Research on the emotional resonance effect of online virtual idols from the perspective of quasi-social communication

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Abstract：With the rapid development of the virtual idol industry, virtual idols and fans have built a close, two-way rush, symbiotic quasi-social relationship, online virtual idols can replace real people, provide emotional value, and virtual idols with "people in the middle" behind them will be more likely to cause emotional resonance.
Keywords：quasi-social interactions; virtual idols; emotional empathy; The Man in the Middle

1 Introduction

With the continuous evolution of digital media technology, the virtual idol industry has developed rapidly, and virtual idols have entered the public's field of vision one after another. Virtual idols have become a hot topic of concern from all walks of life, with the development of the times, they will have a more and more far-reaching impact on social development. Virtual idols are idols created based on new digital media technologies such as virtual reality, engine animation, motion capture, image recognition, and speech synthesis, which do not exist in the form of material entities [1]. A virtual idol is a virtual person who conducts idol activities and has its own virtual setting and work output. Unlike real idols, the personality, activities and popularity of virtual idols rely more on UGC (User Generated Content) to improve, so the virtual idol is closer to fans. Some researchers claim that online virtual idols can replace real people and provide emotional value, and have developed artificial intelligence virtual idols and AI synthetic anchors including Luo Tianyi and Du Xiaoxiao. But we've observed that very few people really have emotional attachments to virtual idols. Even the online anime group, which is known for its two-dimensional dimension, does not have any intoxicating emotional sustenance for the virtual idols that came first. On the contrary, the A-SOUL network virtual idol established by the motion capture technology of "the man in the middle" has a deep empathy among netizens, and public opinion has also produced a huge contrast. The biggest difference between these "people in the middle" and online virtual idols is that the people in the middle really have staff as the core of stage performance.

In this regard, we wondered: why are netizens more likely to resonate emotionally with virtual idols with "people in the middle" behind them? Will netizens behave differently depending on the difference between "people in the middle" or artificial intelligence? Why is there such a performance and what is its root?

2 Literature review

2.1 A literature review on quasi-social interaction theory

The theory of "quasi-social communication" was proposed by psychologists Horton and Wall in an article published in the journal "Psychiatry" in 1956 to describe the relationship between media users and media characters, that is, certain audiences, especially TV viewers, tend to develop some kind of attachment to their favorite TV characters or characters, and develop an imaginary interpersonal relationship. Because of its certain similarity with real social interaction, it was named "quasi-social interaction" [2].

With the development of social networks, there are more and more studies on quasi-social relations, and foreign research is currently focusing on the characteristics of quasi-social communication behaviors. McGuire et al. found that quasi-social interaction behavior often occurs during viewers watching TV programs. McGuire et al. thus identified two basic functions of quasi-social interaction: companionship and identity.

At present, the research on quasi-social communication in China is mainly in the aspect of theoretical research review. Regarding the characteristics of quasi-social interaction, Zheng Peijuan (2015) believes that the construction of quasi-social interaction relationship is carried out in the long-term continuous communication and interaction between people and media figures. With the advancement of social media, quasi-social communication has taken on new characteristics, and unilateral communication also has the possibility of two-way interaction [3]. Scholars Ge Jinping found that the research dimension analysis of quasi-social interaction is roughly divided into three areas: cognition, attitude, and behavior [4]. In quasi-social communication, Zhang Jie and Fang Jianqian (2009) believe that the rules of electronic media scene communication are common to the social rules in real life, but the quasi-social communication objects in the new scene characteristics become virtual characters, breaking the spatial distance limit of real interpersonal communication and the familiarity limit of the communication object [5]. The structure of Internet information flow has shaped a new type of quasi-social communication. However, these studies do not address the question of whether online virtual idols can have emotional resonance with netizens from the perspective of quasi-social communication.

2.2 Literature review of the phenomenon of virtual idol interaction with fans

Liu Shengzhi made an overall analysis of the reasons for the worship of virtual idols by young people from the utopian experiment of intimacy - the cultural study of virtual idol worship in youth groups, pointing out that virtual idols enter the hearts of fans or the interaction of the true feelings of the people in the middle, that is, to bring the intimate relationship with fans closer in a common ability and way [8]. Liu Shengzhi & Shi Bingrong proposed that virtual idols bring happiness, companionship and encouragement to fans, and become their emotional sustenance and psychological dependence. Fans actively support their idols to realize their dreams, and gain

a sense of accomplishment and participation [7]. Interactive cultural interpretation of virtual idols and fan bases. Professor Yu Guoming believes that virtual idols themselves are "a new type of communication medium with its own relationship attributes"[9], and uses the theory of emotional design to analyze virtual idols and their interactive relationship with fans[11]. In addition to these theoretical analyses, other scholars have conducted empirical research on virtual idol fan groups, such as Tian Yinzi studying the interaction between fans and virtual idols [10], Li Jia and Chen Feiyang believe that there is a "shout-style" quasi-social relationship between fans and virtual idols, "The fan group is spread through specific symbols. the cultural practice of creating regenerative texts and relational imaginaries to construct identity"[8].

2.3 Questions asked

This paper hopes to conduct qualitative research from the perspective of the establishment of intimacy between fans and virtual idols, and explore the following core questions: Why can fans establish intimate relationships with virtual idols? What does this intimacy mean for fans? What are the forces and influencing factors behind intimacy?

3 Research methods

3.1 Research hypotheses

From the perspective of quasi-social communication, the quasi-social communication object becomes a virtual character, breaking the spatial distance limitation of real interpersonal communication and the familiarity limit of the communication object. Today, when social robots gradually affect human life, it is of practical significance to extend the theory of quasi-social communication to the new research object of social robots. The different interactions between people and virtual idols in the live broadcast room will affect people's emotional projection, whether virtual idols with "people in the middle" behind them are more likely to cause emotional resonance, and the different stage performance of virtual idols will also affect people's emotional projection. Based on the above assumptions: the more emotional answers the

H1 virtual idol, the more emotions people projecte;The better the stage performance of;

H2 virtual idols, the more emotions people projecte;

H3 Compared with virtual idols, people will project more emotions to people in the middle;

H4 Virtual idols with people in the middle are more emotions that people project than virtual idols without people in the middle

This paper will use online ethnography and in-depth interview methods as research methods. Attempts to answer the above questions

3.2 Network ethnography

Network ethnography is a new research method born from the rapid development and wide

application of the Internet based on the participatory observation of the online community. Since the research object of this paper is virtual idol fans, who actively participate in idol-related information interaction on major social platforms on a daily basis, this paper adopts the ethnographic operation mode of observation, ethnographic recording, and theoretical analysis to draw conclusions.

The specific operation is as follows: from April 2023 to August 2023, select the community platforms with a large number of virtual idol fans and high activity, Bilibili Barrage Network (B station) Douyin, Baidu Tieba and Weibo super topic community for participatory observation. The main observation objects are:(1) B station and Douyin dynamics, video barrage, and comment area of A-SOUL and its members, as well as UP main dynamics, barrage and comment area for secondary creation; -SOUL and its members' Weibo fans supertalk; (2) Baidu Tieba of A-SOUL and its members;

3.2.1 Study object selection

Since the research object of this paper is virtual idol fans, they actively participate in idol-related information interaction on major social platforms on a daily basis. Due to the large number of virtual idols, this paper selects representative A-SOUL network virtual idols as the main research object. The selection was based on A-SOUL's current leading position and extensive influence in China's virtual idol industry.

3.3 In-depth interviews

3.3.1 Interview Selection Participants

Since the real-time interaction between virtual idols and fans is mostly carried out through live broadcasts, and the selection of live broadcast platforms is mainly concentrated on Douyin and station B, this article will take the audience of the live broadcast room of the official B station account of the virtual idol as the total sample, and select some fans for interviews.

3.3.2 Interview outline production

1. Have you learned about virtual ? . How did you meet your virtual idol? How well do you know virtual idols?

2. Will you interact with virtual idols? What was the most memorable interactive experience?

3. Would you rather interact with a virtual idol, or would you rather interact with someone in the middle of the virtual idol? Which would you rather have an emotional conversation with? Why?

4. What do you think of the emotional answer of virtual idols? If the virtual idol has more emotional answers, will it make you more willing to interact with the virtual idol? Will it increase your liking for them?

5. What do you think is the most attractive thing about virtual idols?

6. What do you think of the stage performance of virtual idols? Does the stage presence of virtual idols affect how much you like them? Probably how much impact it will have?

7. If the people in the virtual idol changed, would you still like them?

8. Would you rather interact with a virtual idol with a "person in the middle" behind you, or would you rather interact with a virtual idol? What type of virtual idol would you rather interact with and communicate emotionally? Why?

4 Research findings and discussion points

In this study, this study theorizes the phenomenon of emotional resonance of online virtual idols from the perspective of quasi-social communication through the interview method, and attempts to answer the questions. Virtual idol companionship and emotional communication reduce the social loneliness of netizens to a certain extent.

"When Jiaran first livestreamed, fans in the circle were disgusted, posted a large number of malicious attacks, and it was even difficult to find normal interactive messages, but Jiaran still insisted on completing the 3-hour live broadcast and dancing 20 house dances in a row, striving to be diligent, innocent and cute and caring to encourage the positive image of fans." (S1)

"Virtual idols are virtual, definitely more perfect than real idols, whether in image or skills, such as singing and dancing, you can do some things that are difficult for real people to do, and you can also add some more mysterious virtual effects, like glowing ah or something, A-SOUL anniversary live broadcast did the effect of flying the sword."(S2)

"Maybe it's because I'm emotional, so I think the most attractive thing is the bond between them, communicate with them, share with each other, encourage each other when they are sad and uncomfortable, face difficulties together, be happy together when they are happy, and inform each other of their learning results, this kind of two-way rush is really reassuring."(S3)

"What really makes these virtual idols go to the hearts of fans is the interaction of the true feelings of the people in the middle, and if the people in the middle debut as real people, I feel that I will not chase them anymore." But if, as some people say, virtual idols are 'dehumanized', I feel that I can't accept it, how can the machine have people's real emotions?"(S4)

4.1 Emotional resonance under quasi-social interaction

The study found that the more emotional Q&A interactions of virtual idols, the more people are willing to interact with virtual idols, mainly because of empathy and companionship. This is a gift from the virtual idol to the fan group, and it is the emotional connection between the two sides to build a virtual field in a long-term companionship. In the Internet space, virtual idols interact with fans, virtual idols respond appropriately to fans' imaginary interactions, and fans" gain "remote intimacy". Although virtual idols are still "physically absent" in real situations,"relying on the personal field constructed by social media, the emotions between virtual idols and fans develop towards intimate relationships characterized by care, trust, understanding, interaction and commitment. Although the quasi-social relationship is one-way, fans can feel a deeper emotional

connection from it.

Fans in quasi-social relationships, in the face of virtual idols, will first feel that "they" are real people; Secondly, in the live broadcast, they are more inclined to interact with "them" in the way of being friends, and think that "they" are talking to "me" and can feel companionship. This quasi-social relationship is warm and at the same time makes fans feel empowered.

4.2 The establishment, transmission and consolidation of empathy between people

People are more willing to interact with virtual idols who have "people in the middle" behind them, and are more willing to have emotional exchanges with virtual idols who have "people in the middle" behind them. The main reason for this is that what really makes these virtual idols go to the hearts of fans is the interaction of the true feelings of the people in the middle, and the ability and way of empathy to bring the intimate relationship with fans closer. This article takes A-SOUL network virtual idols as the main research object, such as the aforementioned Jiaran crying, because the virtual holster at that time did not have a "crying" action template. Virtual idols can't shed electronic tears.

The person in the middle gives the virtual idol the soul and also brings the virtual idol to the human mind. Everyone knows that she is crying, people are more able to have emotional resonance· and the positive image of hard work, innocence and cuteness and care to encourage fans through interpretation gives virtual idols a humanized core and provides emotional value to fans. The people in the middle are real human beings and lack the sense of distance on the Internet. Therefore, fans regard the person in the middle as the soul of the virtual idol, and the virtual idol as the companion and leader in their own life. It can be seen that it is this kind of empathy and respect of virtual idols that impresses fans, thus forming a relationship of "two-way rush" and "common feelings" that carry trust and commitment.

4.3 Fans have stronger emotional identification in virtual idol culture

Virtual idols are a kind of artificial objects that tend to be perfect based on technology and imagination, virtual idols bring about the democratization of idols, virtual idols change the relationship between fans and idols, idols can be public figures who enjoy the public space of fan worship, and in a certain sense, become the private objects of fans in the private field. Fans are given more space to participate in idol creation and the right to make their own choices, no longer one-way passively participate in the idol worship process, and enhance fans' emotional identification and belonging to virtual idols. In the traditional idol manufacturing system, the right to create idols is firmly in the hands of the production company. But in the open model of virtual idol creation, this right is ceded to the fan base. Fans can also project their own stories and emotions into the creation of derivative content of virtual idols, such as songs, fandoms, dances, etc. In the process of self-projection, fans not only get emotional satisfaction, but also shape their ideal self and shape their sense of self-identity. Fans have increased their loyalty to virtual idols and fan stickiness in the process.

5 Summary and reflection

This study uses the in-depth interview method to theorize the phenomenon of emotional resonance of online virtual idols from a quasi-social perspective, and attempts to answer hypothetical questions. It has been found that netizens are more likely to arouse emotional resonance with virtual idols with "people in the middle" behind them, and netizens are more willing to interact with people in the middle behind virtual idols. This is mainly because of empathy and companionship, which is a gift brought by virtual idols to the fan group, and an emotional connection between the two sides that builds a virtual field in long-term companionship.

This study proposes a quasi-social perspective, which reflects the development of the emotional resonance phenomenon between online virtual idols and netizens. On the other hand, it also provides a new research direction for whether social media can generate emotional communication among netizens in the context of empathy in modern China. However, it is worth noting that this study also finds that the emotional resonance of online virtual idols from a quasi-social perspective will bring about the negative impact of emotional emptiness that aggravates netizens. This is something to be vigilant and reflect on. Under the pattern of global communication, the importance of social media is self-evident, and the establishment, transmission and consolidation of empathy on top of it have also become new research topics. The in-depth study of this topic will provide new explanations for the new changes in the theory of empathy in the Internet era. However, due to the selection of interviewees, this study has incomplete and unrepresentative arguments, and in future research, researchers in the field from a quasi-social perspective may need to pay more attention to virtual idols and whether artificial intelligence and netizens can generate new emotional phenomena.

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