

Behavior and Identity Construction of Online Fan Community— Taking Pocket 48 as an Example

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Abstract:

With the development of new media, online social platforms have gradually emerged and improved, greatly changing the interaction between idols and fans, and even between fans and fans. This article takes Pocket 48, an exclusive derivative application of the SNH48 idol group, as an example to explore the fan groups' interactive behavior and identity construction. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews with 15 fans, the study found that fans' interactions on the Pocket 48 platform not only significantly enhanced their emotional connection with their idols, but also experienced gradual development in self-expression and identity. process. Through long-term interaction and participation, fans' emotional investment in idols and communication with other fans continue to deepen, gradually forming a solid identity. This research provides a new perspective for understanding the progressiveness and complexity of modern social media in individual identity construction, revealing how online communities influence users' identity development through continuous interaction mechanisms.

Keywords: online fan community; identity; fan culture; SNH48; Pocket 48.

1. Introduction

The rapid development of the Internet and online social media has enabled fan culture to be more widely spread and enter the vision of more people. As a community form based on common fan culture, interests and values, fan communities have gradually migrated to virtual social platforms such as Weibo and Douban to build a closely connected online community [1,2]. Virtual online communities allow fans to contact idols more directly and express their support through messages, voting, and gifts in live broadcast rooms. This interaction not only shortens the distance between fans and idols, but also enhances fans' sense of participation and belonging [3].

SNH48 GROUP is a large domestic female idol group carefully created by Shanghai Siba Culture Media Group Co., Ltd. Its operation mode completely refers to and quotes the model of Japanese female idol group AKB48. As a cross-cultural communication of Japanese idol culture, unlike traditional idols, SNH48 GROUP, like AKB48, emphasizes the core concepts of "cultivation system" and "face-to-face idol" [4]. By creating idol images that can be approached at close range, holding offline theater performances, fan handshake meetings, and annual elections, it allows fans to fully participate in and witness

the growth and development of idol members, builds a close relationship between fans and young idols, and promotes fans' highly emotional star-making experience and identity recognition in the process of chasing stars [5, 6]. Pocket 48 is a social application created by the company. Idols and fans form a unique virtual community in this app, called a room. In the room, fans can leave messages and send gifts; idols can flip cards (reply to messages), start live broadcasts, and so on. There are currently many studies on the fan culture and fan community construction logic of the cultivation system, and this study will focus on the Pocket 48 application to explore the interactive changes and identity construction process of the fan group.

2. Research Methods

This research mainly uses the in-depth interview method. The interviewees are all fans who have been using Pocket 48 to interact with idols for a long time, totaling 15 people (in order to better distinguish the content expressed by each interviewee, the surname will be used to represent each person later). The author designed an interview outline, which is divided into two aspects: "interaction" and "identity", aiming to fully explore the interviewees' multifaceted experience and psychological dynamics when

using Pocket 48. Table 1 shows the specific questions.

Table 1. The interview outline

Aspect	Questions
Interaction	1. When and through what channels did you start following SNH48?
	2. How long have you been using Pocket 48? Which idol do you mainly follow?
	3. Under what circumstances do you usually use Pocket 48? How much time do you spend on it every day?
	4. What types of interactive activities do you mainly participate in? (Such as: leaving messages, watching live broadcasts, giving gifts, participating in fan tasks, etc.)
	5. What is your main motivation behind these interactive behaviors? Is it to get more information about idols, or to find like-minded friends, or for other reasons?
Identity	1. How do you understand your relationship with idols? What kind of influence do your favorite idols have on you personally?
	2. How do you think you construct or show your identity in Pocket 48? (Such as: through a specific language style, participating in activities, sharing content, etc.)
	3. What kind of person do you think you are in your daily life? How is it different from the online star-chasing you?
	4. In the star-chasing interaction of Pocket 48, have you found that you have grown or changed in some aspects? (Such as: expressive ability, organizational ability, understanding of star-chasing culture and one’s identity in the process of star-chasing, etc.)
	5. How have these growths or changes affected your self-perception and identity?
	6. In what ways do you think Pocket 48 helps meet your psychological needs? Are there any special interactive experiences that you can talk about in detail?

At the same time, the online observation method is adopted to join the community built by the fan group on Pocket 48. Contact fans through online participation and pay attention to fans’ daily behavior activities and psychological changes.

3. Research Findings

3.1 Interactive Behavior

The interviewee Ms. Tao said, “SNH48’s little idols are only allowed to live broadcast on Pocket 48 because of the company’s contract. This application cannot be searched in the iOS system in mainland China and needs to be downloaded through special channels. Every He Fan (the name of SNH48’s fans) around me is using this application.”

Live broadcast, as a unique interactive method in the Internet era, not only crosses the boundaries of time and space, but also builds an unprecedented “face-to-face” communication experience in cyberspace [7]. In order to pursue a more real and rich star-chasing experience, the SNH48 fan group will download the Pocket 48 application. Fans have the opportunity to participate in idols’

daily sharing, interactive games, talent shows and other links for the first time. This instant feedback and deep participation greatly enhance fans’ satisfaction and sense of belonging.

The research found that in addition to watching live broadcasts, respondents’ interactive behaviors in Pocket 48 also include leaving messages, sending gifts, and one-on-one video chats with idols. The time they spend on it every day ranges from 30 minutes to several hours, mainly in their spare time. Through these interactive behaviors, fans not only get more information about idols, but also establish connections with other fans, forming a virtual community with a strong sense of belonging.

3.2 Self-presentation

In Pocket 48, fans will construct their fan identity through a specific discourse system, language style, avatar, nickname, etc. This identity not only reflects their deep feelings for their idols, but also reflects their social strategies and self-presentation in the fan circle.

SNH48 fans will use specific symbols or nicknames to show their support and love for their idols. Interviewee Ms. Ge said: “I will use some funny pictures of little idols

as avatars and backgrounds, and change the nicknames to their related ones, so that they can be noticed more easily when leaving messages or in live broadcasts. I also bought the membership of Pocket 48, which can have special chat bubbles and live broadcast room entry special effects. In fact, I do this to have more interaction with them.”

Through interviews, the author found that in order to distinguish SNH48 fans from other fan groups, a set of exclusive social discourse systems are often formed within the online community. According to the interviewee Ms. Zhang, “SNH48 is referred to as Seine by fans, and fans are called river fans. Different teams have different fans’ names, and each idol even has his own unique homophonic nickname.” As time goes by, the fans’ interaction in Pocket 48 has gradually shifted from simple star chasing to self-expression and social interaction.

3.3 The Formation of Identity

In the framework of Anthony Giddens’ “self-identity theory”, self-identity covers the core dimension of “the ideal self expected from the heart” on the internal level - although it exists as an inner vision that does not completely correspond to reality, it deeply reflects the individual’s psychological needs and promotes the formation of personal identity; it also includes the “self that others want to become as a role model” on the external level. This part is established and constructed through two key paths - self-reflection and observing others [8].

The personality and appearance types of idols created by SNH48 are very diverse. Fans can project a certain spirit or quality that they like and desire on the idols they admire. The essence of this projection is the embodiment of the fans’ “ideal self”. Idols are “another self”, and the imagination of “ideal self” is satisfied in the process of “cultivating idols” [9]. For the fans of SNH48’s “cultivation system” idols, they use the Internet platform as a medium to actively express their love and support for idols and participate in idol support activities. They not only realize the concrete practice of the dimension of “the ideal self expected from the heart”, but also deepen their ability to reflect on themselves and observe others in the process. Specifically, fans reflect on and adjust their own behavior patterns and value orientations by comparing the growth trajectory and characteristics of idols. At the same time, by observing and analyzing the behavior of other fans and the social feedback under the influence of idols, they further examine and shape their own identity [10].

3.4 Identity Construction Process

3.4.1 Initial stage: observation and adaptation

In the initial stage, fans mainly understand and adapt to the social rules and culture of Pocket 48 by observing the

interactive behaviors of other users. They will pay attention to the interactive methods and content of other fans, and learn how to express their support for idols in messages, voting and other activities. All 15 interviewees said that they had experienced this stage when they first started using Pocket 48. This stage is a critical period for fans to integrate into the community and master basic social skills.

3.4.2 Participation stage: active interaction

After entering the participation stage, fans began to actively participate in various interactive activities, including watching live broadcasts, leaving messages, participating in fan tasks, etc. Through these activities, fans not only expressed their support for idols, but also enhanced their awareness of the role they played in promoting the transformation of amateurs into idol stars, and initially constructed their own identities.

3.4.3 Stable stage: integration into the community

In the stable stage, fans gradually formed a stable self-identity. Their interaction in Pocket 48 is not only to chase idols, but also to find self-positioning and social belonging in the virtual community. They show their identities in various ways, and constantly adjust and strengthen this identity in the interaction with other fans.

Interviewee Ms. Wu said, “Because I am relatively old, they (young idols) are even old enough to be my daughters. I like the youth and vitality of the young idols in SNH48 very much. Most of the time, I interact with them from the perspective of an elder. For example, I will remind them to eat well, rest on time, and take care of their bodies.”

3.4.4 Sober stage: rational review and self-development

In the final sober stage, fans began to re-examine their own behavior and identity construction, and examine the relationship between themselves and idols in a more mature and rational manner. They realized that although the existence of idols added color and motivation to their lives, their own growth and development were equally important. Some interviewees learned how to find a balance between star chasing and personal life at this stage, and not let star chasing affect their normal life and studies.

4. Conclusion

In today’s new media environment, the boundaries between virtual and real life between idols and fans, and between fans and fans have been broken. Online communities have become the main platform for fan circle interaction and relationship building, and identity recognition is not only the premise for the establishment of re-

relationships, but also the process and result of interaction. Since the SNH48 training system emphasizes the common growth of idols and fans, its “two-way interaction” characteristics are more obvious. Fans’ worship of idols is no longer just based on their love for their professional ability, voice and appearance, but more on their personality and emotional reverse returns, and construct identity through interactive emotional experience.

Most of the interviewees in this study are female. However, SNH48 GROUP as an idol group with a relatively high proportion of male fans, scholars should not focus on female fans when studying the identity of the fan group, because this cannot represent the entire fan group. Future research needs to conduct comprehensive, objective, and non-discriminatory observation and discussion of its entire fan group in order to understand its interactive behavior and identity construction more clearly and accurately.

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