

Idol Worship

A recent investigation by the Child Welfare League Foundation found that 9 in 10 teenagers routinely follow social media celebrities, and over 30 percent admitted they mimic celebrities' speech and actions on purpose. The investigation interviewed 1,789 kids whose ages ranged from 11 to 17, and found that three in four of these kids said that they worship one or more celebrities (Maxon 4). An article by PubMed Central says, "one-sided connections imagined with celebrities and media figures are common in adolescence and might play a role in adolescent identity formation and autonomy development." When this attachment becomes intense, it develops into 'idol worship' (Gleason et al.).

According to the media, "emotional attachments to public figures often termed a parasocial relationship, referring to a one-sided psychological bond where a person invests a large, significant amount of time into a celebrity or an influencer who does not know they exist; or in other words, while to public figure is not aware of the individual fan, the fan often feels a close, reciprocal friendship or intimacy with them. Meanwhile, "idol worship" means a kind of admiration that is stronger and more emotionally invested, and not as shallow as liking a song or a movie.

As the number of people retaining idol worship, or idolaters, takes a significant rise, people slowly divide into stands: some people see idol worship as emotional support, while the other portion worries about this worship leading to increased dependency and social detachment. Based on personal observations, I argue that idol worship should be seen mainly as a positive form of emotional support for adolescents as long as it remains balanced and does not completely replace real-life relationships.

When kids step into the adolescence stage, identity search, pressure from school, family expectations, and social comparison weigh on them. In school, other classmates form tight-knit groups, isolating those who haven't found another group yet; after they go home, fights and quarrels break out with parents, intensifying adolescents' feelings of being misunderstood and loneliness. Under burdens such as these, teenagers turn to an alternative source of "light" in their hearts in order to find a sense of belonging or a role model to look up to.

As said before, "idol worship" is mostly termed a parasocial relationship, referring to a one-sided emotional relationship where a media user invests themselves deeply in a public figure who does not know the user exists. Simply put, the media users feel close to someone who doesn't actually know them personally. Although this attachment is not reciprocal, this can still feel emotionally real, as the illusion of intimacy is being exacerbated by modern media, such as TikTok, Instagram, and live streams, which may create a fake sense of friendship and closeness, leading to fans thinking they actually "know" the figure. Fans may experience happiness or comfort when the flow of their idol increases, or sadness, anxiousness, and grief when their celebrity experiences a downfall or dies.

Therefore, because of adolescents' need to find someone to look up to, the act of worshipping idols for teenagers can become a source of comfort and guidance, which is why it should be understood as positive emotional support.

When teenagers are feeling low or can't muster their energy, a large portion of them choose to listen to their idols' music or watch their idols in interviews, sharing their stories. Take a typical idolater, for example. When they feel depressed, they watched their idol talking about his/her examples on live stream; after seeing that even famous figures once went through similar struggles, their emotions tend to calm down, as viewing the interview helps them understand this is just part of ordinary life. For instance, Suga from BTS has been very open about his past when he fought anxiety and depression, which helped many adolescents realize that even their favorite star had dark days and they won't be alone when facing challenges or dissatisfactions in life, normalizing teenagers' feelings.

Whilst adolescents cry over their idols' songs, celebrate an idol's newest achievement, or join a countdown for a new release, they often feel light and relaxed, as these activities provide teens with an outlet for releasing their emotions. This is similar to when New Year's Eve is having a countdown for the New Year, and a large number of Chinese people, wherever they are, join together to welcome the New Year. Having an outlet for emotions, no matter whether positive or negative they are, is always better than keeping everything inside or keeping emotions to oneself.

Or, during times of change, like transferring to a new school or another country on one's own, having exams, or problems with friends, having an idol to hold onto serves as an anchor from the sea, holding ships at bay, instead of feeling lost and lonely. In other words, having a constant figure to "follow" can lead to teenagers owning a sense of having solid ground. Overall, these emotional benefits show why idol worship often feels like real support, and not just a shallow obsession.

Idols could become an inspiration for hard work and perseverance. Fans may find motivation or inspiration from famous idols who have trained for years, faced rejection, or started from a humble background. For example, a teenager who had struggled with sports sees that their idol, Jackson Wang, was a junior Olympic-level saber fencer before becoming a K-pop idol. Inspired by Jackson's athletic background, the teenager decided to join a local fencing club. As a result, the teenager practiced daily, maybe even studying Jackson's old videos to learn technique, treating their amateur training with the same discipline the idol once applied to fencing. This example shows how a celebrity can turn simple admiration into resilience and personal discipline.

Furthermore, idols might also encourage their fans to explore their identity. Starting from mimicking their idols, fans may try dancing, singing, or creating fan art inspired by idols. In particular, consider a learning language scenario here, where an idol with the name YangYang from WayV can speak German, Mandarin, English, Korean, and Spanish. Unintentionally, YangYang's fluency in multiple languages may become the inspiration for his fans to learn a second or third language. However, this should not be seen as simple copying, as it can lead to individuals slowly uncovering their true identity in multiple idols by finding the things they love or are passionate about.

Additionally, many popular idols are invested in charity, kindness, mental health awareness, or standing up to bullying. An example in this case is the BTS, often famous

not because of the celebrities but of their long-term “LOVE MYSELF” campaign with UNICEF to end violence against children and youth, lately renewed to focus on mental health. They are top donors to various causes, including the COVID-19 relief. If teenagers who idolize these people internalize these values by donating money to the poor or just simply mimicking their idols’ actions, it will be beneficial for both them and society if more and more people become invested in those.

Contrary to popular beliefs, idol worship is often social, not just a lonely obsession, as communities exist, and adolescents can find belonging in a fandom. Many teens feel a strong sense of identity when they join a fandom, which gives them a group they can belong to, whether it is through shared memes, fanlore language, or even creating and buying merchandise. Celebrity fandoms help people find like-minded friends. Fans connect through social media, group chats, events, or even specific school clubs. Sometimes, these connections can become real friendships, offering emotional support during hard times. Also, idol worship provides opportunities for participation and contribution, such as an idol’s birthday event, charity donations in an idol’s name, or an archive for works based on their idols. For example, the AFF (AsianFanFics) is a major archive featuring works mainly related to K-pop and other fan works. Taking part in these activities can build confidence and a sense of purpose. However, although fandoms can be supportive, they can also be intense or competitive.

However, it would be unrealistic to say that idol worship only brings benefits to adolescents and never causes problems. For some teenagers, the emotional bond with their celebrity becomes too intense; they might start comparing their own lives to a public figure’s delicately edited image, glamorous lifestyles, or luxurious clothes and belongings. It would be easy to think that their own life is boring, lacking “fun”, or just simply not good enough. In this way, idol worship, which is once a source of comfort and solace, slowly transforms into a standard most people will never reach.

There is also the issue of time. When a teenager becomes intoxicated with an idol, the original worship develops into a morbid state of obsession. It adolescents spend too much time chatting with their netizen friends, watching fan cams, or checking for updates on media too frequently, resulting in less time for studying, spending time with parents, and hobbies. Sometimes, idol worship progresses into a way for teenagers to avoid real problems, or in other words, escape reality, instead of dealing with them. Observations of idolaters with an age ranging from 11 to 17 show that when these teenagers come across problems that they stress about, a portion of them avoid the problem and spend the rest of their day watching their idols’ videos instead, which mostly worsens the current crisis and does not solve it.

But actually, these problems revolving around idol worship only happen when the worship becomes too extreme. With basic self-control, such as setting screen time limits, spending time with friends daily, and remembering idols are still ordinary people behind the camera, idol worship can stay healthy and non-interfering with everyday life. Overall, while risks exist, they can be inhibited, and they still don’t eliminate the support idol worship provides for adolescents.

In conclusion, the debate surrounding the topic of idol worship eventually comes down to one question: should idol worship be seen as a source of positive emotional support or the origin of feelings of disconnection and isolation? Taking a glance at teenagers today, the answer might not be as simple as most parents assume.

On one hand, idol worship offers adolescents a source of solace and comfort, or a space for coping; idols are also role models, giving teenagers motivation and encouraging them to find things they truly love; they furthermore give adolescents a chance to meet people who have the same interests as them, fostering belonging within a community. On the other hand, when simple admiration turns into obsession, idol worship can take away kids' time, cause isolation, or lead to teenagers going down a morbid state.

But still, idol worship should mostly be understood as a positive form of emotional support for adolescents, especially balanced with healthy real-life relationships. Overall, reflecting on the words above, what the teenagers really need is not to cut idols from their lives, but to utilize them as inspiration while still valuing the people surrounding them.

Works Cited

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