

# *Research on Idol Commercialization in the New Media Era*

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**Keywords:** Idol Commercialization; New Media Idol; Idol Culture Consumption Behavior; Talent Agency

**Abstract:** Idol, that is, the object of worship, is the external cause of the movement of things. The word derives from the Greek “Idolon”, meaning sculpture. In ancient Greece, many images such as gods, heroes, and wise men often became the original form of sculptures, such as Venus, Achilles, and Aristotle. The ancient Greek people believed that such sculptures could convey the power and wisdom of gods or figures. With the concentration of social power, the word “idol” began to refer to those people or things that were admired, loved and imitated. The concept of idol was more and more in line with human society, and the form of sculpture was closer and closer to real life. The new media born in the scientific and technological revolution has accelerated the evolution of the word “idol”. The “idol” discussed in this paper mainly refers to pop singers, film and television stars and other celebrities in the entertainment circle, who have high visibility and exposure, and are known for their strong charm and attraction. In today's society, the commercialization trend of idols is more prominent, and idol worship has become a commercial cultural phenomenon, penetrating into all aspects of daily life. The new media environment is like a huge “Dream-Making Space”, which continuously delivers emotional value to people, and continuously expands and strengthens idol capital through secondary sales, forming a complete capital closed loop. This paper will focus on the background of the new media era, combining sociology and communication theory to analyze the characteristics of Idol Commercialization, the trading path of “Idol Products” and the hidden risks of Idol Commercialization.

## **1. The Characteristics of Idol Commercialization: Concept Replaces Charm as The Core of Idol Culture**

The commercialization of idols can be traced back to the Star-System in Hollywood. From the 1920s to the 1950s, American cinema entered its golden age. In order to maximize the popularity of films and ensure the box office, film companies commercialize stars as a kind of commodity, closely combine stars with movie characters, and enhance stars' personalities through various elements such as advertisements, stories, photos and rumors, so that the influence of stars can be better transformed into a kind of economic support and play a role in the development of the film industry. The star system was formed.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the culture industry with the goal of making idols first began in Japan.

The birth of Johnny's Office in 1975 is considered to be the symbol of the birth of the Japanese idol industry, and for a long time, Johnny's Office has maintained a stable and unique business model, producing generation after generation of top idols, but also very efficient integration of entertainment resources, stable its position in the field of popular culture, becoming the last century Asia's premier star-making factory.<sup>[1]</sup> Around the 21st century, with the help of the Internet new media development opportunities, worldwide idol culture and fan economy gradually into a scale, South Korea's "Korean Wave", Europe and the United States of "Pop Music", Chinese Music have absorbed and carried forward the essence of idol culture, to create their own unique idol commodity system.

Idol Conceptualization is the most significant feature of Idol Commercialization, which is manifested in that talent agencies take idol manufacturing as their goal and capital acquisition as their purpose, carry out cultural production activities in a planned, regular and organized way, and take one or more "concepts" as the core to shape a world view for idols and form a field that belongs only to fans, audiences and idols. For example, South Korea's SM Entertainment company launched a large boy band NCT in 2016, taking the first letter of "Neo Culture Technology" to form "NCT". NCT is a leading and exploratory combination that takes the world as its stage. At present, the concept of NCT is "dream", and the combination of "dream" is the center or channel, and the concept of NCT is integrated into a series of contents such as the number of units, names, forms, members, styles, MV and so on.

With the rise of Artificial Intelligence Technology and Virtual Reality Technology, talent agencies can even customize a virtual image for the idol, and inject the idol into the grand space of the Meta-universe through "encoding - decoding", thus achieving absolute eternity beyond the scope of time and space. This is a "Posthumanism", in which people initially love idols because of their incomparable charisma, but now it has become that people love the concept launched by the talent agencies rather than the idol itself, and the "concept" designed by the company can be applied to anyone else, which makes the rare attribute of the idol is greatly weakened, they are like a beautiful skin without a soul, can be replaced by others at any time. Although the executives of SM Entertainment Company admit that NTC is still an experimental combination, and the conceptualization is not yet mature, we can explore the current idol conceptualization law from a number of cases, and extract the three key elements of conceptualization: "Categorization of Character Settings", "Establish a Meta-universe", and "Parasitic Relation".

## 1.1 Categorization of Character Settings

Character Setting, is generally believed to have originated from the second world of anime and online novels.<sup>[2]</sup> It refers to the author's setting of character characteristics, appearance, family background, interpersonal relationship and other contents of his characters, which helps to enhance the particularity and stability of novels, and plays a pivotal role in literary and artistic creation. Because of its highly symbolic, easy to spread and easy to distinguish, The Character Setting has been smoothly introduced from the second dimension to the third dimension. In order to stand out in the competition of culture and entertainment, maintain vitality for a long time, and realize their own commercial value and artistic value, more and more idols have begun to create their own unique Character Setting, committed to the construction of Character symbols under the support of capital power, and new media technology has also given idols a new channel to show and build themselves.

The character setting of an idol usually has a certain complexity. Some idols play a certain role, and the characteristics of the role are applied to the idol himself, which is often reflected in Hollywood movie stars. Some character setting are based on the personality and physical

characteristics of the star, or even MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator), which has a certain particularity. For example, Lalisa Manoban, a member of the Korean group Black Pink, is loved for her sweet appearance and optimistic personality, but the most important thing that enhances her popularity is her beautiful and neat bangs, which have earned her the reputation of "Human Barbie", and when she lifts the bangs, it becomes unrecognizable. More character settings are specially selected by the talent agency, in order to maximize the audience's love, although these characters may look more "ordinary", but in social life the most easily received by the audience and be appreciated. For example, hardworking, excellent, pure, etc.

After a long experiment, talent agencies have learned which people are most popular with audiences and which people can be combined to maximize profits, so there will be a phenomenon of idol "duplication of legend", for example, SM Entertainment's new group aespa launched in 2020 is believed to be a replica of YG Entertainment's BLACK PINK group. The two have striking similarities in the composition of the members, and the new group aespa has been as popular as the debut of BLACK PINK, SM Entertainment said on May 15, 2023, according to the statistics of the initial sales statistics website Hanteo Charts. aespa's third mini album "MY WORLD," which was released on May 8, has sold 1,698,784 copies, beating BLACKPINK to become the first female group on KPOP.

## 1.2 Establish a Meta-universe

Run Lola, released in 1999, was a worldwide sensation. This film is full of strong postmodernism, director Tom Tykwer subverts the orthodox film creation concept in the way of games, explores multi-dimensional space, and shows the ever-expanding desire for life of art at the turn of the century. The narrative line of the film is split into fragments, and the characters rush through time and space through the flashbacks of the screen, where the creative combination of animation and real shooting makes the film's aggressive game style better stand out. The animation image of the girl Lola is the generalization and sublimation of her own image, the integration of consumer factors and fashion elements, every rush of Lola is greatly in line with the psychology of the "Audio-Visual Generation", the new generation in the virtual world without hesitation to release passion, dancing with Lola.<sup>[3]</sup> The pioneering significance of "Run Lola" is that it gives virtual images to the movie characters, creatively connects the real time and space with the virtual time and space, and creates a more visual impact, communication power, and more full three-dimensional character image, which is also a beneficial exploration of the "Meta-universe".

Idol virtualization is the inevitable trend of the development of science and technology and the prosperity of new media. At present, we can divide this trend into three categories - Virtual Images of Real Idols, Holograms of Dead Idols and Virtual Idols.

### 1.2.1 Virtual Images of Real Idols

With advances in new technologies such as AI, VR, AR and K-POP groups gaining worldwide attention, South Korea has quickly explored a mature path by creating virtual idols on numerous different subdivided tracks. The best recent evolution of virtual idols is undoubtedly the girl group aespa, launched by SM in late 2020, in which each of the four members of the group has a corresponding avatar. In the debut teaser video, SM created a scene where Karina, a real aespa member, chats with her digital avatar, ae-Karina, in an exchange that flows like late-night TV. With the continuous launch of the combined works, the virtual images of the four members have appeared more and more in MV, stage and micro film, and these works have gradually formed a digital living space with a new social system, forming a virtual world that can interact with the real world.

In order to welcome the era of AI artists, SM has made many efforts to ensure the source technology of artificial intelligence, such as the joint investment with the American AI company ObEN in Hong Kong to set up a company "AI STARS", dedicated to producing content combining AI technology and IP associated with celebrities.

### 1.2.2 Holograms of Dead Idols

Death will not stop the commodification of celebrity. Throughout history, the relics of many famous people have been sold at auction, often for staggering prices, and the cemeteries of famous people such as George Washington and Karl Max have also become historic sites. Just as religious believers will preserve the body and relics of saints, in the real society, the items of deceased celebrities are also worshipped as sacred objects, and with the development of The Times, people not only pursue collection, worship the relics of celebrities, but also insist on the representation of the image of celebrities who have passed away.

Special effects recreations of dead idols are now a hot topic in the fields of artificial intelligence, psychology, ethics, communication and so on. In 2012, at the Coachella music Festival in the United States, the famous American rapper Tupac Shakur, who has been dead for nearly 20 years, reappeared on stage through holographic projection technology, making the audience cry. In 2013, the hologram of "Teresa Teng" sang with Jay Chou for 3 minutes and 30 seconds across time and space, giving people a great visual shock. In 2015, in the film *Fast and Furious 7*, Paul Walker also used virtual human technology to "resurrect" on the big screen to complete the final goodbye to fans. With the combination of special effects, virtual people and VR, the "resurrected star" can not only be perfectly copied in appearance, posture, movement and voice, but even return to the stage for creative performance. But it also raises questions about ethics, image rights and copyright. It is reported that a number of technology companies have set up a special "Virtual Person Talent Agencies" that will sign virtual portrait rights with the family of the deceased superstar. Signed stars will not only do concerts, but also "star" in their main image of drama movies, TV shows and variety shows.

### 1.2.3 Virtual Idols

Since the beginning of Hatsune Miku to the world in 2007, the industry of virtual idols has quietly opened. As a major branch of idol activities among virtual digital people, virtual idols are engaged in entertainment activities similar to real idols, such as singing, dancing, variety show and live broadcast, with distinct identity setting and work output, highly dependent on user creation, and more closely connected with fans. In the past decade, many capitals have entered the industry.

Historically, time and space costs have often become the main limiting factors in product production, with the help of cutting-edge technology, talent agencies can create surreal idol products around the "core concept", which breaks through the time and space constraints in the design and packaging process, so that talent agencies occupy a more favorable position in the entertainment market competition. At the same time, the consumption mode of fans also highlights the digital characteristics, and the idol products they buy gradually change from physical products to virtual products.

## 1.3 Parasitic Relation

Under the trend of commercialization of idols, idols and talent agencies constitute a parasitic relationship, that is, the concept of output of talent agencies is the core selling point, and the individual power of idols is gradually weakened and becomes an accessory of talent agencies.

South Korean company SM is known for its high-budget, big-budget packaging, the kind of

exquisite packaging and media exposure that can make a team famous quickly. Talent agencies usually do not let the fourth generation, the fifth generation of artists open Mai singing, on the one hand, do not let the idol make mistakes, is conducive to maintaining the perfect image of the idol, but on the other hand, do not let the idol's real strength show, resulting in too strong strength to leave the company management. In order to maintain this "attachment relationship," talent agencies, as star-making factories, will use various restrictions to prevent idols from becoming popular with their charisma, but make idols' images and songs popular and make idols attached to the company's concept.

Originally known for singing and dancing, idol groups eventually became "dance groups" that only lip-synced, and idol singers could not even compose their own songs, often singing covers or adapting songs of their predecessors. Usually, the streaming data that talent agencies focus on is album sales, that is, whether the songs launched are popular, so they will timely adjust the idol configuration in the portfolio through the audience response.

According to Max Weber, "He(Celebrities) acquires it retains it only by proving his powers in real life.." [4] The idols produced under the assembly line model do not need or have the ability to prove themselves, they only need to stay in their conceptual image and become a propaganda tool of some power. And now Hong Kong's new female top flow Ah Yi (Xue Ying Yi) is the product of the commercialization trend of idols. "Sing without moving mouth, dance without moving legs", 39-year-old Ah Yi looks very general, but this does not affect her is "ATV first sister". When the debut of the first single "one plus one equals Ah Yi", as soon as the line received millions of plays, quickly rushed to the top of the song list. However, from the packaging of talent agencies and media traffic hype, ordinary people without the foundation of music and dance in any previous era are almost impossible to become tens of thousands of idols.

## 2. The trading path of Idol Products: Realize the Flow Realization in The Secondary Sale

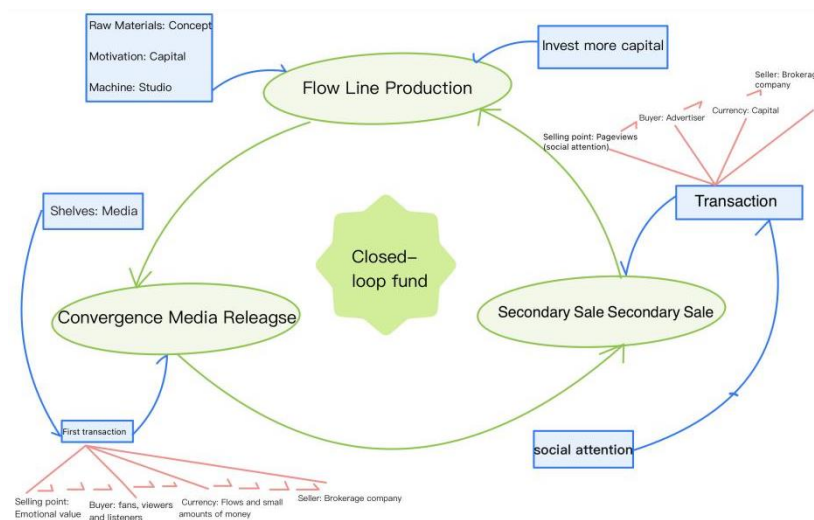


Figure 1: The trading path model of idol products

Through the investigation of some idol products in Europe, America and Asia, the author summarized the value realization of idol products into three links - Flow Line Production, Convergence Media Release, and Secondary Sale (Figure 1). The three stages not only have linear logic, but also form a closed loop of "product-flow-capital", and talent agencies continue to expand capital accumulation through the realization of two "value conversions" in the cycle.

## 2.1 Flow Line Production

The mechanization of the production process is the beginning of the industrial revolution, similarly, in order to chase the highest efficiency of commercialization, the "Star-Making Factory" of talent agencies also generally adopts the "Flow Line Production" model - please professional teams to outsource production, forming a unified style and stable quality of idol products.

In the process of Flow Line Production, the concept is the raw material of production, the capital is the power of production, and the studio is the production machine. In the era of new media, screens are no longer scarce, and entertainment information is gradually becoming cheap. In order to compete for consumers' attention, talent agencies will choose highly differentiated and advanced concepts, establish conceptual models, and shape idols with concepts. For example, VIXX, a group owned by South Korea's Jelly Fish Entertainment, each album contains a different concept - from Greek mythology to voodoo dolls to robots - that is sought after by fans for its creativity and imagination. British actor Robert Pattinson is famous for playing the vampire hero in the movie "Twilight". In real life, he is also given the concept of "vampire aristocrat" because of his cool and charming personality. Some fans even trace Robert's family origin because of the overly realistic vampire image in "Twilight", thinking that he is a distant relative of the original vampire Willard III.

Commercialized idols are very potential assets, but the market competition is cruel, in the process of idol cultivation talent agencies need to invest a lot of capital, a large part of which will flow into the studio to activate the operation of the "idol production machine" to ensure the continuous output of high-quality idol products.

## 2.2 Convergence Media Release

After the production and packaging of idol products are perfected, the talent agency will release idol products through various types of media, when the media is like rows of shelves, placing idol products for sale. In the first stage of realizing the "value exchange" of idol products, the selling point of idol products lies in the high emotional value. The seller is a talent agency, the buyer is a fan or a general audience, and the currency used for the initial transaction is the page views (social attention) and a small amount of money.

In the 1970s, the American artist Andy Warhol predicted that "in the future, everyone will be a celebrity in 15 minutes." "He believes that under the right circumstances and with enough exposure, everyone has the opportunity to become a superstar. Although Andy Warhol died many years ago, he successfully predicted the use of new media in our era, where pictures, videos, and articles are wildly copied and disseminated, which are changing our original life status. A celebrity is "known for being well-known"<sup>[5]</sup>. Idol products become in short supply because of the hot sale, due to the injection of the concept of "limited quantity", "hype economy" is gradually sought after by people. For example, a card printed with the photo of Korean idol Jeon Jung Kook released by the talent agency can be sold for 7,000 dollars. But even if idol products have such a high price, they are still accepted by fans and are more cherished.

Integrating various forms of media, talent agencies use conceptualization to create a "dream-making space" for fans and audiences. They live together with idols in a pseudo-environment of a specific world view. Through virtual image chat, idol performance, and multi-type interaction of star peripheral products, fans and audiences form a kind of social relationship with idols. In a study on fans' social behaviors and social attachment to celebrities, scholar Stever found that fans choose to establish relationships with celebrities in order to meet their social psychological needs.<sup>[6]</sup> Generally speaking, such social psychological needs are manifested as love fantasies, and fans will fantasize their idols as their other half to have love

relationships in the similar society. For example, you get caught up in the plot of a movie, fantasize that you are the heroine of the movie, and fall in love with the hero. This kind of situation was relatively common in the last century when Hollywood star system was prevalent, and it is not a unique social behavior of idol commercialization. At present, a more prominent phenomenon is the phenomenon of the fan circle group CP (Coupling), which fantasized that an idol and another idol they love form a romantic relationship, and most of them are the love between same-sex idols. According to Boorstin, "heroes create themselves; celebrities are created by the media."<sup>[5]</sup> In order to get more media views and occupy more resources and advantages in the communication environment, idols will even produce their own rumors to give the audience more fantasy space. Idols will also take "CP" as their task to sell love experience or homosexual love to meet the psychological needs of fans. For example, Chinese actor Zhang Han once starred in a reality show called "Dear Online" love game variety show. Zhang Han is the only actor in the whole drama, and the audience can experience the love relationship with Zhang Han from the first-person perspective with great personal charm. "Dear Is Online" has received a huge number of views on You Tube and has reached a global audience.

In the First Transaction, the talent agency gets currency, mainly social attention. Because the fan base is relatively loose, not every audience is willing to make actual consumption behavior for the idol, and the contribution of each individual is limited. Although the income obtained by the talent agency from the concert, album and peripheral products of the star is already high, it cannot belong to the capital force. Therefore, in this link, idol value only realizes the transformation from "product" to "flow".

### **2.3 Secondary Sale**

In the First Transaction, the talent agency obtains high social attention by providing emotional value to fans. In the second link, the talent agency will sell the "social attention" as a commodity to advertisers, earn high endorsement fees through idol endorsement, or create brands in the name of idols and co-sign with other brands. Relying on a wide range of social attention to drive the consumption behavior of social groups. For example, Justin Bieber and Hollywood producer Ryan Good founded the brand Drew house in 2018, once launched, captured the favor of European and American fashion youth, and set off a street trend storm during New York Fashion Week. In this stage, the talent agency realized the realization of the flow, and the currency acquired by the transaction was a large amount of capital, which also enabled the talent agency to develop and grow, and it had more sufficient funds and stronger capital to invest in the upgrading of the original idol products and the research and development of new idol products.

In this model, the value exchange of idol products forms a complete closed loop of funds, which is conducive to the stable trading of idol goods, and talent agencies have gradually explored a mature way to make profits - such as hunger marketing, cross-border joint branding, and so on, forming a hype economy. However, the stable closed loop of funds is also easy to cause the monopoly of the entertainment industry, which is contrary to the mobility of social classes in the entertainment industry in the past.

### **3. The Risk Hidden Danger of Idol Commercialization: Fall, Corruption and Deviation**

Commercialization of idol products is the portrayal of new media digital consumption and fast food culture. Although talent agencies avoid risks by optimizing symbols, establishing public order of network society and establishing certain links between idol products and other fields, forming a relatively stable capital chain, commercialization of idol products is not only efficient but also has high risks and hidden dangers. It is a threat to idols, fans and even national security.

### 3.1 The Fall of An Idol

On the one hand, in the atmosphere of new media fast food culture, a person may become famous overnight because of the extensive attention of the media, but this way of fame is often short-lived. The idol in the new media era is like a shining meteor, which is beautifully packaged and perfect, but his career is very short. In particular, the members of idol groups have a relatively strict age limit, and major talent agencies recruit new artists every year, while some older members have to leave.

On the other hand, surrounded by fame and capital, the normal life of many idols is subjected to various interference - from the restriction agreement of the talent agency and the prying eyes of the paparazzi, coupled with the career pressure and various temptations in life after fame, and unlike previous idols, commercial idols have been trained for a long time and may fall into the abyss if they are not careful. The chaos in China's entertainment industry in recent years reflects this fact.

### 3.2 Spiritual Corruption

In previous studies on celebrity worship, celebrity worship has been conceptualized as pathological and non-pathological forms.<sup>[7]</sup> When idol worship from example and model, into the crazy point, worshippers will breed in the human nature of "self-indulgence" desire and "black and white" one-sided thinking, and eventually fall into the pursuit of idols, escape from reality, lost self-psychedelic state, resulting in spiritual corruption and even a series of radical behavior.

In the *Conceptualization and Measurement of Celebrity Worship* (2002), the author proposes a model of celebrity worship based on psychological absorption and addiction. This model still holds true in today's idol-commercialization research - the social distance between fans and idols acts as a filter, which makes people more tolerant of idols' moral evaluation and more confident that the idol image created by the talent agency is perfect.<sup>[8]</sup>

Psychological absorption brings the illusion of actual relationship, which is usually manifested as the quasi-social behavior of fans, which easily makes fans lose themselves in the ideal world and gradually become socially isolated, and also easily leads to some violent behaviors, especially the network violence of fans. For example, in the "227" event in China's entertainment industry in 2022, fans' collective excessive behavior damaged the idol's personal reputation. On the other hand, "addiction" is manifested as extreme dependence on idol products, which is not conducive to the mental health of people, especially teenagers. "Idol worship" is an instinct, but also the natural expansion of human nature.<sup>[9]</sup> Especially in this era of change, stress caused by constant moving due to urban expansion<sup>[10]</sup>, lack of peers due to the one-child policy, and complex work environment..... More and more young people feel isolated, and many believe that having an intimate relationship with their idol will be much better than the isolation they experience in other ways.

### 3.3 Political Bias

Under the tide of globalization, the wide spread of social media has promoted the global cultural integration, cultural identity and cultural convergence. Whether the international idol culture will reduce the cultural diversity of the country still needs to be considered. However, we can clearly find that due to the improper guidance of idols, some teenagers do not establish the correct three perspectives at the right time and lack the sense of family and country identity. As a result, there is a shift in political stance, and they choose to acquiesce, approve and even support the behavior of some foreign idols insulting their country, which poses a huge security risk to national political and social security.



## 4. Conclusion

Under the trend of commercialization of idols, the personal charm of idols is gradually replaced by the core concept of talent agencies, and the value of idol products is converted into capital through secondary sales and continues to be invested in entertainment production. Commercialized idols have a certain competitiveness in the highly saturated entertainment market, and the new media, as a shelf, has created a dream-like consumption space. The idol economy has developed rapidly worldwide, which has also derived a series of psychological and ethical problems. The future trend of commercialization of idols is worthy of scholars' attention and reflection.

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