

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IDOL WORSHIP OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the idol worship experiences of 15 Chinese college students, in order to identify the factors motivating idol worship, the meanings and impact gained from the worship experience. 15 college students who identified themselves as idol worshipers were interviewed. Thematic analysis revealed the participants' understanding of idol worship from three aspects: the way of idol worship, the role model of idols and the significance of idol worship. Three main factors that influenced participants to become idol worshipers were found: the need of self-development and the personal characteristics of idols. In addition, the themes that appeared to describe the influence of idol worship perceived by participants included emotions, life goals, spiritual support, personality, behavior and relationships with others. Generally, college students do not think there is a negative impact of their worship experiences. This study also reveals insights into how idols can play an important role by inspiring young generation in a positive way.

KEYWORDS

College Students, Idol Worship, Factors, Impacts, Qualitative

1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of the 20th century, the proliferation of media and the rise of "idol culture" prompted psychologists to explore the meanings of public figures in audience life (Samantha, 2018). Religious connotation is often quoted in the discourse surrounding celebrities, which regards celebrities as "idols" or "icons" (Alexander, 2010; Hackley and Hackley, 2016). From the perspective of psycho-sociology, celebrities are usually presented as role models. As a part of the process of identity exploration, it is a normal part of life development for people to take their favorite celebrities as role models (Ferris, 2007). People's Daily pointed out that "Idol as a public figure has a strong demonstration effect on the development of teenagers' health concept, and spreading positive energy with a good image is the social responsibility of celebrities" (https://www.sohu.com/a/486000492_121174848). In this era when the idol worship of stars or celebrities is soaring, it is particularly important to explore its present situation, causes and impacts.

In this study, the meaning, causes and impacts of idol worship will be reviewed in order to understand how the idol worship experience can have a positive or negative impact on their lives, and to provide college students with empirical expressions about the reasons for their changes. The methodology chapter will discuss semi-structured interviews used to gain insight into the idol worship experiences of 15 college students. The findings will present three chapters focused: college students' interpretation of idol worship, the factors that motivate idol worship and the impacts of idol worship on college students. The discussion will explore the relationship with existing literature, so as to draw further conclusions and suggestions.

2. INCENTIVE ON RESPONSE RATE

2.1 Definition of Idol Worship

Scholars in some English-speaking countries refer to the phenomenon of chasing celebrities as "celebrity worship" (Li and Shen, 2010). Some scholars, such as Chinese scholars, call the phenomenon of chasing celebrities "idol worship", which has the same meaning as "celebrity worship". Although the term "idol worship" is considered to be related to religion, which means the worship of a physical object as a god or immoderate attachment or devotion to something (<https://www.merriam-webster.com>). In the Chinese context, people and many scholars generally use the phrase "idol worship" to describe the phenomenon of worshipping stars or celebrities. As a Chinese translation, the phrase "idol worship" will run through this study.

Yue of City University of Hong Kong believes that idol worship is people's social identity and emotional attachment to their favorite characters (Yue, 1999). Wang thinks that idol worship is a kind of thinking habit, behavior pattern and values that people are willing to accept with high recognition, and gradually develops into a kind of social action with strong emotion — worship (Wang, 2004). This study will adopt He definition of idol worship, which refers to the individual's extreme respect, admiration, love, appreciation and yearning for the self-selected and recognized person, and various behaviors caused by it (He, 2005). It should be noted that this study mainly analyzes the idol worship phenomenon in China's environment and conditions.

2.2 Idol Worship of College Students

In the context of contemporary Chinese college students, idols generally refer to stars and celebrities (Zheng, 2018). Zhang measured 273 college students aged 17 to 24 in a higher education park in Zhejiang Province using the Celebrity Attitudes Scale, and the results showed that only 16

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students did not have a favorite star (Zhang, 2009). Taiwan scholar conducted interviews with 17 teenagers and young fans aged between 16 and 28 and found that fans were disgusted by the crazy performance of the so-called "idol worship" reported by the media, but they had their own views and ways on idol worship (Zhu and Lu, 2000).

Qin and Chen points out that contemporary college students are in the mature period of psychological and physiological development, and they are extremely eager for perceptual things, while contemporary idol culture gives contemporary college students the idea of being unambitious and seeking pleasure (Qin and Chen, 2009). Li pointed out that "Idol worship" represents popular culture and is the unique spiritual world of mankind in the current era (Li, 2019). Idol has a far-reaching impact on the aesthetics and value orientation of contemporary college students, and it also reflects the characteristics, multiple psychological demands and aesthetic tastes of contemporary college students' idol worship, which is a cultural phenomenon worthy of attention.

2.3 The Reasons That Motivate Idol Worship

Through investigation, some researchers found that individuals' idol worship is caused by their inability to properly resolve and deal with the difficulties in real life (Maltby et al., 2004). When they are not fully satisfied in real life, they will rely on idols as their emotional support. Giles and Maltby found that intense, personal interest in celebrities was best predicted by low levels of security and closeness, suggesting that idol worship somehow compensates for this lack (Giles and Maltby, 2004). Shen thought that the interpersonal communication and emotional cognition of college students had undergone earth-shaking changes, which made some college students feel uneasy, and even produced emotional and spiritual emptiness and pain (Shen, 2004). Therefore, college students often hope to realize their ideal self through the external world, and idol worship can help college students to reflect their wishes through idols, and then sprout their enthusiasm for life.

2.4 The Impacts of Idol Worship

Idol worship has a deep influence on individual thinking, emotion, and behavior (Liu, 2016). For example, how they might encourage purchasing behaviours influence political views or endorse health-related messages (Kosenko et al., 2016; Malik and Guptha, 2014; Veer et al., 2010). Zhang and Chen think that some college students will actively participate in public welfare activities organized or called by idols, such as poverty collection and green travel, and they will also buy products related to idols, such as concert tickets, albums or movie tickets, without affecting their study and within their abilities (Zhang and Chen, 2001).

The quantitative research by reveals some possible positive results of idol worship: emotional empathy, cognitive empathy, sharing goals and absorption (Cohen, 2001). Some scholars believe that idol worship will have a bad influence on the worshipers. Consumption-oriented idol worship may lead worshipers to worship money, affect the core values of socialism, dispel spiritual beliefs, and stimulate excessive behavior (Zhu, 2007; Qiao and Dong, 2006; Yang, 2007; Xu, 2007).

A review of the literature on idol worship shows that in many studies, idol worship is related to negative personality traits, characteristics, and pathology (Jenson, 1992; Maltby et al., 2003). However, idol worship has shown some beneficial effects, especially in the role-building, the increase of empathy and interpersonal relationship, and the formation of identity (Chin and Nee, 2018). Idol worshipers will take their idols as role models and even imitate their body images. Studies have shown that body image is positively related to idol worship. (North and Sheridan, 2009). A group researchers investigated the correlation between cosmetic surgery and idol worship (Viren et al., 2009). According to the survey, personal idol worship has become the most powerful intervention factor in choosing cosmetic surgery.

2.5 The Present Study

The literature discussed in the above review shows that the research objects of idol worship in recent years are mainly teenagers, and college students are only a small part of them. Future research can provide a more in-depth analysis of idol worship of this group. Researchers can also compare the characteristics of idol worshipers, such as gender differences and regional differences in idol worship (Hao and Feng, 2000). Existing research have not paid attention to the possible motives of the unconscious aspect of idol worship, that is to say, they only do explicit research, but have not paid attention to the implicit aspect, such as what kind of implicit influence idol information has on fans' emotions (Li and Shen, 2010). In addition, due to the limitation of research tools, the research methods in China are relatively narrow, and there is no imported

or self-made scale with high reliability and high efficiency (Li and Shen, 2010). Most studies on idol worship are conducted in western society and mainly use quantitative methods. This study attempts to make up the research gap by qualitative research on Chinese college students who participate in idol worship, and further explore their experiences.

3. RESEARCH QUESTION

In this study, the phenomenological approach is used to explore the experiences of idol worshipers among Chinese college students, aiming to determine the college students' understanding of idol worship, the factors that influence idol worship and the impacts gained from this experience. This qualitative research focused on interview questions within semi-structured interviews based upon the following objectives:

1. Explore the interpretation of idol worship from the perspective of idol worshipers among college students.
2. Explore the factors that motivate idol worship.
3. Explore the significance of idol worship to individuals, as well as its impacts and changes on individuals.

4. RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Social Imitation Theory

According to Tarde's social imitation theory (2008), social imitation is essentially an intentional behavior (Clark, 1969). In Tarde's view, imitation can be used to explain all social phenomena. Albert Bandura summed up the variables in the process of model demonstration through behavioral experiments (Bandura, 1998). The observer and model have the same or similar characteristics in interests, values and ages, which makes it easy for the observer to have a psychological tendency to learn from the model, especially when the model and the observer are close in some respects, the attraction of the model will be enhanced.

In terms of the content of idol worship, worshippers think about themselves by learning the behavior of idols (Bandura, 1998). As for college students' idol worship, if college students take idol behavior as a reference system and imitate others' behaviors intentionally or unintentionally, then college students are imitators and idols are imitated objects. Tarde believes that we are driven by conscious and unconscious incentives to emulate each other. In the case of intentional imitation, the imitation behavior of college students often has obvious personal motivation. This motivation is either to satisfy one's curiosity, to eliminate one's psychological anxiety, to adapt to the social environment at that time, or to enrich and change oneself, so that one can make greater progress in study, life and work (Wang, 1988).

4.2 Participant Sample

Participants are full-time adult college students, aged between 19 and 30, who all have the experience of worshipping stars or celebrities as idols, which lasts for 1-10 years. All participants included 8 males and 7 females, who worship different idols, and the idols of two participants have passed away.

4.3 Semi-Structured Interview Methodology

This study uses phenomenology to understand and explain the idol worship experience of college students from the perspective of participants (McNeill and Chapman, 2005). The purpose of this study is to pay attention to the abundant data obtained by qualitative methods, so as to ensure the authenticity by inductive methods (Blaikie, 2009). Semi-structured interview was used to obtain detailed information, clarify questions that respondents could not understand, and explore more questions (Bryman, 2008). 15 interviews were conducted. I used the process of grounded theory to analyze the research data (Glazer and Strauss, 1967). After copying and reading the data repeatedly, I identified and created different themes or category sets by using Nvivo qualitative analysis software. Then, the data are systematically classified and analyzed to answer the research questions.

5. RESULTS ANALYSIS

In the analysis, 3 main themes and 12 sub-themes were identified. These themes and subthemes illustrate the significance of idol worship experiences reported by idol worshipers in their lives: (I) the interpretation of idol worship, (II) the factors that motivate idol worship, and (III) the impacts of idol worship.

Table 1: Participant sample

Participant Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Name of His/Her Idol	Duration of idol worship (Year)	University	Grade
Seven	F (Female)	24	Ruth Bader Ginsburg	3	Beijing Institute of Technology	MA. Grade 1
Demi	F	20	Denise Ho	5	East China Normal University	BA. Grade 3
Tim	M (Male)	24	Andres Iniesta	10	Inner Mongolia University	MA. Grade 1
Hairi	F	24	Girls' Generation	10	Inner Mongolia University	MA. Grade 1
Sophie	F	22	Sandy Lam	9	Guangdong University of Foreign Studies	BA. Grade 4
Iris	F	19	Yibo Wang	2	The Hong Kong Polytechnic University	BA. Grade 1
Kyrie	M	20	Kobe Bryant	10	Anhui University	BA. Grade 1
Tom	M	23	John Felix Anthony Cena	1.5	Shanxi Technology and Business College	BA. Grade 4
Ninth	F	21	Danylee	1	Sichuan Agricultural University	BA. Grade 3
Curry	M	20	Stephen Curry	5	Taiyuan University	BA. Grade 3
Jack	M	30	Qiuyu Yu	10	Shanghai Jiao Tong University	Ph.D. Grade 3
Anne	F	22	Anne Hathaway	5	Ningbo University	MA. Grade 1
Liang	M	21	Guimei Zhang	2	Taiyuan University	BA. Grade 3
Hu	M	22	Petra Kvitova	3	Yangtze University	BA. Grade 3
Ronaldo	M	20	Cristiano Ronaldo	3	Taiyuan University	BA. Grade 3

5.1 Theme I: Interpretation of Idol Worship

Participants described their understanding of the concept of idol worship, and their interpretations were different. Three subthemes were identified: (1) diversified ways of worship, (2) idols should serve as role models, and (3) the significance of idol worship.

5.1.1 Diversified ways of worship

Participants generally reported that approval, support, attention, and imitation of idols are positive experiences of idol worship. The words mentioned by participants were "like," "learn," "appreciate," "role model," "motivation," "inspiration" and "belief". Besides, they also use words such as "attraction," "spiritual support," "admiration," and "change.". It can be seen that all participants have shown great recognition for idols. Some participants also mentioned that buying idol-related products to support idols is also a way of worship. For example, Kyrie states:

"if I like a star, I would like to wear some of his shoes and jerseys on the basketball court. I will definitely buy these and support him when I am well-off. This is just some material things." (Kyrie, 2021)

Jack also said, "I will read all his books." Most importantly, many participants mentioned that they would learn or imitate the characteristics or behaviors of idols. Tim even regarded idol as the standard and direction of his efforts: "It is our love and imitation of some characteristics of this person, including taking some personal characteristics or some qualities of him as a standard of my efforts." Liang also made it clear:

"I think idol worship is actually a kind of spiritual worship. In fact, idols are what we call role models, that is, learning from role models and learning from each other's strengths." (Liang, 2021)

Participants' sharing of their own feelings shows that different people have different emotional experiences of idol worship, accompanied by practical actions.

5.1.2 Idols should serve as role models

Almost all participants believed that idols should have some qualities that are worth learning or infectious, that is to say, they cannot be called idols if they cannot serve as role models for others. Participants attached great importance to this. According to Kyrie, a successful career and being able to influence the world are the conditions for a person to become an idol: "First of all, in his professional field, his career must be very successful...he should also have some influence on other aspects of the world." Sophie clearly pointed out that idols must have outstanding advantages and good qualities:

"I think idols must at least do one thing better than ordinary people ... In

short, it is necessary to have a certain specialty that is more prominent, which is the first condition. Secondly, dedication, love and work. Third, not breaking the law." (Sophie, 2021)

Ronaldo believed that idols should possess many excellent personality traits: "Perseverance, not afraid of difficulties ... and being a self-disciplined, positive and optimistic person." For participants, idols are role models in the hearts of worshipers and are worth learning from.

5.1.3 The significance of idol worship

All participants talked about the significance of idols to individuals. Iris explained that idol worship will have a positive impact on personal development: "I think idols sometimes give people some strength ... And sometimes idols will make you better." Sophie also emphasized this point:

"She has changed my life. At present, I have not seen any negative impact on my life, and I am grateful to her." (Sophie, 2021)

At the same time, two participants emphasized the significance of idol worship to society. In Tim's view, teenagers' worship of social models can promote teenagers' ideological and political education, which is beneficial to the development of the country:

"But if we look at idol worship or this social phenomenon from a macro perspective, it may have social value...or the whole society forms such an worship of learning these models, which is extremely important and significant for the development of the whole country, especially for the education or value of young people at the ideological and political level." (Tim, 2021)

Jack mentioned that idol worship is helpful to social governance, because idols can influence the behavior of fans, and then influence the development of society:

"For social governance, some good behaviors of idols will affect some choices of his fans ... In the animal world, for example, there will be leaders in wolves, which will play a leading role." (Jack, 2021)

Therefore, in the participants' view, the contribution of idol worship to individuals and society should not be underestimated, because the influence brought by idols is mostly positive. However, some participants believe that idol worship should be rational. For example, Tom said that if an idol makes his fans do something contemptuous for him, this is the worse situation of idol worship.

5.2 The Factors That Motivate Idol Worship

There are three subthemes in the data to answer the factors that motivate idol worship, including: (1) the need of self-development, (2) Personal characteristics of idols, and (3) resonance of values.

5.2.1 The need of self-development

Four participants mentioned that when they didn't know the way forward, it is their pursuit to be like their idols. Tom emphasized this point:

"Because I am not satisfied with the status quo, I am not satisfied with my past life, and I am not satisfied with my own body and strength, so I chose to pay attention to people who are more recognized by me and people who are more admired by me." (Tom, 2021)

Tim also expressed the same reason:

"I don't know what is valuable. I always don't know this. Then, as an idol, he will give you such a kind of guidance. It can be said that the standard we have been talking about just now is just like giving you a direction." (Tim, 2021)

Three participants expressed their desire to be like idols. Iris said, "Maybe I just want to be like that, so I like him." Ronaldo and Curry's outspoken idol worship can help them learn the excellent qualities of idols, such as "self-confidence" and "self-discipline". Curry further indicated that idol worship is very important to him, because it is closely related to how he faces difficulties:

"Only with idol worship, I will have motivation when facing some difficulties, otherwise I will easily give up. If I can get any encouragement from my idol at that time, I will definitely go forward desperately, and no one should underestimate the power of an idol." (Curry, 2021)

When idol worship will have a beneficial effect on the participants, the participants will actively carry out idol worship to promote their own development.

5.2.2 Personal characteristics of idols

In the process of data analysis, there are four personal characteristics of idols, which can explain the reasons of idol worship behavior of participants. More than half of the people have repeatedly stressed the importance of personality. All the participants used rich language to praise the personality of their idols. Ronaldo explained:

"My idol is a person who has positive energy, is not afraid of difficulties and challenges, and constantly challenges himself. Moreover, he is usually very self-disciplined, and he is very strict with himself." (Ronaldo, 2021)

Excellent professional ability has also become an important reason for idol worship. Jack thinks that his idol Qiuyu Yu's literary works are "beautifully written". Ronaldo said that his idol has a strong professional level and talent and said: "The most important thing is that his unique leadership ability makes me like him very much." Seven called her idol "a successful woman in her professional field". Liang also sighed: "Because in the teaching profession, she is really a role model." The idols of these participants are outstanding in their professional fields.

In addition, five participants were impressed by their idol's social influence. For example, Kyrie said that his idol Kobe Bryant "has the Mamba spirit which has deeply influenced the world". The above data reflect the different advantages of participants in appreciating idols, most of which are the intrinsic characteristics of idols, and only a few are external characteristics.

5.2.3 Resonance of values

Nearly half of the participants think that when they find that a star or celebrity holds the same values as them, they will be more inclined to regard these stars or celebrities as idols. Sophie thinks that her idol's music works reflect her heart, which is also the direct reason for her idol worship: "Because I like her music and I think she expresses my heart, I found myself in her." Liang thinks that he and his idol have the same attitude towards life: "Dare to give, be full of expectation for life, and be ready to help others." Participants mentioned that in some respects they feel the same as idols, which is an important reason for them to become idol worshipers.

5.3 The Impacts of Idol Worship

Participants often mention the benefits of idol worship to them. Six subthemes are identified to explain the impacts of idol worship on participants, including: emotion, spiritual support, life goal, personality, relationship with others, and behavior.

5.3.1 Emotion

All participants said that when their idols encounter good things, they will feel happy. Kyrie said: "I will feel very happy when he does something with positive energy." Ronaldo said without hesitation: "His good thing is to finish a beautiful goal or win a good prize. I will be happy for him and will be happy for a long time." Curry used "a great surprise" to describe his happy mood.

In addition, six participants also mentioned that when something bad happens to idols, they will also feel sad. Hairi said: "Although I don't feel empathy, I will be sad and distressed." Iris's feeling is very strong:

"Because my mood is easily affected, I will be angry and sad, and will feel powerless. I will uninstall all the social software and stay away from it. I feel that it has affected me and affected my mood very much." (Iris, 2021)

Therefore, we can see from the interview data that idol worship may cause idol worshipers to have short-term positive emotions or negative emotions in varying degrees.

5.3.2 Spiritual support

All 15 participants emphasized the inspiring role of idols and the efforts and dedication of whom that infected and inspired them. When they were asked about the role of their idols when they faced difficulties, many participants talked about spiritual support. Ronaldo explained:

"In the most difficult time, I will think about some of his experiences, some challenges he faced, and how he got over those setbacks. This will also give me some spiritual strength, help me, and give me courage to face some difficulties." (Ronaldo, 2021)

Kyrie was once inspired by his idol Kobe Bryant's spirit of never giving up, and played well in the important entrance examination, and achieved his goal:

"At that time, everyone thought that I couldn't get into high school ... But I studied very, very hard afterwards, because I thought of Kobe Bryant, and I felt that I couldn't give up. Later, I was very lucky to take the walk-in exam with the last quota, and then I was admitted. This may be something that I am particularly impressed with, and it is really great." (Kyrie, 2021)

Demi also said that she would look at her idol's experience when she encountered difficulties, which was helpful to her. From the above analysis, idols play a role of spiritual support in the life of respondents and motivate them to face life better.

5.3.3 Life goal

Nine participants told me how idol worship changed their life goals. Seven talked about her efforts in law for three years because of her idol Ginsberg:

"At that time, I tried to take an examination as a doctor of law in the United States ... I yearned for this profession because of this person from the beginning. At last, I reflected on my abilities and personality in all aspects, including a possibility on the legal career path in the United States, and finally made a decision to interrupt this major, but these three years' experiences are quite colorful for my life." (Seven, 2021)

She also mentioned that she hopes to help women like her idol in the future:

"For example, when she was in office, she would consciously tend to support and help women, so in my future life, I would be more inclined to help girls." (Seven, 2021)

Hairi once went to the company where her idol works to participate in the draft in order to be like her idol. Although she failed in the final draft, she still said, "This is my most unforgettable experience". Sophie told me that her life goal has changed because of her idol, and she is grateful to her idol:

"I never thought about studying abroad or studying hard. I once wanted to be an ordinary wage earner, stay in China, and then spend my life in an ordinary way. But now I want to work hard, and then try to find a job abroad. Because of her, my whole life goal has changed." (Sophie, 2021)

Even though Kyrie's idol has passed away, Kyrie is still affected:

"I hope I can be rich in the future, and I can be rich enough to do some public welfare undertakings, which will have an impact on children in remote mountainous areas. Because Kobe has a Mamba Foundation to help some

vulnerable groups. He donated a lot of money during the Wenchuan earthquake.” (Kyrie, 2021)

Participants shared their own experiences with me. Their academic or career goals have changed after idol worship. They are deeply influenced by idol worship both in the past and in the future.

5.3.4 Personality

Five participants said that thanks to idol worship, their personalities became different from the past. For example, Ronaldo became “brave and self-disciplined”, Demi became “no longer concerned about other people’s eyes”, Hu became “extroverted and more willing to meet new friends”, and Liang became “hard-working and no longer selfish”. Participants learned many excellent qualities from idols and became better people. Anne said that under the influence of idols, she became more independent.

5.3.5 Relationship with others

Idol worship also affects the relationship between participants and others, which is embodied in their family relations, mate selection and social interaction. Seven said that when she introduced her idol to her family, the family communication increased. Five female participants indicated that idol worship had influenced their future mate selection. Seven said: “Maybe I will pay more attention to the values of my future boyfriend, or his attitude towards these feminist movements.” Seven said that this was because her idol had devoted herself to fighting for women’s rights and interests, and she was deeply influenced. Sophie said that her idol worship experience made her discover that her sexual orientation was homosexual, because she said she had “sexual fantasies” about her idol. Five participants shared the influence of idol worship on their social interaction. Sophie said: “Because I like her, I also got to know some other fans.” Sophie thinks it feels good, because her new acquaintance has many common topics with her:

“Because idol worship will make me feel that I don’t have much common topics with my classmates around me, but I have many topics with netizens. Therefore, the objects I usually chat with may be more of my netizens than my real friends.” (Sophie, 2021)

All participants did not reflect any negative impact of idol worship on their relationship with others.

5.3.6 Behavior

Four participants mentioned some changes in their daily behaviors and habits, including work and rest time, diet, hobbies, consumption and so on. Kyrie shared with me:

“he said that if he trains according to the normal schedule, he will spend very little time with his daughter. However, if he goes to bed at 11: 30 every day and then gets up at 4: 30 for training, he can spend one or two hours with his daughter, so that he will not waste his family’s time and can train himself ... So he likes to get up at 4: 30. Therefore, I also like to get up at 4: 30 when I was in the third grade of high school, which is one of his influences on me.” (Kyrie, 2021)

It seems difficult for most people to get up at 4: 30, but Kyrie has adopted the same schedule as his idol in the coming period of the college entrance examination. Iris imitated her idol’s dressing style and hobbies:

“I may imitate my idol in dressing, sometimes imitating his style, or wearing his same clothes ... he likes dancing and skateboarding. I may have a good impression and interest on these because of him, and then I will learn skateboarding and dancing for him.” (Iris, 2021)

Hu’s idol is a tennis player. He said that playing tennis became his daily sport. Ronaldo said that his idol attaches great importance to regular diet: “I will also pay great attention to regular diet and exercise properly like him.” In addition, ten participants indicated that they usually like to buy products related to idols, such as jerseys, sneakers, brooches, mugs, albums, mobile phone cases, magazines, posters and books. These different behaviors and habits all appear in the process of idol worship and are closely related to their idols.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Theme I: Interpretation of Idol Worship

According to Ci Hai, worship means “to respect and admire”, and there are similar explanations in other dictionaries (She, 2011). Worship represents

people’s feelings of longing, admiration, praise and appreciation, and embodies the mentality of hoping for success and pursuing perfection (Xiang, 2000). My findings reflect this very well, and the participants generally reflect that liking, appreciating, being attracted and admiring are some emotional experiences of idol worship. In addition to their psychological feelings towards idols, participants also talked about worship and corresponding behaviors, including supporting or imitating idols. Social exchange theory shows that people will choose the action that is most beneficial to them (Jia, 2000).

Taiwan Province deeply explored the idol worship of fans in Taiwan Province through in-depth interviews, and found that fans’ support for idols was manifested in buying idol-related commodities (Zhang, 2000). Most participants will buy products related to idols in the process of worshiping idols, because this will not only bring satisfaction to themselves, but also support idols. Most importantly, they all imitate their idols. Participants also explained their understanding of idols. They believed that idols must have a positive impact on people, not a negative one, which is the most important point when they choose a person to be their idol. A group researchers found that idols are self-selected, more personalized, and diversified (Zhang et al., 2006).

Participants hope that, if they can choose, the idol is not only a distant star or celebrity, but also an important person who is closely related to their lives and plays an exemplary role in their lives. This is because, for worshipers, the more they invest in idol worship, the more they will think that idols play an important role in shaping who they are and how they feel (She, 2011). Several participants mentioned the significance of idol worship to individuals and society. They believe that idol worship can and should promote the development of individuals and society, otherwise it should not be supported. Because the types and characteristics of idols reflect the characteristics of the times and cultural features, at the same time, the changes of idol worshipers’ worship ways and motives also indicate the changes of a society’s cultural value system (Liu, 2010). Although each participant’s feelings and experiences of idol worship are slightly different, their interpretations of idol worship are similar. They advocate rational idol worship so that this experience can play a positive role.

6.2 Theme II: The Factors That Motivate Idol Worship

One of the reasons for idol worship is the need for self-development. This is manifested in the fact that the worshiper’s own desire for progress and the need to be motivated will prompt him or her to seek a person he can look up to and pursue. Obviously, idol worship in this study involves two subjects—idols (stars or celebrities) and worshipers, who interact with each other in the process of taking their own needs. In the process of paying attention to idols, worshipers must pay a certain amount of time or money to watch TV, surf the Internet and buy products, etc. If idols want the support of worshipers, they must meet people’s expectations. A group researchers discussed two related components of social support-social approval and internal attraction, which can explain idol worship (Blau, 2008). Therefore, there are two basic sources of idol worship: one is the worshiper’s approval of idols, and the other is the attraction of idols to worshipers.

The reason why worshipers love their idols is that they agree with some characteristics of their idols. Participants show strong appreciation for their idol’s excellent personality and always praise the idol’s professional ability. Some participants believe that idols should have good social influence, because “their certain characteristics have influenced or are affecting countless people in this society” (Xu, 2009). Physiological characteristics, such as good-looking appearance and nice voice, are regarded as a kind of sensory enjoyment (Chin and Nee, 2018). Any public figure who wants approval and lasting support must cater to the needs and preferences of the public (She, 2011). As public figures, those stars or celebrities will always pay attention to maintaining their image. Therefore, idol worship arises not only because worshipers promote their own development by learning from idols, but also because idols help worshipers determine their own roles, form values and guide their way forward.

6.3 Theme III: The Impacts of Idol Worship

As for the impact of idol worship, many previous studies considered it to be negative. In recent years, some studies have shown that the role and impacts of idol worship are twofold. The most interesting thing in this study is that all participants do not think that their worship experience has any negative impact. Some studies have reached the same conclusion, that is, the establishment of quasi-social relations between fans and celebrities can positively influence their emotions and feelings and serve as a coping

mechanism to cope with the stress in their lives (McCutcheon et al., 2002).

Some participants even mentioned that they are eager to be consistent with their idols in character, behavior and values. All 15 participants emphasized that idol worship gave them spiritual support or encouragement. For example, under the influence of stars or celebrities who always work hard to realize their dreams, participants will imitate their spirit and apply it to their own lives, especially in the process of facing difficulties. Social imitation theory shows that social imitation makes people behave in a consistent way (Tarde, 2008). Indeed, some studies have shown that identifying with a star or celebrity who is similar to his or her ideal self can enhance self-esteem. By assimilating idols into the ego, the difference between the real ego and the ideal ego can be reduced (Derrick et al., 2008). This relates to Alexander's suggestion that worshipping idols can be understood as a process wherein the idol becomes part of the internal self (Alexander's, 2010).

Idol worship has an impact on the relationship between participants and others. The research reveals that idol worship is positively related to interpersonal communication ability (McCutcheon et al., 2003). One participant said that it can increase the communication among family members. This is the same as the research results (Chin and Nee, 2018). Some participants did mention their social deficiencies before worshipping idols. They explained that becoming idol worshipers can help them make friends with similar interests. In addition, all the participants were unmarried, and the non-single participants indicated that idol worship had no effect on their love relationship. However, single participants hope to meet people who have similarities with idols in the future mate selection process. This is hardly mentioned in other literatures.

One of the findings reveals the impacts of idol worship on worshipers' life goals, which is believed to help them establish self-determination (Sheridan, 2006). This discovery is consistent with the work of which shows that people will develop their strong right to self-determination through the process of idol worship (Rojek, 2012). For example, some participants set up new life ideals in order to become someone like their idols. Obviously, all the participants' experiences support the social imitation theory (Tarde, 2008; Liu, 2010; Hammersley, 2012).

7. CONCLUSION

This research is exploratory and explanatory in nature, aiming to provide further insight into the experiences of idol worshipers. By means of qualitative investigation, I tried to empower the college students I interviewed. I agree with that idol worship still has considerable social positive and negative functions. Only by actively guiding and correctly using it can idol worship contain more positive meanings and reflect more social positive functions. After becoming idol worshipers, all participants began to pay attention to their untapped potential and deepen their insight into themselves. Their idol worship tends to draw positive demonstration energy from idols to enrich and improve themselves. They are mature and rational idol worshipers.

This study provides a new explanation for the reasons and results of idol worship experience, especially from the perspective of Chinese college students. It is important that any concluding statement pay tribute to those college students who have generously devoted their time to this research. This research gives some suggestions to practitioners. Schools and families should pay attention to the correct guidance of idol worship and the development of model education. By giving support, parents and teachers can establish a better relationship with idol worshipers and have a more open mind and acceptance for idol worshipers. Entertainment companies should first focus on shaping high-quality idols and make due contributions to spreading positive energy of idols.

Stars or celebrities should also set up their own image and enhance their sense of social responsibility and play an exemplary role for worshipers. The limitation of this study is the universality of the research results. In this qualitative research, the sample size of 15 college students means that the participants in this study may not represent a wider range of Chinese college students with idol worship experience. However, as an exploratory study, these findings are of great significance in terms of transferability: if readers see similarities in their own environment or think that the process of this study is worth replicating in their own environment, then this study will contribute to new knowledge in this field. Future research can make in-depth research on people of different cultures, so as to have a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

In addition, the case of "pathological edge" was not involved in this study, so extreme cases were not discussed. To sum up, the popularization of this study is limited to a certain extent. From the perspective of participants,

idol worship has more advantages than disadvantages, unless it is irrational. This is consistent with many literatures about idol worship. Therefore, it is suggested to use a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods to conduct a larger-scale study and conduct more investigations on this phenomenon. The characteristics and differences of idol worship experience of college students with different grades, genders, academic achievements and regions can be further studied and analyzed.

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