

# Construction, control and identification: the generation mechanism of para-intimate relationships between idols and fans

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**Abstract.** The development of the Internet and digital media has given birth to new forms of idol worship, with more interactive and authentic interactions between idols and fans. This paper analyses the generation mechanism of the para-intimate relationship and summarises three aspects: construction, control and identification. Audiences complete the construction of the impression, are defined as “fans” in the emotional regime and form relationships by constructing different roles. The two-way control between fans and idols is seen in the maintenance of para-intimate relationships in the horizontal time dimension; furthermore, individual and collective identifications promote the strengthening of the relationship in the vertical depth. These discussions introduce theories about intimate relationships into fandom studies, develop research on the latest fan-idol relationships and provide insights into the psychology and media use of contemporary youth.

## 1. Introduction

As actively participating consumers [1], fans express adoration and emotional attachment by constantly supporting their idols and, accordingly, receive an emotional response in interactions. Technology development has transformed both interpersonal relationships and the way that fans connect with their idols [2]. New interactional modalities have emerged and the emotional relationship between fans and the objects of their fandom has been reshaped, demonstrating more and more similarities to real-life close relationships. While scrolling through their smartphones, it becomes harder and harder for fans to distinguish the messages they receive from social media saying, “Good night” or “How was your day?” coming from friends, families, or their idols, indicating how a “para-intimate relationship” between fans and idols has generated in cyberspace. Some fans call themselves “lover of the idol” and even get the chance to video chat one-on-one with their idol, which was unimaginable in the past. This relationship embodies the interweaving of the virtual and the emotional, which is a new type of interpersonal relationship based on digital media and following the trend of individualism and social atomisation [3].

Intimacy is no longer limited to real-world, flesh-and-blood objects, as evidenced by research into virtual love in games. By comparing the virtual world and the real one, researchers found that players who establish relationships through avatars have the same strong psychological attachment as in the real world [4]. In female-oriented romantic video games, players are also able to build relationships with virtual objects and “feel authentic love” [5]. Previous studies described the relationship between

celebrities and their audiences as a “para-social relationship” [6], which is a one-sided, non-reciprocal relationship thought to be an “illusion”. However, this theory was criticised for the dichotomy between “realness” and “fantasy” and the dichotomy between a single fan and a specific celebrity; consequently, a multisocial interaction analysis was conducted to develop it, aligning fan relationships with “real” and enduring experiences of love [7]. However, this research only pays attention to its expression; the complex generation mechanism of this relationship has not been fully discussed.

Additionally, the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM) indicates that the two sides of an intimate relationship are not independent but can influence each other [8]; this can also be observed in the interaction between idols and fans. This article draws on this model and combines fandom studies with psychology and emotional sociology theories, to explore the following questions:

1. What is the generation mechanism of para-intimate relationships between idols and fans?
2. How do the processes of construction, control and identification affect the para-intimate relationship?
3. What are the power relations and influencing factors behind the formation of this relationship?

By answering these questions, the study will observe the para-intimate relationship from multiple dimensions and reveal the external power influencing factors behind the internal relationship, leading to further insights into fandom in the context of modern society.

## **2. Subjective construction: forming para-intimate relationships with objects**

### **2.1 Impression construction**

In the subjective internalisation of the object, the audience gradually constructs the impression of their idol and becomes a fan motivated by emotion [9]. This is the starting point of para-intimate relationships. It is a process of both inner and outer action for an audience - from merely being a “passer-by” who glimpsed the idol through different platforms to being more deeply involved. This process involves both the background and history of the individual and the framework of the society.

Idols are striving to release more hits and increase their exposure on different platforms to provide audiences with diverse media to consume. In the past, scholars used psychoanalysis to investigate the para-social relationships that formed between celebrities and their audience: “The consumer internalizes the celebrity’s off-screen persona... psychically with in oneself through a selective reading of media texts and loads it with one’s own... fantasies... and meanings. Then s/he projects the created personal impression back on to the celebrity” [10]. However, stars are now utilising more ways to expose themselves and there is no longer a clear boundary between on-screen and off-screen. More varied communications provide fans with more resources for projection and layers of introjection. These communications and the idols themselves become the objects for the audience to construct impressions.

The subjective perception of the idol is deeply and comprehensively integrated with the audience and when they find interweaving with their past, present and/or future selves in the idol, they can construct an impression with personal subjectivity. Through the knowledge of the idol’s past experiences, the audience may recall their former self. When they see similarities between their idols and their current selves, the audience will resonate. In the South Korean talent show *Produce 48*, the scene of girls training hard and facing challenges is constantly displayed; consequently, the audience will construct the idol image of the ideal “future self” based on this repeated image. Through these selective interpretations of self-mirroring paratexts [11, 12], the audience will experience “feelings of love” [13], and be attracted to this impression. These emotional experiences form emotional expressions (emotives) which follow external social frameworks, meeting the description of the “emotional regime” as “the set of normative emotions and the official rituals, practices, and emotives that express and inculcate them” [14]. This set of emotions and emotives defines the audience as “fans”.

### **2.2 Role construction**

After completing the construction of an attractive impression and obtaining the identity of a fan, the individual’s needs motivate the fan to construct their role and form a para-intimate relationship through a series of actions related to the role. Repeated introjection and

projection have created a variety of impressions that serve as a starting point for fans to develop their fantasies. The content of fantasy is influenced by the psychological needs of fans; whether they regard the idol as “a considerate lover” or a “seamless friend”, fans can obtain a kind of substitute satisfaction [15], satisfying the needs and desires of specific objects that are not satisfied in real life. For instance, an adolescent tends to adore the idol in ways that would compensate for deficiencies in the adolescent’s parental resources and favour the compensation model of idol worship [16]. Moreover, the global trend towards lower fertility means Gen Z are often only children, making it more common to have a brother-sister imagination of idols [17]. This fantasy that fills the void allows fans to complete their role construction by placing their idols within their perception as the corresponding roles of lovers, relatives and friends. The fans’ “self-roles” and the idols’ relevant “other-roles” are identified [18].

The distinct and identifiable roles determine role-taking behaviour, such as fans changing their social media names to “the girlfriend of...” or “I love...”. In this role-making process, the tendency to create and modify conceptions of self- and other-roles is the orienting process in interactive behaviour [18]. Role-taking and role-making become the core of the interaction between idols and fans. One could directly express love and get responses from the other, completing the formation of the para-intimate relationship.

The aforementioned formation process reflects the influence of social orders and norms. Although fans who establish such a close relationship with their idols have stronger emotions and more active emotional expression than other fans, they are still in the “emotional regime”. Emotions that are not properly managed and do not fit into the regime cannot be incorporated into the framework, and such fans will be “out of touch with the normative tone” [14]. Consequently, they will become alienated, dysfunctional characters and perform Sasaengpaen/fanatical behaviours, including sexual harassment and trespassing. Under the power of the social regime, fans can establish para-intimate relationships with their idols, which can still be classified as idolatry rather than criminal behaviour or the pathological “delusion of being loved”.

## **3. Two-way control: actor-partner interdependence maintains the relationship**

Fans and idols conduct two-way control and multiple relationship maintenance behaviours, namely “the specific means by which partners manage to sustain long-term, well functioning relationships” [19], to maintain the parasocial relationships. The more frequently partners use those behaviours, the more stable their relationships will be [20]. In addition, idols and fans are not independent of each other. During intimate interactions, the emotions, behaviours, and cognition of couples can affect each other accordingly [21], and significant actor and partner effects on spouses’ perceptions of satisfaction and commitment can be seen with the use of maintenance behaviours [22].

Idols and fans in the para-intimate relationship also follow the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM), they work together and influence each other to prolong the duration of the relationship.

### 3.1 Actor effect

The actor effect refers to how an individual's traits or behaviours are affected by his/her traits or behaviours, and it measures the internal consistency or stability of an individual [23]. Driven by their inner feelings toward their idols, fans take the initiative to use a series of relationship maintenance methods, including participation in the career or life of idols and active emotional expression and input of material resources, to achieve power control over idols and maintain the para-intimate relationship.

The process of idol cultivation can most directly reflect the control of fans over the careers of idols. Fans, as "producers", spare no effort to vote to promote the debut of their idols and support their careers like family members or friends. Fans in para-intimate relationships are also involved in idols' lives. When they see that their idols have health problems during intensive travel, fans will protest the idol's management company, hoping that their idols can get rest and better treatment. Except for sharing tasks, four other relationship maintenance strategies can all be observed in fans' interaction with idols: positivity, openness, assurances and networks [24]. They give positive comments on the idol's performances, show love and loyalty to the idol and share this feeling with other fans. In romantic relationships, the intimate sphere requires the mobilisation of a range of appropriate material resources [25]. Fans in quasi-intimate relationships also make purchases, such as buying their idols' albums or endorsing products. A group of fans of Jang Won-young, a member of the Korean girl group IVE, even bought her a diamond-encrusted microphone. Fans' relationship maintenance behaviour is significantly related to commitment [24], and commitment can effectively predict whether an intimate relationship will last [26].

### 3.2 Partner effect

The partner effect describes how an individual's traits or behaviours are influenced by a specific object and it measures the correlation in relational data. The active behaviour of fans can be responsive, pushing fans to carry out passive investment and relationship maintenance under the control of idols. As a job that earns income by being supported, idols' work also includes significant emotional labour [27, 28], some idols even talk romantically with their fans at online or offline fan meetings. They also keep daily interactions with fans on multiple social media, increasing their self-exposure and creating a feeling of "falling in love" or "living with idols" for fans. For example, Bubble, a paid social app from South Korea's SM Entertainment, allows users to subscribe and receive messages from their idols, talking about their moods or meals. Idols and their companies jointly create an environment for fans, with the help of

mass media [29], to realise the control of fans' attention, time, emotional investment, consumption, etc., using a variety of ways to maintain para-intimate relationships.

In the process of maintaining the relationship, the two-way power control between audiences and the industry can be observed. As active audiences, fans continue to produce and consume texts, products and relationships, while fans in para-intimate relationships have a stronger influence on idols and industries, more active participation and form a deeper extent of emotional economy [30]. Fans with deeper emotional involvement also attract more attention of capital and become the object of emphasis control. Symbiotic fans and the industry jointly influence the maintenance of para-intimate relationships.

## 4. Multiple identification: Strengthening relationships at the individual and collective levels

### 4.1 Individual identification

Fans continuously enhance their individual identity during idol worship, which further strengthens the para-intimate relationship. Since all identities are formed in social contexts, all human identities are social identities [31]. Identity can be divided into individual identity and group identity according to whether the scene is an interpersonal relationship or inter-group relationship [32]; moreover, both individual identity and group identity contain internal and external aspects. Internal personal identity refers to an individual's self-identification [31]. By adoring their idols and establishing para-intimate relationships, fans connect themselves with their idols and satisfy their sense of belonging. After the "two-way interaction" and satisfying their need for love and belonging, fans are able to further satisfy the need for respect and self-actualisation [32]. When fans nurture their idols and support their careers, they can gain happiness and a sense of accomplishment as well as individual identification, just as their partners or friends succeed with their assistance. The satisfaction of multi-level psychological needs further strengthens the para-intimate relationship.

External personal identification refers to the classification of individuals by society [31]. Many fans introduce themselves on social media with labels to publicly claim that they are "girlfriend fans" or "mother fans" of idols. By clarifying their classification, they can enhance their external personal identification and further strengthen the relationship. It is worth noting that many fans indicate on the labels that they "refuse to communicate with people who like the same idol as me" (this usage originated in Japan). These fans are different from others who are keen to join fan groups. Instead, they exclude other fans in the same category as themselves, which is a behaviour similar to "exclusivity" in intimate relationships. They protect their social classification as the lover of an idol to protect their individual identification and reinforce their self-claimed relationship.

## 4.2 Collective identification

Although there is a group that rejects entering the fan community among the fans who form para-intimate relationships with their idols, collective identification still has a positive effect on the strengthening of intimacy among most fans. Internal collective identity refers to members' sense of belonging to the group [31], and previous studies have associated fandom with group identification [33]. Fandom can be defined as an individual's psychological attachment to other fans who also share the same fan interest [34]. Fans create, join and maintain various online fan groups, exchange videos, pictures and other resources, discuss topics related to idols and share their feelings for idols and feelings in para-intimate relationships. For example, some fans post videos after attending fan meetings with descriptions such as, "He was so sweet to notice that I changed my haircut and it made me love him even more." Interactions such as these increase the fan's collective identification. Fan communities promote interaction between fans, enhance the sense of belonging to the group and increase the intimacy with the idol.

External collective identification is the group classification of members by society [31]. Research on Lady Gaga's fans shows that despite repeated attempts to

position fan activity as pathological, fandom can yield important prosocial benefits [35]. Positive social attitudes towards fans can enhance their external collective identification. For example, fans participate in public welfare activities in the name of their idols, so that their love for idols will be more widely recognised by society. Similar to how the support of family and friends can help further the development of love in real life, fans who gain social approval can also strengthen the para-close relationship with their idols.

The individual identification and collective identification can be influenced by discourse power in the process of strengthening para-intimate relationships [36]. Although fans have an equal voice, they are still subject to different controls. Fans who invest more in their idols tend to be more powerful discourse subjects and gain a stronger identification. Fandom also has a strict hierarchy and the group managers or opinion leaders can guide, dominate and control other fans through discourse and enjoy greater collective identification. The difference in discourse power affects the intensity of the relationship between fans and idols.

Based on the arguments above, a model diagram can be summarised to present the generation mechanism of the para-intimate relationship and the logical relation between the different elements. As Figure 1 shows:

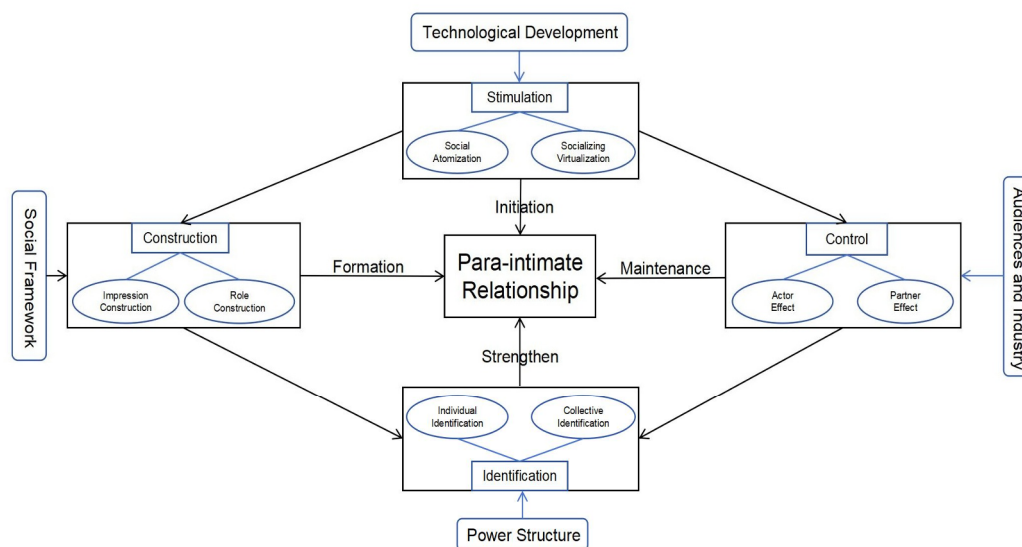


Fig. 1. Model of the generation mechanism of para-intimate relationship.

## 5. Conclusion

The generation mechanism of para-intimate relationships further confirms that fans are prosumers. They actively produce both texts and relations [37]. The APIM proves that these relationships are not "isolated fantasies" like para-social relationships, but real interpersonal interactions facilitated by digital media and have complex generative mechanisms. However, the interconnections and effects between the three aspects are not dynamically considered. For example, the strength of the relationship

may be predicted for a longer duration. At the same time, there is a lack of research on fans of different countries, genders and objects of worship. Empirical research is also expected in the future.

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