



PAPER – OPEN ACCESS

Distance and Intimacy: An Introduction to the Characteristics of Japan’s Idol Image

Author : Chen Ichen
DOI : 10.32734/lwsa.v7i3.2110
Electronic ISSN : 2654-7066
Print ISSN : 2654-7058

Volume 7 Issue 3 – 2024 TALENTA Conference Series: Local Wisdom, Social, and Arts (LWSA)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/).

Published under licence by TALENTA Publisher, Universitas Sumatera Utara



Distance and Intimacy: An Introduction to the Characteristics of Japan's Idol Image

Chen Ichen

Nihon University College of International Relations Department of International Liberal Arts, Shizuoka, 411-8555, Japan

ccsophia1203@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper investigates Japanese Idols, its definition, and the development of Idol culture. It points out the two defining characteristics of 'Japanese Idols.' First, 'immatureness' refers to the part of Japanese Idol culture that provides an imperfect 'immatureness' that allows those who participate in Japanese Idol culture have the possibility to 'create' their own 'Idols' in which they can project their idealistic self. This 'immatureness' originates from the importance of 'KODOMO (Children)' that Japanese society upholds. Second is the mentality of group 'solidarity,' which acts as the key concept for willing participants. This refers to the 'audiences/fans' that use Idol consumption to gain happiness through three kinds of relationships: 'Fan-Fan,' 'Fan-Idol,' and 'Idol-Idol.' Furthermore, the paper includes a case study on the no-live-audience concert at the end of 2020 by the male Japanese Idol group ARASHI. The study included an examination of how 'Fans' and 'Idols' obtain mutual 'emotional support' and 'intimacy' through 'mutual communication.' It further points out that 'Fans' do not just gain enjoyment from their consumptions on the 'cultural product' that is 'Idols.' In reality, it shoulders the double connotations of 'care' and a 'sharing of affection' for the 'Idols.' The paper has discovered that 'fans' would, without fail, initiate and adjust their 'distances' between themselves and their 'Idols' to achieve self-fulfillment and room for imagination.

Keywords: Idol; Japanese idol culture; Fan Culture

1. Introduction

“Couldn't beat her smile, it stirred up all the media
Secret side, I wanna know it, so mysterious
Even that elusive side, part of her controlled area
Complete and perfect”

《Idol/YOASOBI》

The lyrics above are an excerpt from the song "Idol" released by Japan's new hot sensation YOASOBI in April 2023. Not only did this song instantly become a hit in Japan, but it also reached number one on the U.S. Billboard list for Billboard Global Excl. U.S. in June of that very same year¹. Furthermore, the song maintained its top 10 status until September in the Japanese pop Billboard lists for South Korea, Singapore, India, France, and the United Kingdom². One of the interesting things regarding the song's global popularity was that an English version was released in May. However, the most circulated version remained to be the Japanese version. This could be a direct result of the fact that the term 'IDOL' is synonymous with incredible ties to Japanese culture.

If we take a closer look at the lyrics of the song, we can also see one of the characteristics of the Japanese idol image of "maintaining a certain intimacy despite the obvious distance." For example, the lyrics "What did you eat today? What book do you love? Whenever you go out for fun, tell me, where do you go? Haven't eaten anything It's a secret, unknown Any questions you're facing, always acting so vaguely" demonstrates the desire a fan has towards getting a glimpse of the day-to-day life of their Idol and their willingness to accept an artificially manufactured portrayal that is initiated by the idols themselves. This is because, as the Audience, fans are the recipients of the carefully curated idol image delivered through the media as both distant and intimate. These idols, whose existence is just as common as the boy (or girl) next door are at the same time surrounded by a veil of mystery that is enough to invoke a blank canvas of imagination for their Audience. This canvas is as though a perfect reflection of every Audience and their 'desires' shaped precisely by their 'individuality' and unique life experiences and thoughts.

Therefore, the topic of this thesis is as listed. Firstly, the organization of the most dominant topic in Japan's Subculture – IDOL culture and its history. A discussion of the perceived changes in the Image of Japanese idols follows this. Lastly, further discussions into the unique idol characteristic of being both distant and intimate that has originated from Japan's IDOL culture. Additionally,

there will be investigations of how Fans treat their idols with the utmost intimacy and their efforts to create mutual communication with them, as well as how Fans use 'communication' to achieve a relationship of intimacy and mutual support with their idols.

2. Research Method

First, in section 2.1, there will be a general overview of previous studies on Japanese idols, its history, and its greatest trait of immaturity. Then, in section 2.2, an attempt will be given to organize how Japanese idols are defined and other key traits beyond its immature nature. This includes 1) the obvious longevity of Japanese idols compared to other countries, 2) the establishment of the 'idol group' in Japan, and most importantly, 3) the feelings of distance and intimacy given to fans.

Finally, an introduction of the research subjects and methods used in the thesis at the end of section 2.2 will be followed by a case study on how Japanese idols initiate mutual communication with fans during a concert to achieve a sense of mutual support and intimacy.

2.1. Japanese Idols, its History, and Definition

Idols are generally considered a cultural product that only came to be after the 1970s in Japan (Ogawa, 1991; Tsuji, 2001; Tajima, 2022). As Tsuji (2001) pointed out, Japan's pop culture can be divided into two halves. The first one is the post-war era between the years 1950 to 1960. At this time, Japanese society struggled between the feelings of defeat and the difficulties of rebuilding their country. Hence, the personification of 'success' and a longing for a 'star' was born as a direct projection of the Japanese public (Audience). The second period began in the late 1960s to the 1980s, when Japan was undergoing great economic growth. At the time, Japan was filled with young adults who experienced the 1960s Counterculture movement and its subsequent failure. These same young adults became the most significant consumers of Japanese pop culture, and they were also the ones who decided to invest in 'idols.'

The popularity of 'idol' culture is also considered synonymous with the development of the Media industry (Inamasu, 1989; Sasayama, 2014). Inamasu (1989) points out that if the 1960s was taken as a turning point, Japan's multimedia environment shifted from the mainstream, which was the 'cinema' to that of the 'television.' As such, the Charismatic 'star,' usually considered a byproduct of the 'cinema,' has now followed the 'television' into Japanese households and into the audiences' everyday lives. This shift in media consumption again reflects the dynamic of a seemingly untouchable existence changing to one that is much more approachable.

But who was the very first Idol to grace Japan's society? Although there are scholars who think that the definition of Idols should be for 'those youngsters whose dance and song cause a great ruckus amongst young people' then pre-war stage actress Matsuko Ashita (1920-2019) should be considered the very first 'IDOL' (Sasayama, 2014; Oshida, 2022)³. However, it is Saori Minami (1954-) who released her debut single "Seventeen (十七歳)" in 1971 that is most commonly agreed upon as the first in Idol culture. Saori Minami's songs were characterized as ones that resonated with teenagers of her generation and were mainly songs of growing pains. This also differentiated 'Idol Song' into a genre of its own. Songs that are in this genre possess the trademark of allowing 'the younger generation to sing their stories for those of their own generation.'

What really manufactured the copious number of young "idols" and established its unique branch of 'Japanese Idol' was the then popular music talent show, *Star Born!* (スター誕生!). It is plain to see even from its title that the notion of 'idol' was not yet constructed at the time, and the Audience still referred to talents that emerged from the entertainment industry as 'stars.' But this talent show allowed many teenagers who are still amateurs to appear directly on television and its audiences. As such, the audiences were able to witness a seemingly 'normal' boy or girl mature and grow until they became a 'star.'

Shuto (2022) who has organized the many statements made by the show's mastermind, Yu Aku (1937-2007), points out that the most important factor in identifying a rising star was choosing an individual that has yet to 'mature.' Young female idols such as Junko Sakurada (1958-) and Momoe Yamaguchi (1959-) also first appeared in front of the Japanese public as neighbouring girls who resonated greatly with the Audience.

The show *Star Born!* (スター誕生!) was responsible for the debut of numerous idols in the 1970s who captured the many hearts of the younger generation. With its 'immature' idols on hand, the idol industry came to its height in the 1980s. Female idols such as Kyoko Koizumi (1966-) and Seiko Matsuda (1962-) or even the seldom seen male Idol Masahiko Kondo (1964-) not only took Japan by storm but their popularity also spread to other Asian countries and are still very much active in their careers today.

After enduring the Budding period of the 1970s and the Golden period of the 1980s, the industry then experienced an Ice Age in the 1990s. During this time, many music talent shows got cancelled, which meant that 'Idol Singers' lost their only performance stage. During this time, Idols were forced to branch out and diversify their talents beyond the usual song and dance. One group that stood out from the crowd at this time was the male idol group SMAP⁴. By taking the direct initiative to participate in variety shows, SMAP was able to shed down its iron-clad Idol façade.

Furthermore, by engaging in variety shows and challenging genres not normally associated with 'Idols' (such as Comedy), the members were able to present a different side of themselves to the public. As a result, SMAP's proactivity successfully diversified the variety of work available for Japanese idols. The 'Idols' that are seen today are ones that are active beyond just song and dance,

who can be seen on theatre stages or variety shows, and ones that would gladly challenge themselves to different areas of expertise (e.g., newscasters, athletes). This also transformed 'Japanese Idol' into its own area of expertise like an actor, anchor, and such. Moreover, because the Audience can now see their idols almost everywhere, it again brings the Idol ever closer to everyday life with the public.

In the 2000s, the Japanese Idol industry entered a Warring State period. Even with the so-called mainstream female idols such as AKB48, Momoiro Clover Z, and Hello! Project, there was abundance in not only just numbers but talents and this did not even factor in the underground idols that were extremely active in live houses and such. The vitality and competitiveness of the idol industry at this time easily surpassed that of the 1970s-80s and thus was considered the Warring State period.

The Japanese idols of the 2000s all demonstrated one exceptionally important trait. That is, as was mentioned before, the main reason that Japanese idols were able to capture the hearts of so many fans was because they portrayed themselves as 'immature' yet ever 'progressing towards success.' This 'immatureness' also precisely created the feelings of intimacy for fans. However, what does this 'immatureness' represent? As Oda (2011) points out, the origin of idols essentially means 'the privileges that are only acceptable for youngsters' and the charisma that entails within. So, when Japanese idols mature into adulthood, it is also the time that they are expected to shed their identities as idols. Hence, despite the fact that many idols before the 2000s still enjoyed career success many years after their debut, their identities as an idol would only last a few years. For example, the male idol group Hikaru Genji (光GENJI) broke onto the scene with their fresh dance performances in 1987. Even though they were immensely popular, they only maintained for so many years before disbanding in 1995.⁵

However, in the late 2000s, many male idol groups from Japan's largest idol talent agency, Johnny & Associates, Inc.⁶, have been experiencing success in their idol careers for more than ten years. Take ARASHI for example; considered Japan's national Idol, their idol career already spanned two decades before they announced their hiatus in 2021. Take the girl idol group AKB48 as an example; even though there was a consistent change in its member lineup (referred to as 'graduated'), the group was active for more than ten years as well. Compared to other countries, Japanese idols' long life expectancy is not only a peculiar phenomenon in itself but also a highly distinguishing trait⁷.

2.2. Japanese Idols— Definition and Image Transition

In the last section, an overview of the history of the Japanese Idol as a cultural product was presented. In this section, there will be an in-depth discussion on how 'Japanese idols' are defined and the transitions their publicly portrayed images have undergone. Takashi Katsuki (2014) points out that in today's society, the term 'idol' encompasses many definitions. Nobuhiko Baba (2020) agrees that what is generally accepted as 'idol charm' is based on personal experiences, making it incredibly hard to reach a consensus. After all, when people use the term 'idol' everyone is actually using the word in the context of how they define it themselves. This means that when people identify a certain individual as an 'idol,' they actually look at this individual with their own judgment as to whether the person can be considered an idol. This is also why even though in Japan there are many academic research regarding 'Idols' (and Idol Fans), the perspective of the study fluctuates according to historical background and the personal experiences and point of view of the researchers and their subjects.

Regarding the complexity of the word, Katsuki (2014) has categorized it into three main categories: ①the idolization of 'Idols,' ②'Idols' whose charisma surpass their abilities, and ③'Idols' that belong to specified domains. Katsuki further explains that the first two idols he refers to are those that can appear in any given domain, while the third kind refers to the commonly accepted idols seen in the entertainment industry. However, even though Katsuki breaks his definition into three categories, he still emphasizes that the Idol in today's society is a mixture of all three.

If the quote of the song "IDOL" by YOASOBI at the beginning of this paper is recalled, the song describes how Fans see their Idols like the stars in the sky, sparkly, perfect, and unique. But what Fans truly consider irreplaceable is the imperfectness that shines through on occasion (although this imperfectness may very well be a highly orchestrated performance as well). If we use Katsuki's understanding to analyze the lyrics to this song, we can surmise that the song is presenting the 'Idol' as though they are a perfect and unique start that deserves worshipping (①the idolization of 'Idols'). But at the same time, the 'Idol's' charm lies not in their talent but in their smiles (②'Idol' whose charisma surpasses their abilities), and even at times when the Idol is perceived as talentless, it can still be interpreted as cute. Lastly, the Idol that the song refers to the common Idol that sings and dances on stage (③'Idols' that belong to specified domains).

'Worshipped' but with 'talent that pales to one's charisma,' 'distant' yet close enough in daily life to invoke a feeling of 'intimacy,' the Idol concept that combines seemingly unrelated characteristics is seemingly intertwined tightly with Japanese culture. However, this is precisely the reason why Idols not only act as an extension for their Fans but also as a projection of an idealistic version of themselves (Ogura, 2012; Seki, 2014; Chen, 2014). Chikako Ogura (2012) points out that Johnny's Idols uphold a gender-neutral existence for their female Fans and thus provide a mirrored reflection of their own existence.

Kenji Nishi (2017) further suggested the concept of 'Indi-visual' to explain the existence of 'Idols.' He points out that the concept of 'Idols' is an idea consisting of multiple 'Individual' elements collected together, demonstrating a collective Visual. Those who encounter these Visuals daily through an array of mediums actually are just experiencing one Individual or parts of an

element. Even so, it is easy for people to unconsciously feel that 'seeing an Idol equates to knowing everything about them.' Furthermore, an idol's image is varied as they can be seen as intimate as a mirror-image of the fans themselves and what a fan hopes to be like (image-wise). Hence, in Japan, the transformation of the Idol image has always been a direct reflection of the changes within Japanese society.

As per the last section, it was during the Golden period between the 1970s and 1980s when 'normal' boys and girls got the opportunity to perform on stage and turn into 'stars' right in front of an audience. This trait of 'immatureness' is still a core concept of Japanese Idol culture. Shuto (2022) points out that this 'immatureness' is a reflection of the 'Modern Family' designated by modern Japanese society in which 'KODOMO (Children)' is bestowed the utmost importance⁸. Shuto (2022) further points out that post-war Japanese society used 'KODOMO (Children)' as the token and buffer in which foreign culture is accepted (this is especially true for American popular culture, which symbolizes democracy and progressiveness). In other words, Japanese society was not just accepting and replicating American popular culture; instead, it was adding its own flairs of 'Japan' into it to make it a truly unique culture. This can be most observed in post-war Japanese society with the emergence of the New Middle Class and its core values centered around Family and Children.

Other than the notion of 'immatureness,' this paper is meant to lay emphasis on the Japanese Idol trait of 'feelings of solidarity.' In reality, before the Ice Age of the 90s, mainstream Japanese Idols were often solo artists. However, today, when we refer to Japanese idols, the first thing that comes to mind is 'idol groups.' How does this 'group' manifest itself within Japanese society, and what are its implications?

Post-war Japan endured the tedious task of rebuilding itself and welcomed economic success between the 1960s and the 1980s. However, in the latter half of the 80s to the early 90s, their soaring economy turned out to be a bubble that devastated⁹ the country. Japan's 'community,' forced to face the possibilities of societal collapse, further projected their desires for their ideal 'Community' onto 'Idols.' As such, 'solidarity' gradually became one of the defining traits of Japanese Idols. Furthermore, the 'relationships' between group members and the 'communication' between Idols and their Fans would all become emphasized elements.

For example, the 'relationship' between the members of the 'National Idol' group SMAP, who debuted in the 90s and whose members were very active in variety shows and theater, is a highly researched topic for many Japanese Idol scholars. Darling-wolf (2003) points out that SMAP group member Takuya Kimura (1972-) became the object of imitation not only for his representation of the ideal male in the new era but also because his every performance and interaction with his group members emitted the unbreakable bonds of male friendship. In addition, numerous fan studies focused on Japanese Idol fans show that many fans actually gain happiness from the consumer 'Relationship' they have with their Idols (Tsuji, 2012; Chen, 2014).

After experiencing economic stagnation and following disasters, Japanese society and the Japanese public essentially projected what they desired of an ideal 'community' to that of an 'Idol' and all that it symbolizes. The key to enabling the 'audience/fan' to gain fulfilment through a consumer's 'relationship' is precisely the unique trait only found in Japanese Idol culture of the 'distant yet intimate' bond. It not only allows fans to not only participate in an 'Idol-fan' relationship (such as being witness to the growth of an Idol into a star) but also is integral in maintaining a certain distance for 'fans' to overlook the 'Idol-Idol' relationship within Idol groups. In the next section, a case study will be used to discuss the notion of how the 'distant yet intimate' Idol succeeds in sustaining 'communication' with their 'fans' and how they construct the 'idol-fan' relationship.

3. Case Study

This case study will focus on the various marketing strategies that were implemented for the no-live-audience concert that ARASHI held at Tokyo Dome on December 31, 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face 'audience/fan' interactions within an emotionally charged 'normal' concert hall were not viable for ARASHI. Thus, they had to improvise using technology as a medium to strengthen the 'Idol-Idol-Fan' (the bond between members and their bonds with their fans) 'intimacy.' This paper will investigate how this 'intimacy' establishes and shapes how the word 'Idol' is defined.

Debuted in 1999 as a five-member group, ARASHI, just like their predecessors, was accumulating public popularity through active participation in various domains such as variety shows, theater, and the music industry, to name a few. In 2010, they succeeded in reaching the pinnacle of their industry and were decidedly considered to be 'National Idols.' After 20 years of being Idols, they decided to go on a temporary hiatus after they finished their nationwide tour. However, immediately after they announced their hiatus plans, the COVID-19 global pandemic forced them to cancel their plans of having a 'direct' and face-to-face interaction with their Fans. Instead, they altered their plans to a no-live-audience concert – where only the Idols and staff members would be present in an otherwise empty Tokyo Dome and where they would perform directly into the camera for Fans across the screen. This was obviously a difficult decision for the group and, from a Fan's point of view, one that was filled with disappointment.

Per the last section where the characteristics of Japanese Idols were listed, one points to the feelings of 'intimacy' Japanese Idols bring to their 'audience/fans' as one of their key charm points. The 'intimacy' that is experienced by the Fans is not only attained through mass media but also through the opportunities to see and 'interact' with their Idols in real life (such as concerts or live events). The 'audience/fans' can then interact and participate in an affective interaction with their 'Idol' by sharing a common space. From this perspective, a no-live-audience concert would take away from the 'intimacy' that is normally constructed between

the 'Idol' and 'Fans' during a concert. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the market for live entertainment performances shrunk 80% in 2020 compared to the year before (PIA Research Institute, 2020)¹⁰. It is not hard to imagine the seriousness of the impact this had on the entertainment industry at the time since it also threatened the very livelihood of 'Idols' who relied on the support of their 'fans.' Therefore, ARASHI utilized various techniques during their no-live-audience concert to bolster the 'intimacy' for the 'Idol-fan' relationship with their 'fans.' This paper focuses mainly on the videos uploaded to ARASHI's official YouTube page as a research subject and takes the documentary DVD *This is ARASHI LIVE 2020.12.31*, which was recorded and released after their no-live-audience concert performance as a reference. An effort will be attempted to explain how Japanese Idols continue giving their 'audiences/fans' feelings of 'intimacy' and further shape their ideal images of group 'solidarity' despite restrictive circumstances.

3.1. "Meet Chance"

Japanese music fans (especially Idol fans) often refer to attending concerts as 参戦 (Sansen - meaning to join the battlefield); from the usage of this term, it is not hard to surmise that Japanese Idol fans do not consider attending a concert as something stationary but instead, an event that entails face-to-face interactions with those around them. By referring a concert to the likes of a battlefield, it can also be speculated that fans (to a certain degree) consider themselves in a place of competition with other fans and this competition is for the attention or interaction with their 'idol.' For 'fans,' going to a concert (参戦 Sansen) is not just an opportunity for them to see their 'Idols' in person but also 'to participate' in a space mutually constructed by the 'Idol' and their 'fans.' In fact, Chen and Obi(2021) have also pointed out that 'fans' who like 'Idols' of other countries are willing to spend a lot of time and money to overcome language and distance barriers. As such, '参戦 Sansen' is actually considered by many 'fans' as a prized and significant activity to elevate one's social standing and self-worth as a 'fan.'

One of the major difficulties of the no-live-audience concert is that it takes away the opportunity for 'fans' to actively participate in a real live concert. This risked causing 'fans' to again feel the harsh truth in the distance between themselves and their 'Idols' as they lost the feelings of 'intimacy.' Consequently, ARASHI orchestrated a feature called 'Meet Chance.'¹¹ By face value, it literally means that 'fans' who are not able to attend the concert in person still have the opportunity to 'meet' their 'Idols' despite being across the screen. Those 'fans' who receive the opportunity for the 'Meet' would have their image projected onto the big screen in the concert venue. Therefore, 'Fans' who are watching the performance on their screens would not only have their image projected onto the big screen but would also have the chance to make their way into the eyes of their 'Idols.'¹²

In order to promote the 'Meet Chance' feature, members of ARASHI made instructional videos that were then uploaded to their official YouTube account with statements such as: "It would also make us feel like the Audience is right there in the venue with us" (Sho Sakurai/Member of ARASHI) and "of course we will utilize any possible way to get close to our 'Fans'" (Jun Matsumoto/Member of ARASHI). During the concert, when various members saw their fans waving their 'Uchiwas' in support on the big screen, they happily moved to the front to point and wave at the 'Fan.' From this observation, it can be assumed that for the 'Idols,' meeting 'fans' is not just a marketing scheme to please their fans but a way for them to feel emotionally supported by their 'fans.' In other words, the action of 'Idol consumption' is not just one-sided, and 'Fans' also exist to support their 'Idols.' This is still true for 'Fans' when they cannot physically or verbally initiate direct interactions (although Japanese 'Fans' who attend a physical concert tend to show their unwavering support with 'Uchiwas' rather than their voices). 'Meet Chance' worked as the medium that transformed the 'invisible support' of 'Fans' into something visually tangible. In a concert with no physical 'fans,' the feature amplified the presence of 'fans' to an unexpected level.

3.2. "Projected fan messages"

ARASHI also experimented with projecting fan messages onto the ceiling of the Tokyo Dome when the concert was coming to an end. The messages were on the ceiling and the big screens on the stage. That is to say, 'fan' messages were not only delivered to their 'Idols' but also spread across the 'fan community.' The previous section mentioned the uses of the 'Uchiwa.' In essence, when Japanese idol fans attend a concert, they often bring along 'Uchiwas' that carry messages (or the name of the Idol they supported). These messages are meant to be used facing the 'Idols,' and sometimes, if the messages carry requests (such as 'please wave at me'), they might get an immediate response from their 'Idol.' This means that despite being unable to verbally communicate during a concert, 'Idols' and their 'fans' can still maintain their 'communication' through the medium of 'Uchiwas' to connect on an 'intimate' 'one-on-one' basis. The message feature that was used in the ARASHI concert made the expected two-way communication possible even in unusual circumstances. Most notably, even though generally during a concert, one-on-one communications with a specific member is more common. During the no-live-audience concert, messages were predominately directed to the group as a whole (e.g., I Love ARASHI or Thank you ARASHI for 21 years of companionship). Obviously, 'fans' who are not restricted by time and space would expand their sights to the whole group, favoring more heavily on the notions of 'group/community.' Also, from the collected messages, it was plain to see their love and gratitude for their 'Idols.' The basis for the love and gratitude the 'fans' feel for their 'Idols' is from their own private affections.

On the other hand, when 'fans' leave their messages to have them broadcasted in real-time, it is essentially a real-time 'sharing' of their most immediate emotions. If it was a traditional concert, 'fans' most likely would not have been able to understand the

emotions of the other 'fans' and would be forced to perceive the mood of the venue by guesswork. However, with the message feature at ARASHI's no-live-audience concert, 'Fans' were able to 'talk' with each other and felt as one when a two-way communication was formed. From the establishment of 'talks' between 'Fan-Idol' and 'Fan-Fan,' a tighter-knit three-way 'Network' is created.

4. Conclusion

In the last section, a case study was done on a no-live-audience concert by the Japanese Idol group ARASHI. It was observed that when Japanese Idol 'audiences/fans' are consuming the 'cultural product' of 'Idols,' they would not just act in an 'observation' or 'consumer' capacity but instead actively 'participate' and 'shape' their own relationship with the 'Idol.' It is worth noticing that if we consider 'Idols' to be entertainers, they should only be expected to provide entertainment when their services are required. However, from the case study, we can see that through 'Meet Chance' the 'Fans' were able to reinforce their existence to the 'Idols' and, alongside the 'Projected fan messages' granted the 'Idols' the emotional support that the 'Fans' were projecting towards them. In other words, the relationship between 'Idols' and their 'Fans' is not limited to the common understanding of what a 'performer-audience' relationship would be. 'Fans' would proactively seek out methods to provide 'care' to the 'Idols' while at the same time overriding the predisposition of 'distance' between the 'Idol' and 'Fan' and transforming the relationship into one of mutual support and 'intimacy.'

Furthermore, in this relationship between Japanese idols and their 'audiences/fans,' the 'audiences/fans' take more initiative. For a long time already Japanese society has projected their ideal aspirations for their younger generation and the community onto 'Idols.' Furthermore, the definition of 'Idols' for all intents and purposes encompasses a lot of contradicting concepts (e.g., as objects of longing, 'Idols' must be out of reach yet with a sense of intimacy). The 'Idols' symbol contains so much meaning because of the imaginative space deliberately created by 'Idols' and their 'audiences/fans' for each 'individual. In this space, every 'audience/fan' can enjoy an all-encompassing 'initiative' that only belongs to them, they can freely adjust the 'distance' that is between them and their 'Idol,' and they can bestow any implications they so choose to their 'Idols.'

This paper focused on the 'initiative' and 'individuality' of 'fans' and an investigation on how an individual's 'affections' affect their willingness to participate in 'fan activities.' In our quest to comprehend the inner workings of 'fans,' we should not deny the fact that with the proper usage of 'fans' and their 'affections,' a well-constructed product (Idols) can magnify its product sales with affective communication and mutual support. Regarding this point, another paper will attempt to further its investigation on the topic.

Notes

- [1] See 「YOASOBI、「アイドル」が米ビルボード・グローバル・チャート"Global Excl. U.S."で首位獲得」 Billboard Japan,2023/6/6, https://www.billboard-japan.com/d_news/detail/126098 access on 2023/10/19
- [2] See 「【ビルボード】YOASOBI「アイドル」グローバル・ジャパン・ソングス4週連続首位 Eve「廻廻奇譚」初のトップ10入り／フランスでセカオワ初登場」 Billboard Japan,2023/10/5, https://www.billboard-japan.com/d_news/detail/130435 access on 2023/10/19 access on 2023/10/19
- [3] In August 2022, Japan's public broadcasting station NHK aired a T.V. drama titled "アイドルIDOL" based on the story of Matsuko Ashita.
- [4] SMAP, a Japanese boy band, was formed in 1988 and debuted in 1991. However, the group had a difficult start due to the decline of the Japanese idol industry during that time. SMAP was originally six members, but Katsuyuki Mori left in 1996, leaving them with five members. They performed together until disbanding in 2016.
- [5] Hikaru Genji was active from the second half of the 1980s to the early 1990s, coinciding with when the idol industry was going through a downturn. Therefore, they played a significant role in the final peak of the idol era.
- [6] On October 17, 2023, Johnny & Associates, Inc. changed its name to SMILE-UP, Inc.
- [7] For example, very few K-pop idol groups have been active for more than seven years.
- [8] According to Shuto(2022), "immaturity" is a common characteristic of Japanese idol culture and popular music throughout the ages.
- [9] Japan has experienced several major disasters, including the sarin gas attack on the subway in 1995 and two significant earthquakes in 1995 and 2011. https://corporate.pia.jp/news/detail_live_enta_20201027.html access on 2023/10/1.
- [10] Fans who pre-register and win a lottery will have the opportunity to "meet" their favourite stars in real-time through monitors set up at the live venue.
- [11] It has been observed that fans, even when watching online concerts from their private spaces, still hold onto idol merchandise and "Uchiwa (Paper fan)" with their favorite Idol's name or a message of love on it. It seems as though they are still following the usual routine of going "directly" to the venue to attend the concert.

References

- [1] Chikako,O. (2012). オンナらしさ入門 (笑) . イースト・プレス.
- [2] Fabienne, D. (2003). Male Bonding and Female Pleasure: Refining Masculinity in Japanese Popular Cultural Texts. POPULAR COMMUNICATION, 1(2), 73–88.
- [3] Ichen, C. (2014). 台湾ジャニーズファン研究. 青弓社.
- [4] Ichen, C. & Yuko, O. (2021). 不只是鍵盤追星—傑尼斯偶像網路時代下的台日粉絲活動比較與粉絲的自我價值建構. 文化研究季刊, (176), 73-91.
- [5] Izumi,T.(2004).ポピュラー文化の危機—ジャニーズファンは"遊べているのか"
- [6] Izumi,T.(2012). 『観察者化』するファン—流動化社会への適応形態として: ネットが創る新しい社会. アド・スタディーズ, 40,28-33. http://www.yhmf.jp/pdf/activity/adstudies/vol_40_01_05.pdf

- [7] Kenji,N. (2017). アイドル／メディア論講義. 東京大学出版会.
- [8] Keisuke,S. (2014). 幻の近代アイドル史:明治・大正・昭和の大衆芸能盛衰記. 彩流社.
- [9] Nobuhiko,B. 視覚イメージとしてのアイドル論——「見ること」によって呼び出される集合的記憶—甲南女子大学研究紀要 I (56) ,47-56.
- [10] Nobuko,O. (2022). 元祖アイドル「明日待子」がいた時代——ムーラン・ルージュ新宿座と仲間たち——. 扶桑社.
- [11] Osamu,S. (2014). 隣の嵐くん~カリスマなき時代の偶像. サイゾー.
- [12] Shoichi,O. (2011). アイドル進化論—南沙織から初音ミク、AKB48まで. 筑摩書房.
- [13] Takashi,K. (2014). 「アイドル」の読み方: 混乱する「語り」を問う. 青弓社.
- [14] Yoshiki,S.(2022). 「未熟さ」の系譜—宝塚からジャニーズまで—. 新潮社.