the cross-sectional questionnaire survey to help us. We published this questionnaire after setting up multidimensional questions in Beijing during the 2022 Spring Festival. The questionnaire lasted for 2-3 months, during which people of different ages, genders, and experiences participated in the survey. The options of “informed” and “agreed” were written in the description of the questionnaire, so as long as the participants agreed that the answers would be used as data in the survey, and the purpose of the survey was also informed at the beginning of the questionnaire so that the respondents could think purposefully and answer our questions.

For participants of the questionnaire, we face not only not enough mature adolescents, and adults of all ages, and also investigated the different gender in the opinion of this matter, we aim to 1:1 ratio, so that we can more effectively reflect the data, for different people make track for a star attitude can be better to make a summary. Therefore, in order to explore the generational differences in star-chasing, we collected the attitudes of respondents with different ages and attitudes toward star-chasing as much as possible, which also made us more organized and easier to find rules when sorting. After several months, we received a total of 699 questionnaires, and eliminated 13 invalid questionnaires, leaving 686 valid questionnaires with an effective rate of 98.1%.

As for the content of our questionnaire, we divided it into 4 parts and 14 parts in total, except for the questions to explore the basic information of each respondent. The first part investigates the opinions of people of different ages and genders on star-chasing, so as to determine their basic cognition and main attitude towards it. The wide age range of the respondents also lends credence to our study. The second part explores the relationship between the time of following stars and the influence of stars among respondents of different ages when they were young, and the extent to which they were influenced by stars. From this, we can analyze the reasons and motivation for people to follow stars. The third part is the relationship between family attitude and the time that people of different ages suffer in different circumstances when they pursue stars. Because the attitude of family members is very important for the pursuit of stars, especially for minors, they need the money and support of parents to be able to chase stars freely. The last part is the most important question, which directly points to the theme. It investigates how young people and their parents perceive each other’s star-chasing behavior. To sum up, there are a total of 14 questions, which provide us with detailed data on the generational differences in star-chasing.

After carefully collecting the data, we conducted multi-dimensional data analysis in order to find out the rules and draw conclusions

about the generational differences in star-chasing among different groups. In the analysis, we use Microsoft Excel, which has the advantage that it allows us to organize more clearly and directly, and the method is very common in descriptive statistics, which allows us to directly understand the generational differences in star-chasing. The main content of our analysis is frequency and percentage. Accurate data can ensure the reliability and accuracy of our survey, which will not be affected by subjective ideas, and more effectively reflect the intergenerational differences of star-worshippers among people of different ages.

Results

A questionnaire was completed by a total of 686 respondents, comprising 489 men and 197 women. The majority of respondents belonged to the younger age groups. Approximately 23.9% of males and 50.3% of females were under the age of 20, while 40.5% of males and 22.8% of females fell within the 20-29 age bracket. Individuals over the age of 30 accounted for 35.6% of males and 27.0% of females.

Among people aged 30 and above

In both sexes, a larger proportion of individuals over 30 years old admitted having pursued stars during their youth (aged 16-20) compared to those who denied it. Men over 30 show a near-equal split (54.6% and 45.4%) between those who chased stars and those who did not in their teenage years (aged 16-20). In contrast, the majority of women over 30 (67.9%) engaged in star-chasing during their teenage years, with only a minority (32.1%) showing no interest in stars. Specifically, among individuals who denied actively chasing star during 16-20 years old, admiring stars or celebrities (59.4%) had the higher proportion than absolutely having no interest in them. Those who did not chase stars largely exhibited a critical stance during their youth regarding their peers’ star-chasing behavior. Only 12.5% of them affirmed star-chasing behavior, and 39.6% held relatively or complete negative opinions, with a significant proportion (47.9%) expressing neutral uncertainty.

Among people above the age of 30 who had exhibited star-chasing behaviors in their youth, the most prevalent behavior was collecting items related to their idols, with 46.6% of the sample engaging in this activity. The second most common behaviors were purchasing idol’s commercial endorsement products (28.2%) and participating in public activities of idols (28.2%). It was found that only 5.3% of them had experienced direct oral or written communication with their idols, and a mere 3.8% had participated in their star’s fan activities. Interestingly, 30.5% of this ‘old generation’ of men had never engaged in any of the aforementioned star-chasing behaviors. The star-chasing behaviors in women over the age of 30 mirrored those of their male counterparts to a large extent. However, some slight differences were observed. For instance, women were 10% less likely than men to have attended star events such as concerts. Additionally, the proportion of women who had not engaged in any star-chasing behaviors was approximately 8% higher than that of men.

Idols’ charm and impact on fans were multi-aspect. Talent was considered by 81.7% of the over-30 group as the most attractive quality of their stars, followed at a distance by appearance (45.8%) and virtue (36.6%)(Figure 1). Less than a quarter prioritized achievement, and less than 10% did thought. However, 40.5% asserted that they saw the largest influence of their stars on their thoughts and views, while 34.4% did on appearance and manner.

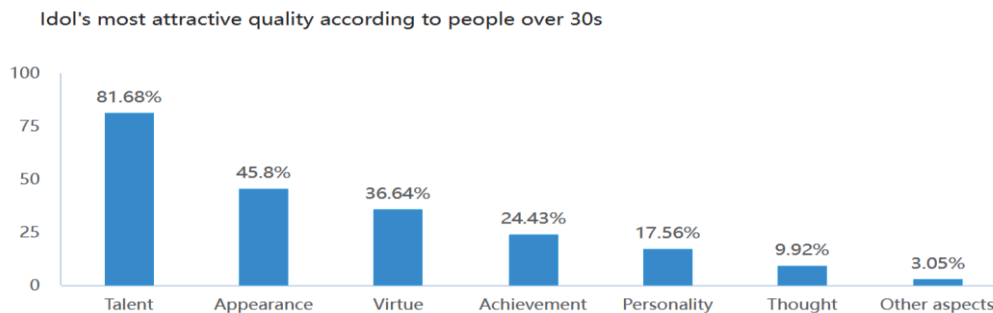


Figure 1 Idols’ most attractive qualities according to people over 30 years old

The familial attitudes that those over the age of 30 were faced regarding chasing star when they were young were quite supportive, irrespective of sex. A substantial proportion (84.2%) of family members held a neutral attitude towards their behavior, and a total to 14.7% expressed support, with only 1.05% imposing objection.

Two thirds of men and women over the age of 30 are not involved in celebrity chasing now. However, over half of them still pay attention to popular figures in the entertainment industry, indicating a passive interest, while less than one quarter of them do not follow any entertainment stars. They tend to hold a largely negative view of their middle-aged peers’ star-chasing phenomenon, while a small fraction supports or expresses positivity towards it.

Most of the over-30 fathers do not object to their children chasing stars. For them, their children’s star-chasing behavior is largely rational, which shows that male parents are willing to understand and support their children. Most of mothers remain neutral, as do fathers. It is worth mentioning that no mother thinks that her child’s star-chasing behavior is irrational, which fully reflects the mother’s respect and recognition for her child. However, when asked about attitudes towards young people chasing stars, 44.3% of fathers consider it as negative, with only 22.9% approving of the practice. 37.7% of mothers did not agree with it, and only 16.9% support it.

Among people aged below 30

Within individuals under 30 years old, men are predominantly not involved in chasing star. In contrast, women have a very narrow

majority (51.4%) engaged in such practice. Specifically, more than half of men and women who deny actively chasing star actually admire certain stars or celebrities (55.7%). Those who do not chase stars largely exhibit a critical stance regarding their peers' star-chasing behavior. Only 13.9% of them affirmed star-chasing behavior, and 41.1% held relatively or complete negative opinions, with a significant proportion (44.9%) expressing neutral uncertainty.

The most prevalent behavior of the below-30 group is collecting items related to their idols, with 56.1% of the sample engaging in this activity. The second most common behaviors were purchasing idol's commercial endorsement products (38.6%), followed by participating in public activities of idols (23.7%). Notably, as Figure 2 visualizes, nearly 10.0% of them had experienced direct oral or written communication with their idols, and a considerable 16.7% had participated in their star's fan activities, both of which significantly higher than that 'older generation'. 34.2% of this 'new generation' had never engaged in any of the aforementioned star-chasing behaviors. Across all listed star-chasing behaviors, women have a higher rate of participation than their male counterparts, which indicates women's more proactive and diverse behavioral pattern. Women are almost 30% more likely than men to collect idol-related things and 20% plus higher to buy what idols advertised. Additionally, the proportion of women who had not engaged in any star-chasing behaviors was approximately 28% lower than that of men.

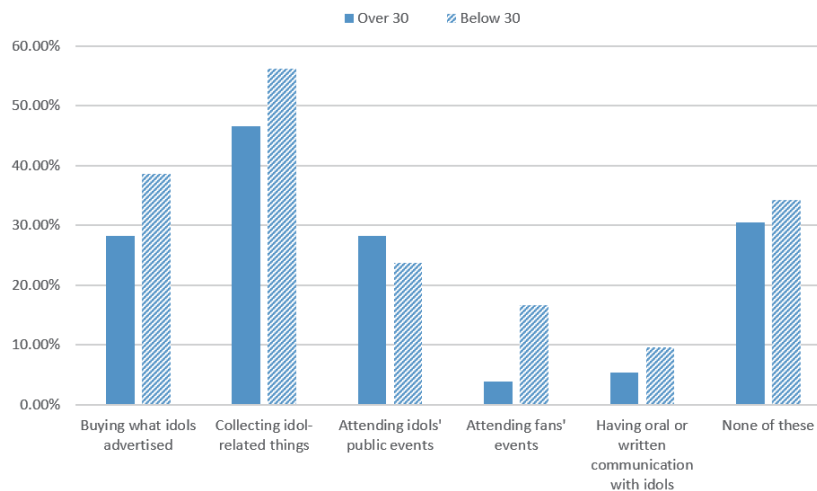


Figure 2 Rates of participation of two generations of Chinese youth in some forms of idol-chasing behaviors

Talent is still the dominant source of charm, considered by 75.4% of the under-30 group as the most attractive quality of their stars. Appearance (60.5%) remains the second but at a smaller distance, while personality (54.4%) replaces virtue (41.2%) to be the third (Figure 3). A smaller proportion (16.7%) prioritized achievement, but a bigger one (20.2%) looks at thoughts. The young generation also found the largest influence of their stars on their minds (47.4%). Appearance and manner (29.0%), however, give up the second place to dreams and goals (42.1%) (Figure 4).

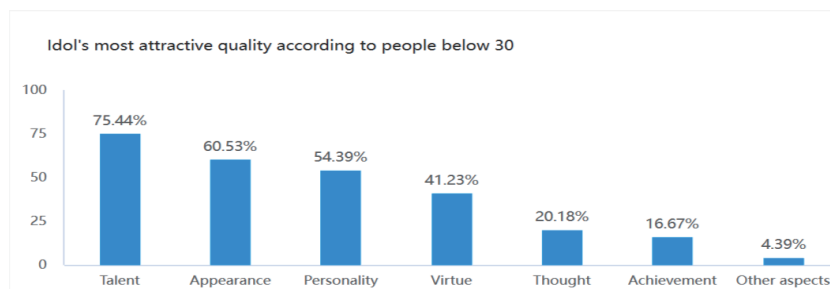


Figure 3 Idols' most attractive qualities according to people below 30 years old

The familial attitudes that this young generation are faced regarding chasing star are somewhat more supportive, irrespective of sex. 44.0% enjoy support from family members towards their behavior, with only 2.6% imposing objection.

A significant number of young individuals (53.7%) are certain that their parents had not pursued entertainment idols in the past, while only 11.1% believed their parents had engaged in star-chasing behaviors. The remaining participants were unsure about their parents' history in this regard. When examining the current situation, the gap widened, with 81.9% of respondents indicating that their parents presently have no idolatry, while only 1.6% believed their parents currently chase stars. Within the group with the highest proportion (parents with no idolatry), approximately half of the parents paid no attention to any entertainers. Conversely, 31.0% appreciated some entertainers without actively pursuing them, and 19.4% had concerns with the entertainment industry despite not enjoying stars.

It was also found that young men and women have varied understandings of their parents' star-chasing status. As a whole, the options of "once chasing the star," "not chasing," and "unclear" were almost equally represented, with a marginally higher proportion in favor

of “not chasing.” Interestingly, however, women were 20% more likely than men to state that their parents had pursued stars, potentially indicating that girls are more aware of their parents’ youth. As their parents aged, the ratio of parents who did not worship idols increased to almost 80%, signifying a sharp contrast from their youth. Among the parents who did not have an entertainment idol, approximately half appreciated some entertainers without actively pursuing them, while the rest were evenly divided between those who paid no attention to any idols and those who had concerns with the entertainment industry.

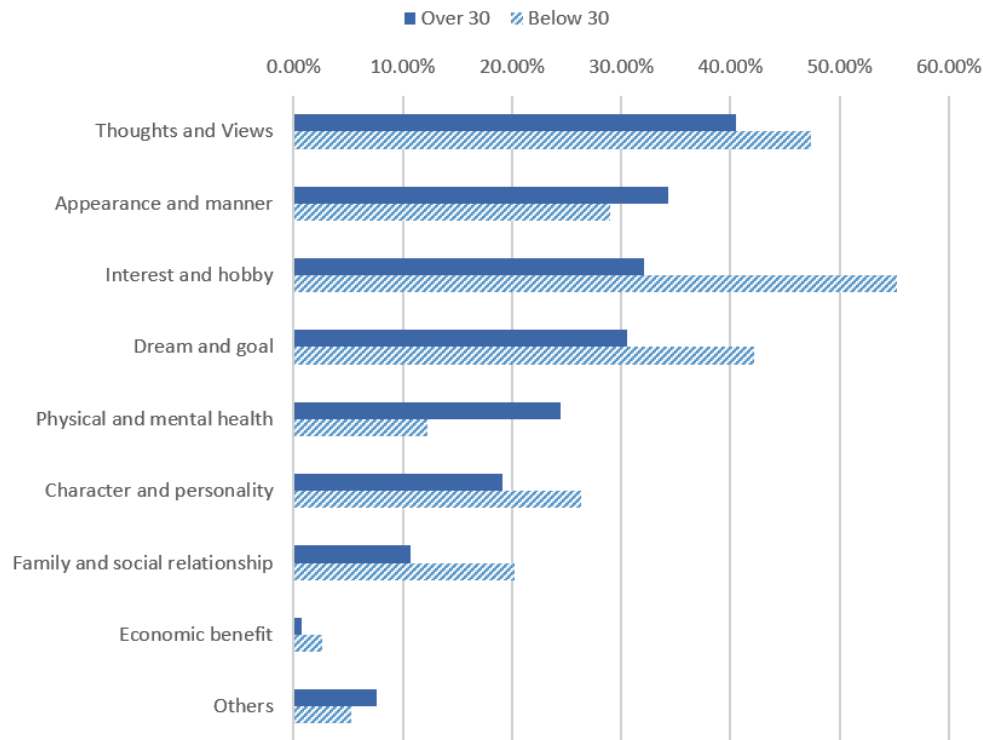


Figure 4 The distribution of idols’ impacts reported by two generations of Chinese youth

Discussions

When comparing star-chasing behaviors and attitudes between individuals under 30s and those above 30s, several distinct differences emerge. In terms of star-chasing behaviors, individuals under 30 showed a higher level of diversity and activeness in star-chasing activities participation compared to those above 30. The younger age group displayed a much higher likelihood of engaging in activities such as collecting items, buying advertised products and, to a remarkable extent, participating in fan activities. This finding confirms the phenomenon observed by Zheng (2007) and De Kloet (2012) in large sample populations, as well as the increase in material and immaterial labor among Chinese fan communities identified by Fung (2009). The growth of these two factors is mutually reinforcing. The possession of more and rarer idol-related items enhances the sense of belonging, status, and discourse power of individual fans within the fan community. At the same time, the fan collective has become an important channel for individual fans to purchase these items.

Both age groups encountered predominantly neutral attitudes from their family members regarding their star-chasing behaviors. Individuals under 30 had a significant higher proportion of family members expressing strong support compared to those above 30. It is interesting to scrutinize this finding with reference to another finding that less than a quarter of those above 30—the very age of parents of under-30 group—give a positive assessment to young generation chasing star. One reasonable explanation is that the parents of younger generation remain critical to star-chasing behaviors but turn more self-restrained in the expression of such attitude, caring more about their children’s sentiments. This is a far cry from the rumored image of Chinese parents who have zero tolerance and mete out harsh punishments to their children for following stars.

While more than a half of over-30 samples said they had been fans, less than one fifth of individuals under 30 are clear about the fandom status of their parents—surely over 30 years old. There were notable differences between men and women in their perceptions of their parents’ star-chasing behaviors. A significant proportion of men believed that their parents had not pursued entertainment idols in the past and that they currently have no idolatry. Women, on the other hand, had a higher belief that their parents had engaged in star-chasing behaviors, indicating a greater awareness of their parents’ youth. One explanation may be related to gender socialization and cultural expectations, where boys are often encouraged to engage in more “masculine” activities while girls are encouraged to appreciate and follow entertainment idols. This societal influence could lead to differences in awareness and perception of their parents’ past behaviors. Additionally, women may feel a stronger connection to their parents’ star-chasing behaviors due to identification and bonding, as individuals

tend to seek role models who share similar experiences. This identification process may enhance their awareness and memory of their parents' involvement in star-chasing activities. Furthermore, cognitive biases and selective memory could contribute to these differences, as women might be more attentive to their parents' behaviors due to their own interest and involvement in the same activities. However, it's important to note that these explanations are speculative and further empirical research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological processes underlying these gender differences (Eagly & Wood, 2013; Fivush & Buckner, 2000; Roese, 1997).

Their underestimation indicates a crucial gap in the intergenerational communication. A common reason for middle-aged individuals to conceal their fan behavior is that they tend to conform to social norms and view their own fandom as immature. This is particularly true when they interact with their own children, as they seek to reinforce their image as mature, powerful, and authoritative figures. Additionally, many parents do not want their children to become fans, so they do not share their own stories, for fear of providing negative examples or promoting incorrect beliefs. However, actively sharing their own growth experiences with their children can be particularly helpful in helping children understand their own life paths (Petersen, 2018). This approach not only does not harm the parents' authoritative image, but also highlights their empathy and tolerance.

The generational change of the ranking of idols' most attractive qualities unravels a vital transformation. Far more attention has been paid by the young generation to stars' personality and thought, while the importance of achievement is severely downgraded. This shift reflects a broader transformation of values among Chinese youth. In the past, achievement was highly valued as a marker of success and social status. However, as China has undergone rapid economic and social change, young people are increasingly questioning traditional measures of success and are placing greater emphasis on personal fulfillment, creativity, and self-expression. They are drawn to stars who are authentic, relatable, and who share their values and beliefs. This reflects a broader cultural shift towards individualism and self-expression, as young people seek to define themselves on their own terms. Moreover, the rise of social media has given young people unprecedented access to celebrities and has allowed them to interact with them on a more personal level. This has created a new kind of celebrity culture, where authenticity and relatability are highly prized.

Conclusion

This article, using a questionnaire survey, investigates the idol-chasing experiences, cognition, and attitudes of Chinese individuals born in the 1990s (now above 30) and those born after the 1990s (now below 30) during their youth. Both generations of young people share the commonality that females have a higher proportion of idol-chasing than males, and regardless of gender, they generally hold a negative attitude towards idol-chasing. They are enthusiastic about collecting idol-related items and purchasing products endorsed by idols, and females exhibit higher levels of enthusiasm in all activities. The talent and appearance of celebrities are the most attractive factors to them. The main difference lies in the fact that the previous generation of young people were less involved in fan activities and direct communication with celebrities, while the current generation's participation rate has significantly increased. Compared with the previous generation, the current generation of young people place a much greater emphasis on the personality and thoughts of idols, replacing morality and achievement. The current generation of young people have a relatively vague understanding of their parents' idol-chasing experiences and underestimate the enthusiasm of their parents' generation for idol-chasing. Young women have a better understanding of their parents' idol-chasing experiences than young men. In sum, the younger generation (under 30) showed a higher level of interest and active participation in star-chasing activities compared to the older generation (above 30). The findings suggest a generational shift in star-chasing behaviors and attitudes in China, indicating a change in societal norms and cultural influences over time.

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