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The Impact of Idol Worship on Chinese Undergraduate Students' Self-Identity: Mediated by Group Belongingness

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Abstract

As Chinese undergraduates face increasing academic, career, and social pressures, developing a stable self-identity is a significant challenge. Understanding factors that may support self-identity development, such as idol worship, is important for promoting mental health and social adjustment among students. This study explored the impact of idol worship on the self-identity of Chinese undergraduate students, focusing on the mediating role of group belongingness. A quantitative survey was conducted among 164 Chinese undergraduate students exhibiting idol worship behaviors, using convenience sampling. The minimum required sample size was calculated using G*Power 3.1 (68 participants) to ensure adequate statistical power, and 164 valid responses were analyzed for reliability. Participants completed scales measuring idol worship, group belongingness, and self-identity, and data were analyzed using SPSS. The results showed that idol worship was positively associated with self-identity, with group belongingness partially mediating this relationship and enhancing students' self-identity. These findings indicate that idol worship can support self-identity development through social connectedness, while excessive engagement may pose potential risks. This study deepens the understanding of undergraduate students' idol worship culture and its psychological mechanisms and provides a reference for related educational and psychological counseling practices.

Keywords: Idol Worship, Self-Identity, Group Belongingness, Chinese Undergraduate Students, Identity Development

Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid development of the Internet, digital platforms, and the expansion of the cultural and entertainment industry, the creation and dissemination of idol celebrities have gained a broader platform. From music and movies to TV shows and social media, idols are everywhere, bridging the gap between ordinary people and public figures. This has made idol worship a widespread social and cultural phenomenon that strongly influences undergraduate students' psychological development (Wei, 2023). Idols' words, actions, values,

and lifestyles have become a major focus for undergraduate students, making idol worship a popular topic in society (Hu & Xu, 2020). Young pop culture figures with attractive appearances, especially singer-dancers from the Korean, Chinese, and other global entertainment industries, who are active in music, performance, and fan-oriented activities, are particularly popular among Chinese undergraduates.

Idol worship refers to a psychological phenomenon where individuals admire and imitate a person who has special charm and value, seeing them as role models (D. Chen, 2020). This involves admiration and emulation of individuals perceived as role models. Undergraduate students are at a crucial stage of developing their self-identity and often find emotional support and reference points through idol worship. By emulating the behaviors and values of idols, they cultivate qualities they admire and gradually form their own identities. Parasocial relationships, which go beyond traditional social interactions, play an important role by allowing fans to project their emotions onto idols and form idealized bonds (Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Group belongingness also plays an important role. It refers to the extent to which an individual feels connected to and identified with a social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). By participating in fan activities and receiving emotional support from fan communities, undergraduate students can enhance their sense of belongingness and strengthen their self-identity (Marcia, 1980; Wu, 2017).

Although idol worship can enrich students' lives, provide emotional support, relieve stress, and motivate personal growth (Li, 2022; Lou, 2024), excessive engagement may adversely affect academic performance, financial stability, emotional well-being, and social interactions (He & Liu, 2024). While there have been many studies on idol worship, research focusing on its impact on undergraduate students' self-identity through the mediating role of group belongingness remains limited. Most existing research primarily addresses the direct effects on emotions and behaviors, while rarely exploring the complex psychological mechanisms involving group belongingness as a mediator (Li & Dong, 2024). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining the relationship between idol worship and self-identity among Chinese undergraduate students, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of group belongingness.

Literature Review

Idol Worship among undergraduate Students

Idol worship has become a common cultural phenomenon among young people, especially undergraduate students, as the Internet and entertainment industry continue to expand (Wei, 2023). It generally refers to individuals admiring and imitating public figures with certain charm and influence, taking them as role models for shaping attitudes and behaviors (Chen, 2020). For undergraduate students, who are in an important stage of

developing self-identity, idols often serve as emotional support and examples to follow (Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Idol worship among undergraduate students is characterized by cognitive identification and emotional attachment to specific figures, manifested through collecting information, sharing idol deeds, and imitating idol behaviors (Xi, 2023). This reflects students' idealized life expectations and admiration for certain personality traits (Liu, 2022; Xi, 2023). Idol worship allows students to project their ideal selves onto idols, bridging gaps between real and ideal selves and providing emotional sustenance (Li, 2022). Emotional projection plays a key role in this process: fans identify with the inner qualities of idols, which reinforces self-identity confirmation (He & Liu, 2024; Yang, 2002). Lacan's mirror theory similarly suggests that individuals see their ideal selves reflected in idols.

Self-Identity

Self-identity refers to an individual's understanding and definition of the self, shaped by both personal reflection and social context. Freud (1975) introduced identification as an emotional and psychological convergence with others or groups. Erikson (1963) extended this by emphasizing that self-identity develops through continuous maturation and interaction with society. Marcia (1966) identified four identity states based on exploration and commitment, and Grotevant (1987) highlighted the dynamic interplay between environment and internal roles. Cheek and Briggs (1982) further distinguished personal and social identity, noting that identity importance affects stability and behavior. Cultural context also influences identity formation, with collectivist cultures emphasizing group connections (He, 2014). For undergraduate students, self-identity builds on self-understanding, goal planning, and social recognition, and it adjusts as the environment and personal growth change (Zhang, 2020; Zhou, 2021).

Group Belongingness

Group belongingness is another important construct influencing this relationship. Maslow (1943) placed belongingness in the hierarchy of needs, noting its importance after physiological and safety needs are met. A sense of belonging reflects the internal connection between an individual and the group (Zhang, 1999; Yuan et al., 2011) and is characterized by acceptance and recognition by others (Wen et al., 2009). Strong group belongingness has been shown to positively affect mental health, social trust, and motivation (Newman et al., 2007; Zeng, 2008). Tajfel's minimal group paradigm demonstrates that individuals show social identification and favoritism toward their in-group even when group membership is based on minimal or arbitrary criteria (Tajfel et al., 1971).

Idol worship often provides a path for group belongingness through fan communities. Adolescents may resolve identity crises partly through idol worship and recognition from figures outside the family (Shi, 2007; Yue & Cheung, 2000). Studies show rational idol worship

predicts “future self-investment desire” and positively impacts self-identity formation (Tai, 2018).

Idol Worship, Group Belongingness, and Self-Identity

The interaction between idol worship, group belongingness, and self-identity can be understood through multiple theoretical lenses. Erikson (1963) highlights adolescence as a stage of identity exploration, during which idols provide models for self-evaluation. Social identity theory emphasizes that identification with groups, such as fan communities, supports self-identity stability and social adaptation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Jetten et al., 2012). Social learning theory suggests that observing and imitating idols allows fans to internalize admired traits and integrate them into their self-concept (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Goffman’s dramatism further indicates that idol worship can function as a form of social role performance, enabling fans to construct ideal selves through interaction and identification with idols (Goffman, 1959).

The relationship between idol worship and group belongingness is significant. Idol worship satisfies needs for rebellion, emotional release, belongingness, and group identity (Yue, 2007). Idol worship serves as a form of self-construction, where fans shape their ideal selves through emotional interaction and identification with idols. Joining fan communities enhances belongingness by providing shared goals, social support, and emotional connections (Levesque, 2011; Lv & Zhang, 2019). Fans’ interactions with idols have shifted from passive admiration to active participation, further strengthening collective identity (Zhang, 2010). Thus, idol worship and fan community participation exemplify how group belongingness supports self-identity development.

Self-identity and group belongingness are closely intertwined. A strong sense of belonging, achieved through fan communities and social interactions, provides social support, normative guidance, and shared values that enhance self-identity stability. Moreover, a strong sense of belonging provides social support and shared values that contribute to psychological well-being and meaning in life (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Lambert et al., 2013). Idol worship allows fans to project their ideal selves, bridging the gap between real and ideal self, while community participation helps prevent self-identity confusion caused by excessive idol dependence (Tai, 2018). Together, these processes suggest that group belongingness mediates the relationship between idol worship and self-identity, integrating emotional attachment, social identification, and behavioral imitation into a cohesive framework.

Research Methodology

Study Design and Participants

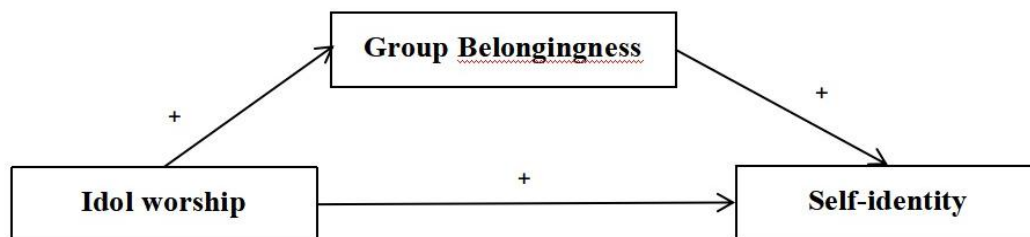
This quantitative cross-sectional survey examined the effect of idol worship on self-identity, with group belongingness as a mediator. Data were collected once via an online questionnaire. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling on social media and email to ensure diversity. All participation was voluntary, anonymous, and completed independently.

A total of 191 questionnaires were collected. After excluding ineligible responses—such as non-undergraduate students, those not engaging in idol worship, or questionnaires completed unrealistically fast—164 valid questionnaire remained, exceeding the minimum required sample size of 68 calculated by G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009) for medium effect size, $\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.80. Among the participants, 86.6% were female. This gender imbalance should be considered a limitation affecting the generalizability of the findings.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1

Conceptual framework depicting the hypothesized relationships among idol worship, group belongingness, and self-identity.



Research Objectives

The present study aims to:

1. Examine the effect of idol worship on undergraduate students' self-identity.
2. Determine whether group belongingness mediates the relationship between idol worship and self-identity.

Research Questions

Based on the theoretical perspectives and findings of related studies cited in the foregoing review of literature, the present study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between idol worship and self-identity among undergraduate students?

2. Does group belongingness function as a mediator in the relationship between idol worship and self-identity?

Hypotheses

1. Idol worship positively affects undergraduate students' self-identity.
2. Group belongingness mediates the relationship between idol worship and self-identity.

Instruments

The survey used in this study consisted of four parts: a demographic questionnaire, the Idol Worship Questionnaire (IWQ), the Group Belongingness Questionnaire (GBQ), and the Self-Identity Scale (SIS).

Demographic Questionnaire: This section collected participants' basic information, including gender, age, academic year, university, and involvement in idol worship-related activities. It consisted of five short-answer questions without rating scales or reverse-coded items. The data served to describe the sample characteristics.

Idol Worship Questionnaire (IWQ): The IWQ was developed and revised by Cheung and Yue (2011) to measure the degree of idol worship among individuals. The questionnaire contains 15 items covering five dimensions: Identification, Romanticization, Idealization, Intimatization, and Commodification. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with higher total scores indicating a stronger degree of idol worship. According to Yue (2021), the overall Cronbach's alpha for the IWQ was 0.92. The subscale reliabilities ranged from 0.64 to 0.78: Identification (0.68; item 1, e.g., "Becoming the kind of person as my idol"), Romanticization (0.75; item 7, e.g., "Wishing my idol to be my lover"), Idealization (0.78; item 10, e.g., "Regarding my idol as the most perfect person"), Intimatization (0.64; item 6, e.g., "Wishing to make friends and chat with my idol"), and Commodification (0.73; item 13, e.g., "Buying things related to my idol [e.g., albums, books, concert tickets]"). No reverse-coded items were included.

Group Belongingness Questionnaire (GBQ): The Chinese version of the Group Belongingness Questionnaire (GBQ), developed by Ye et al. (2018), was used to assess individuals' perceived sense of belongingness to a group. The GBQ includes 11 items covering four dimensions: perceived group warmth (item 4, e.g., "I feel that group members care about me"), active participation (item 2, e.g., "During group activities, I often take the initiative to talk to other members"), group identification (item 1, e.g., "I am satisfied with the current group"), and conscious integration (item 5, e.g., "I enjoy most of the time I spend in the group"). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = completely inconsistent to 5 = completely consistent). Ye et al. (2018) reported an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.93, with sub-dimension reliabilities of 0.86 for perceived group warmth, 0.84 for active participation, 0.79 for group identification, and 0.73 for conscious integration. Confirmatory factor analysis also supported good construct validity with acceptable fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 3.88$, RMSEA = 0.06, AGFI = 0.89, NFI = 0.90, GFI = 0.91, IFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.88, and CFI = 0.89.

Self-Identity Scale (SIS): The Self-Identity Scale (SIS), developed by Chen et al. (2005), was designed to measure an individual's sense of self-identity. The scale consists of 19 items covering three sub-dimensions: personal identity (items 1-11; e.g., item 1, "I am able to control my own future"), social identity (items 12, 13, 14, 18, 19; e.g., item 12, "I am liked by others"), and image identity (items 15-17; e.g., item 15, "My behavior is appropriate"), with the latter considered part of collective identity. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = completely agree), with all items positively scored and no reverse-coded items. Higher scores indicate a stronger sense of self-identity. According to Chen et al. (2005), the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.87, with sub-dimensions ranging from 0.76 to 0.82. The SIS has demonstrated good convergent validity, showing significant positive correlations with other related constructs, such as self-esteem and social identity (B. L. Zeng, 2016).

Data Collection Procedure

After obtaining ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Assumption University (Certification No. 63/2024), participants were invited to complete the online survey via WenJuanXing. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation. The survey link was disseminated through WeChat, QQ, Weibo, and email to recruit Chinese undergraduate students. The online system recorded response times to ensure data quality. Incomplete or duplicate responses were excluded. Data were securely stored with anonymization protocols to protect participant privacy.

Data Analysis

Before data analysis, all collected responses were screened to remove incomplete and duplicate questionnaires, ensuring data accuracy and reliability. Data processing and analysis were conducted using SPSS software. The analyses included descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation analysis to examine the effect of idol worship on self-identity and to test the mediating role of group belongingness.

Results

A total of 191 questionnaires were collected; after excluding ineligible responses, 164 valid questionnaires remained. Among these participants, 86.6% were female and 13.4% were male. The ages of participants varied, with the majority (58.5%) between 18 and 20 years old. Academic years included freshmen (23.2%), sophomores (36.0%), juniors (14.6%), seniors (21.3%), and fifth year or above (4.9%). Participants' schools were located across East China (34, 20.7%), South China (46, 28.0%), Central and West China (50, 30.5%), Northeast China (12, 7.3%), and North China (22, 13.4%). All participants reported having engaged in idol worship activities (see Table 1).

Table 1*Frequencies and Percentages of Participants' Demographic Characteristics (N = 164)*

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	142	86.6%
	Male	22	13.4%
Age Group	Under 18	3	1.8%
	18-20 years	96	58.5%
	21-25 years	54	32.9%
	Over 25	11	6.8%
Educational Level	Freshman	38	23.2%
	Sophomore	59	36.0%
	Junior	24	14.6%
	Senior	35	21.3%
	Fifth Year and Above	8	4.9%
Region	East China	34	20.7%
	South China	46	28.0%
	Central & West China	50	30.5%
	Northeast China	12	7.3%
	North China	22	13.4%
Idol Worship	Participated	164	100%

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for idol worship (Idol Worship Total), group belongingness (Group Belongingness Total), and self-identity (Self-Identity Total). All scores were calculated according to each scale's original scoring instructions. The sample included 164 participants. The mean score for idol worship was 56.87 (SD = 9.35), indicating a generally high level of idol identification. The group belongingness had a mean of 40.20 (SD = 8.63), indicating a moderate sense of social connection within idol-related groups. The mean self-identity score was the highest at 73.41 (SD = 12.68), reflecting a relatively strong sense of self-identity among participants. The variances were 87.43 for idol worship, 74.56 for group belongingness, and 160.90 for self-identity, indicating that self-identity scores varied the most across participants. It should be noted that the relatively high self-identity scores may be influenced by social desirability, reflecting participants' tendency to respond in a socially favorable manner.

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics for Total Scores of Idol Worship, Group Belongingness, and Self-Identity (N = 164)*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Idol Worship Total	164	21.00	75.00	56.87	9.35
Group Belongingness Total	164	11.00	55.00	40.20	8.63
Self-Identity Total	164	30.00	95.00	73.41	12.68

Table 3 shows the results of the mediation analysis performed using PROCESS macro Model 4 (Hayes, 2022) with 5,000 bootstrap samples and a 95% confidence interval. This analysis tested the effect of idol worship (IW_MEAN) on self-identity (SI_MEAN) and whether group belongingness (GB_MEAN) acts as a mediator.

The results revealed that idol worship had a significant positive impact on group belongingness (path a: $B = 0.4684$, standardized $\beta = 0.372$, $SE = 0.0918$, $t = 5.10$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.2870, 0.6498]), explaining about 13.8% of the variance in group belongingness ($R^2 = 0.1383$). Group belongingness, in turn, significantly predicted self-identity (path b: $B = 0.3687$, standardized $\beta = 0.434$, $SE = 0.0592$, $t = 6.23$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.2517, 0.4857]).

Idol worship also showed a significant direct effect on self-identity (direct effect c': $B = 0.2629$, standardized $\beta = 0.246$, $SE = 0.0746$, $t = 3.53$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [0.1156, 0.4102]). Together, these factors explained about 32.7% of the variance in self-identity ($R^2 = 0.3273$).

The bootstrap analysis confirmed a significant indirect effect of idol worship on self-identity through group belongingness (effect = 0.1727, standardized $\beta = 0.161$, $SE = 0.0538$, 95% CI [0.0705, 0.2840]), which supports the idea that group belongingness partially mediates this relationship.

Table 3

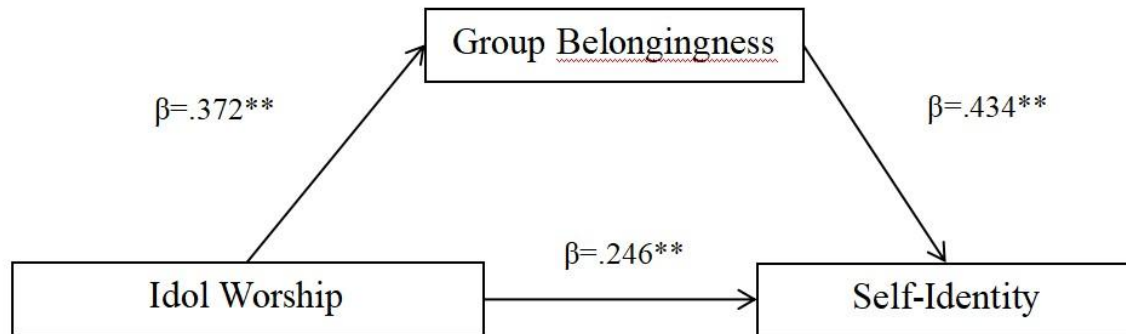
Regression and Mediation Effects of Idol Worship on Self-Identity via Group Belongingness (N = 164)

Path	B	SE	Standardized β	t	p	95% CI (LLCI, ULCI)	R ²
IW → GB (a)	0.4684	0.0918	0.372	5.10	< .001	[0.2870, 0.6498]	0.1383
GB → SI (b)	0.3687	0.0592	0.434	6.23	< .001	[0.2517, .4857]	—
IW → SI (direct effect c')	0.2629	0.0746	0.246	3.53	0.001	[0.1156, 0.4102]	0.3273
IW → SI (indirect effect a×b)	0.1727	0.0538	0.161	—	—	[0.0705, 0.2840]	—

Note: IW = Idol Worship; GB = Group Belongingness; SI = Self-Identity. R² values indicate the proportion of variance explained by predictors in the respective regression models.

Figure 2

Path model representing the influence of idol worship on undergraduate students' self-identity mediated by group belongingness.



Note. All coefficients are standardized. $p < .001$.

Discussion

This study explored associations between idol worship and Chinese undergraduate students' self-identity, as well as the potential mediating role of group belongingness. The results indicated that idol worship is positively associated with self-identity ($\beta = 0.263$, $p = .001$) and also influence it indirectly through group belongingness ($\beta = 0.161$, 95% CI [0.066, 0.260]), supporting the hypothesized relationships. According to Erikson's (1968) theory, idols provide models that help students connect their real selves with their ideal selves, aiding psychological integration.

Group belongingness significantly predicted self-identity ($\beta = 0.434$, $p < .001$), highlighting the mediating role of social identification. Participation in fan communities allows students to satisfy social needs, enhance self-confidence, and integrate individual psychology with social environment.

In China's collectivist culture, group belongingness significantly enhances the psychological and behavioral effects of idol worship (Hofstede, 1984; Markus & Kitayama, 2014). Compared with Western individualistic cultures (Oyserman et al., 2002), this cultural characteristic amplifies social identity through dual identification, manifested as fans gaining emotional satisfaction and a sense of community through collective fan activities and shared discourse (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Chinese undergraduates are at a stage of leaving their families, seeking a sense of belongingness, and being influenced by peers. Being part of fan groups provides emotional support, role models, interpersonal trust, and a sense of connection, helping students build identity, reduce loneliness, and fulfill social and emotional needs (K. Li, 2022; Yue, 2007).

The high proportion of female participants (86.6%) reflects both sociocultural and research design factors. Female undergraduate students generally engage more in idol culture

due to social role expectations and tendencies for emotional expression (Xi, 2023; Xu, 2023). Gendered fan behaviors, topic appeal, and online survey distribution contribute to this imbalance, which should be considered when interpreting results and assessing generalizability.

This research model contains three direct paths and one indirect path, revealing that idol worship is associated with the development of undergraduate students' self-identity by enhancing their sense of belongingness to the social group. It reflects the dynamic interaction between individual psychology and social environment and emphasizes the important role of idol culture in meeting undergraduate students' emotional needs, strengthening social connections, and promoting psychological growth. Especially in the current period of social transformation, facing multiple pressures and identity confusion, this model provides a new perspective for understanding the self-identity formation mechanism of undergraduate students, their mental health education, and social support system.

The study shows how personal psychology and social factors work together in identity development and highlights the positive role idol culture can play. However, idol worship may also have negative consequences, such as academic decline, emotional dependence, or excessive social comparison, which should be considered in future research. Practically, undergraduates could support fan group activities to promote social support and identity development, and educators or policymakers should recognize the importance of idol culture for students' mental health and encourage healthy, balanced engagement.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the impact of idol worship on undergraduate students' self-identity and verified the important mediating role of group belongingness. The results show that idol worship is not only associated with negative effects, as traditionally believed, but also serves as a way for undergraduate students to express their emotions and promotes the construction of their self-identity by enhancing their sense of group belongingness. Idol worship not only has an entertainment function for undergraduate students, but is also an important part of their psychological development, socialization process, and identity construction. Moderate and rational idol worship can provide emotional support and value guidance, serve as a positive driving force for self-growth, and help students establish clear self-awareness and a stable identity. However, irrational or excessive idol worship may manifest as overindulgence in fandom, neglect of academic responsibilities and interpersonal relationships, or even emotional dependence and excessive financial expenditure, which can negatively affect students' psychological well-being and academic performance.

Therefore, the phenomenon of idol worship should attract the attention of educators and mental health practitioners. To mitigate these risks, universities and educators can guide students' interest in idol worship toward healthy group belongingness activities and educational initiatives. For example, courses or seminars can be offered to guide students in reflecting on how idols influence their self-identity and social interactions, while also helping them rationally

manage the time, energy, and financial resources devoted to idol worship to avoid the negative effects of excessive involvement. During extracurricular activities, they can organize fan clubs or interest groups to engage in cultural exchanges, creative projects, or public welfare activities, allowing students to find like-minded peers and gain a sense of belongingness through social interaction, while also promoting personal growth and social responsibility. Throughout this process, emphasis should be placed on recognizing students' behavior, ensuring that their interests are understood and respected, so that they voluntarily accept constructive guidance rather than passively responding to perceived criticism. Through scientific guidance and active intervention, idol worship can be promoted in ways that positively contribute to undergraduate students' psychological development and social adaptation.

Limitations of the Study

First, this study used a cross-sectional questionnaire design; the data reflect only a single point in time, making it difficult to fully test the directionality and dynamic changes of these causal relationships.

Second, the data were collected through self-report, which may have introduced bias. The sample consisted mostly of Chinese female undergraduate students, limiting the generalizability of the findings to all Chinese undergraduates. Future studies should consider more gender-balanced and regionally diverse samples to enhance representativeness. Moderating factors such as types of idols, fan styles, gender, and grade were not explored.

Furthermore, this study focused primarily on the positive effects of idol worship and did not address potential negative impacts such as blind worship, emotional dependence, or excessive social comparison.

Avenues for Future Research

Future research is recommended to use longitudinal or experimental designs to better examine the dynamic changes and causal relationships among idol worship, group belongingness, and self-identity over time. Studies could also expand the sample to include participants from diverse regions, educational backgrounds, and age groups to improve the generalizability and external validity of the findings.

Additionally, potential moderating variables such as gender, family background, and personality traits should be considered. Cross-cultural comparisons could also be conducted to examine how different countries' cultural context influences the relationships among idol worship, group belongingness, and self-identity.

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