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The Relationship Between Celebrity Worship and Intimate Relationship Expectations in Adolescents

Xiaorui Jia

Beijing Haidian International School, Beijing, China
jiaxiaorui225@163.com

Abstract. This study discusses the relationship between celebrity worship and adolescents' expectations of romantic relationships. Through a questionnaire survey of 84 participants aged 14 to 35, the research found that there is a significant positive correlation between the degree of celebrity worship and idealized romantic expectations ($r = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$). Further analysis showed that multiple subdimensions of celebrity worship (such as behavioral frequency, idol knowledge, emotional projection, relationship fantasy, and idol identification) were all related to expectations of romantic relationships. However, due to the high correlation among these dimensions, the independent predictive effect of a single dimension could not be identified. In addition, the results also indicated that females were more active in idol-related behaviors than males. Overall, this study reveals that immersive celebrity worship may reinforce adolescents' idealized expectations of love and have a potential impact on the establishment of their real-life intimate relationships.

Keywords: Celebrity Worship, Adolescents, Romantic Relationship Expectations, Emotional Projection

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage marked by identity exploration, emotional growth and increasing concern for interpersonal relationships. As social media platforms have become part of an individual's daily life, teenagers' attentions are captured by the online personas of celebrities and idols. Studies indicate that, compared with other age groups, adolescents are more susceptible to idolization and more likely to spend significant time participating in fan activities [1,2]. Under this process, many of them develop parasocial relationships, in which they become one-sidedly, emotionally attached to the celebrities [3]. Recent study found that about 61% of teenagers considered a particular celebrity to be an "intimate partner" or "soulmate" [4].

Celebrity worship, or idolatry, is a complex psychological and social phenomenon that involves emotional projection, identity reinforcement, and sometimes escape from reality [5]. Hartmann [6] pointed out that such parasocial bonds with celebrities may may serve as an imaginary intimate relationship and substitute for real-life intimacy, especially when experiencing relational instability or emotional neglect. In these cases, idols become symbols of unconditional acceptance. Adolescents can then build this "stable but impractical" relationship with an idol to reduce loneliness and emotional distress [4].

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More importantly, adolescents are in the process of forming expectations about romantic and intimate relationships. These are strongly influenced by early familial upbringings, emotional experiences, and social environments. Research indicates that teenagers are particularly prone to idealizing romantic relationships, often seeing them as flawless and intensely gratifying [7]. When they lack high-quality interactions with peers, they may project their unrealistic expectations onto media-driven figures, such as a celebrity or an idol. In this way, celebrity worship may reinforce their distorted perceptions of romantic relationships. These distorted views often manifest as an excessive emphasis on finding a "perfect" partner, and an insatiable need for constant emotional validation and safety. Such expectations are usually incompatible with the complexities of genuine intimacy, which inevitably involves conflicts and compromises. If teenagers remain in these idealized parasocial relationship framework, they may find it increasingly difficult to form healthy, reciprocal relationship in real life.

The current study seeks to explore how various degrees of celebrity worship influence adolescents' expectations of intimate relationships. Although previous research has addressed the psychological mechanisms of such parasocial relationships, most studies focus on adult populations or the general influence of media. The literature regarding how these dynamics affect teenagers remains scarce. Specifically, it is hypothesized that higher levels of celebrity worship are associated with more idealized and potentially unrealistic romantic expectations. Furthermore, it is expected that the emotional projection component of idolatry will be positively correlated with expectations of perfect emotional security and unconditional acceptance in a romantic partner. By examining this relationship, the present study aims to provide insights into how media-driven attachments might shape, or even distort, adolescents' real-life romantic expectations.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

A total of 202 individuals initially participated in the study through an online survey distributed via the platform "Wenjuanxing". The questionnaire included 34 items, described in detail below. To ensure the quality and relevance of responses, several exclusion criteria were applied: participants were removed 1) if they were younger than 14 or older than 35, 2) if they completed the survey in less than 70 seconds, 3) if they lacked experience engaging with or following idols, or 4) if their answers were identical across all items. After applying these criteria, the final sample consisted of 84 participants between the ages of 14 and 35 (M = 19.4, SD = 5.4), of whom 57 (67.9%) identified as female.

2.2. Study design

Participants completed a structured 34-item questionnaire, which was divided into three sections: demographics, expectations about romantic relationships, and patterns of celebrity worship. The survey was administered in Mandarin. The demographic section included three questions capturing age, gender, and prior experience with idol-following or celebrity worship.

To assess participants' romantic expectations, a modified version of the Romantic Relationship Expectations Scale was employed (see Appendix A, https://www.wjx.cn/vm/rFrefwK.aspx#). From the original instrument, ten items were selected, with one excluded due to redundancy and lack of contextual relevance. Respondents rated their agreement with each statement using a five-point Likert scale: 1 = totally disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = totally agree. An

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average score across all items was calculated for each participant, with higher scores indicating more idealized or elevated expectations in romantic relationships. Scores ranged from 1.2 to 5 (M = 4.3, SD = 0.7), indicating generally high expectations within the sample.

To measure the extent and nature of celebrity worship, items were adapted from two established instruments: the College Student Celebrity Worship Scale (CSCWS; https://www.wjx.cn/xz/247454333.aspx) and the Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS; [8]. From the CSCWS, five items were selected, with three assessing the frequency of idol-related behaviors and two evaluating the extent of knowledge participants had about their idols. The CAS contributed 16 items, organized into four subdimensions: emotional projection (four items), relationship fantasy (four items), idol identification (four items), and daily engagement with idol-related entertainment and social information (four items). This resulted in a total of 21 items assessing various aspects of celebrity worship (see Appendix B). As with the previous section, participants rated each statement on the same five-point Likert scale. Overall scores for celebrity worship were computed by averaging responses across all 21 items. Additionally, mean scores for each of the six subdimensions were calculated to explore specific behavioral and emotional patterns. The total celebrity worship scores ranged from 1.43 to 4.86 (M = 3.2, SD = 0.6). Subscale scores were as follows: behavioral frequency (range: 1 to 5, M = 3.3, SD = 1.0), idol knowledge (range: 1 to 5, M = 3.2, SD = 0.9), emotional projection (range: 1 to 5, M = 3.3, SD = 1.0), relationship fantasy (range: 1– to, M = 2.9, SD = 0.9), idol identification (range: 1.25 to 4.75, M = 3.5, SD = 0.6), and entertainment/social engagement (range: 1.5– to, M = 3.2, SD = 0.5).

2.3. Statistical analysis

All data analyses were carried out using R (base package). To test the main hypothesis, a Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationship between romantic relationship expectations and overall celebrity worship. A multiple regression analysis was then performed to see how each specific dimension of celebrity worship (such as emotional projection or relationship fantasy) contributed to predicting romantic expectations. To further explore the data, a correlation matrix was created to look at how the different celebrity worship dimensions were related to one another, and with romantic expectation.

In addition to the main analyses, exploratory tests were conducted to examine the potential effects of age and gender. Pearson correlations were used to assess the relationship between age and both romantic relationship expectations and the dimensions of celebrity worship. Independent two-sample t-tests were performed to compare male and female participants on these same variables.

3. Results

3.1. Relationship between romantic relationship expectation and celebrity worship

A Pearson correlation analysis showed a significant positive association between romantic relationship expectations and overall celebrity worship ($r(82) = 0.39$, $p < .001$) (see Figure 1 for the regression line). However, when a multiple linear regression was conducted to examine the predictive power of each individual subdimension of celebrity worship, no significant effects were found ($p > .10$). This lack of significance may be due to multicollinearity among the subdimensions. To further explore this possibility, a correlation matrix was generated to examine the relationships between the individual dimensions of celebrity worship and their respective correlations with romantic relationship expectations.

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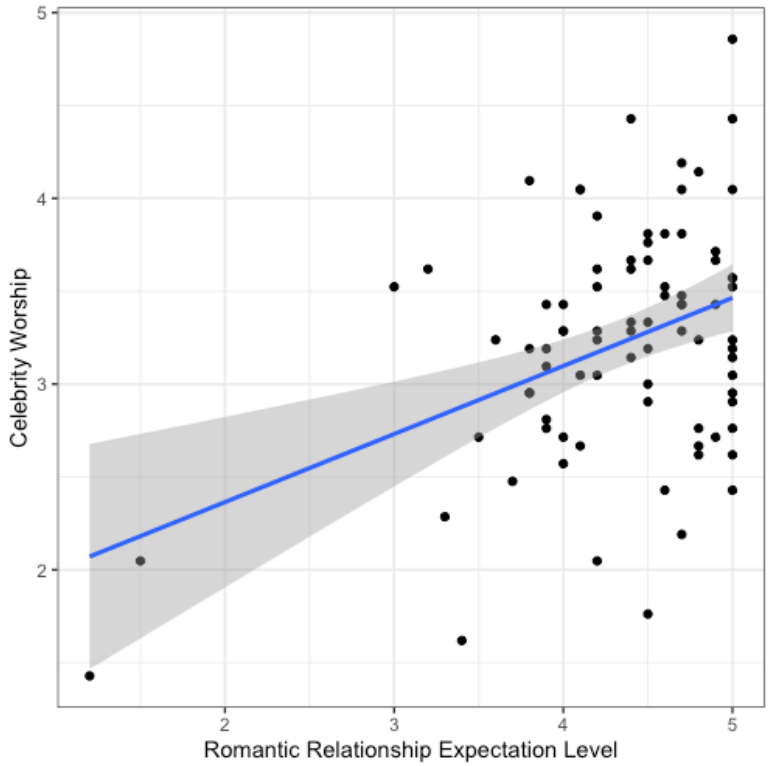

Figure 1. Linear relationship between romantic relationship and overall celebrity worship

3.2. Influence between subdimensions of celebrity worship and on romantic expectation

To further explore the potential issue of multicollinearity observed in the multiple regression analysis, additional Pearson correlation tests were conducted. These analyses also aimed to examine how each subdimension of celebrity worship individually related to romantic relationship expectations. A summary of the results is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Correlation matrix between celebrity worship dimensions and romantic expectation

	Romantic Relationship	Behavior Frequency	Level of Knowledge	Emotional Projection	Relationship Fantasy	Idol Identification	Entertainment Engagement
Romantic Relationship							
Behavior Frequency	0.33**						
Level of Knowledge	0.32**	0.73***					
Emotional Projection	0.34**	0.77***	0.75***				
Relationship Fantasy	0.25**	0.64***	0.67***	0.77***			
Idol Identification	0.35***	0.55***	0.48***	0.55***	0.56***		

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Table 1. (continued)

Entertainment Engagement	0.21	0.09	0.05	0.08	0.04	0.16

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

The correlation analysis revealed strong interrelationships among five of the six celebrity worship subdimensions, suggesting potential multicollinearity. The only exception was the social/entertainment engagement subdimension, which did not show significant correlations with the others ($p > .05$). Specifically, behavioral frequency was highly correlated with idol knowledge ($r(82) = 0.73$, $p < .001$), emotional projection ($r(82) = 0.77$, $p < .001$), relationship fantasy ($r(82) = 0.64$, $p < .001$), and idol identification ($r(82) = 0.55$, $p < .001$).

Similarly, idol knowledge demonstrated strong positive associations with emotional projection ($r(82) = 0.75$, $p < .001$), relationship fantasy ($r(82) = 0.67$, $p < .001$), and idol identification ($r(82) = 0.48$, $p < .001$). Emotional projection was also significantly linked with relationship fantasy ($r(82) = 0.77$, $p < .001$) and idol identification ($r(82) = 0.55$, $p < .001$), while relationship fantasy was moderately correlated with idol identification ($r(82) = 0.56$, $p < .001$). These high intercorrelations suggest that many of these dimensions may overlap conceptually or behaviorally in how individuals engage with celebrity figures.

In relation to the primary research question, further analysis showed that romantic relationship expectations were significantly and positively associated with several celebrity worship dimensions. Notably, significant correlations emerged with behavioral frequency ($r(82) = 0.33$, $p = .002$), idol knowledge ($r(82) = 0.32$, $p = .003$), emotional projection ($r(82) = 0.34$, $p = .001$), relationship fantasy ($r(82) = 0.25$, $p = .025$), and idol identification ($r(82) = 0.35$, $p = .001$). These findings suggest that adolescents who are more emotionally and behaviorally engaged in celebrity worship tend to hold more idealized views of romantic relationships.

3.3. Influence of age and gender on celebrity worship and romantic expectations

No significant relationship was found between age and either celebrity worship or romantic relationship expectations, as all correlations were nonsignificant ($p > .20$). This suggests that within the sampled age range (14–35), individual differences in age did not meaningfully influence levels of idol engagement or romantic ideals.

However, a gender-based comparison revealed notable differences. An independent two-sample t-test showed that male participants reported significantly lower levels of engagement in idol-related behaviors (i.e., behavior frequency) compared to female participants ($t(82) = –2.46$, $p = .016$). This result aligns with prior findings suggesting that females may be more emotionally and behaviorally involved in celebrity worship, potentially reflecting gendered patterns in emotional expression or media consumption during adolescence and young adulthood [9].

4. Disucssion

The current study attempted to investigate the association between celebrity worship and romantic expectations. Consistent with our hypothesis, there was a moderate level of positive association between general celebrity worship and idealized romantic expectations. This suggests that individuals who are more invested in celebrity or idol worship tend to have more idealistic conceptions of romantic relationships, possibly owing to the emotionally safe, one-sided nature of parasocial relationships. Teenagers who devote themselves to celebrity chasing and fantasize an

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intimate relationship with celebrities always have more ideal expectations that place greater emphasis on emotional safety and unconditional acceptance. This result is consistent with the theory that regards parasocial relationships as "practice" relationships or emotional templates: when celebrities act as a safe and unforced emotional resource, the ideal standard will be used as a reference for realistic interpersonal relationships [3].

Bivariate analyses also indicated that romantic expectations were significantly associated with several subdimensions of celebrity worship, including behavioral frequency, level of idol knowledge, emotional projection, relationship fantasy, and idol identification. Notably, social/entertainment engagement dimension did not significantly correlate with others, indicating a difference between passive celebrity interest (e.g., for entertainment) and high emotional arousal. This suggests that it is the intense and immersive forms of celebrity worship, such as projection, fantasy, and identification, that will mostly likely influence relationship expectations, rather than casual or entertainment-driven fan behaviors.

Although many subdimensions were significantly correlated with romantic expectations individually, multiple regression did not identify that any single subdimension was a unique predictor. This is likely due to multicollinearity, as the subscales were strongly associated with one another. In other words, adolescents who are highly engaged in celebrity worship tend to engage in many overlapping ways. Because of this high overlap, it becomes difficult to identify the specific dimensions that are responsible for the effect.

The study also found that female participants reported more idol-related behaviors compared to males, a pattern consistent with previous research on gendered fan culture and emotional expressiveness [10]. However, these differences were limited to frequency of engagement and did not extend to romantic expectations. This suggests that females would be more actively engaged in celebrity-related pursuits, but both genders internalize romantic idealizations to the same extent when emotionally engaged.

These findings have several implications for youth workers, counselors, and teachers. Since adolescents' emotional development is impacted strongly by media and parasocial relationships, it is essential that students engage critically in thinking about the nature of their celebrity attachment and form realistic standards for real-life close relationships.

5. Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations. The sample was relatively small and drawn from a convenience population, which limited generalizability. In addition, the cross-sectional design prevents any conclusions about causality. Larger and more heterogeneous samples, or longitudinal designs in subsequent research could help explore further how parasocial relationships develop over time and how they may interact with other developmental factors, such as attachment style or peer dynamics.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the study reveals that there is a noticeable correlation between intense celebrity worship and more idealized romantic expectations in adolescence. However, this association is shaped by multiple overlapping behaviors and emotional processes. While casual celebrity interest appears noninfluential, emotionally immersive and fantasy-driven idol worship may affect how adolescents conceptualize intimacy and partnership. By addressing this in practice and research, educators and mental health workers can contribute actively towards redirecting teenagers to more realistic and healthier expectations within their interpersonal relationships.

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Appendix

Appendix A

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I expect the emotional bond in an intimate relationship to deepen over time.					
2. I hope to build an unbreakable emotional connection with my partner that endures all hardships.					
3. I long to feel unconditional love and acceptance in a relationship, where my partner embraces everything about me.					
4. I expect frequent and deep communication with my partner, where we openly share thoughts, feelings, and dreams.					
5. In times of conflict, I hope we resolve issues calmly and rationally rather than through arguments or silent treatment.					
6. I expect my partner to make a clear commitment to the relationship, giving me a sense of security and stability.					
7. I believe that in a long-term intimate relationship, both partners should support each other and grow together.					
8. I desire my partner to surprise me occasionally with small gestures, such as flowers or special dinners, to make life more romantic.					

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9. I hope we can share romantic moments together, such as watching the sunrise or sunset, or walking on the beach.					
10. I expect my partner to create memorable experiences for special occasions, like birthdays and anniversaries.					

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. When something good or bad happens to my favorite celebrity, I feel as though it's happening to me.					
2. My idol’s success feels like my own success.					
3. I deeply understand and resonate with the messages and emotions conveyed by my idol.					
4. I feel uncomfortable when friends or family criticize or dislike the celebrity I follow.					
5. If I met my idol, they would recognize me as their most loyal fan.					
6. I imagine that if my idol knew me, we would be great friends or even partners.					
7. I believe my idol is unique and fulfills my deepest emotional needs.					
8. I follow my idol mainly as a way to temporarily escape from life’s troubles.					
9. If my idol is misunderstood or treated unfairly, I would participate in defending them.					
10. If my idol is involved in a scandal or rumor, I’m unwilling to believe it.					
11. To help my idol gain more support, I’m willing to go beyond my personal limits.					
12. I often feel frustrated when others don’t understand my admiration for my idol.					
13. I pay close attention to the personal details of my idol’s life.					
14. Watching, reading, or listening to anything related to my idol brings me great joy.					
15. I enjoy chatting with others who share the same admiration for my idol.					
16. When I’m in a group, I like listening to conversations about my idol.					

How frequently do you engage in the following behaviors?

	Very Frequently	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
17. How often do you engage with celebrity-related content (such as watching/listening to their work, voting, promoting, or supporting them) on online platforms (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, Weibo, YouTube)?					
18. How frequently do you spend money on celebrity-related products (albums, merchandise, clothing, etc.) or celebration projects (birthday support, performance events)?					

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19. How often do you share or browse celebrity-related content with your friends?					

To what extent do you know the following?

	Not at All	Slightly	Somewhat	Quite Well	Completely
20. How well do you know your idol's life (e.g., family background, hobbies) and career (e.g., work, awards, events)?					
21. How actively do you seek information when your idol releases new work or major updates in life or career?					

Appendix B

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
11. I desire my partner to surprise me occasionally with small gestures, such as flowers or special dinners, to make life more romantic.					
12. I hope we can share romantic moments together, such as watching the sunrise or sunset, or walking on the beach.					
13. I expect my partner to create memorable experiences for special occasions, like birthdays and anniversaries.					

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
14. When something good or bad happens to my favorite celebrity, I feel as though it's happening to me.					
15. My idol's success feels like my own success.					
16. I deeply understand and resonate with the messages and emotions conveyed by my idol.					
17. I feel uncomfortable when friends or family criticize or dislike the celebrity I follow.					
18. If I met my idol, they would recognize me as their most loyal fan.					
19. I imagine that if my idol knew me, we would be great friends or even partners.					
20. I believe my idol is unique and fulfills my deepest emotional needs.					
21. I follow my idol mainly as a way to temporarily escape from life's troubles.					
22. If my idol is misunderstood or treated unfairly, I would participate in defending them.					
23. If my idol is involved in a scandal or rumor, I'm unwilling to believe it.					
24. To help my idol gain more support, I'm willing to go beyond my personal limits.					
25. I often feel frustrated when others don't understand my admiration for my idol.					

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26. I pay close attention to the personal details of my idol's life.					
27. Watching, reading, or listening to anything related to my idol brings me great joy.					
28. I enjoy chatting with others who share the same admiration for my idol.					
29. When I'm in a group, I like listening to conversations about my idol.					

How frequently do you engage in the following behaviors?

	Very Frequently	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
30. How often do you engage with celebrity-related content (such as watching/listening to their work, voting, promoting, or supporting them) on online platforms (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, Weibo, YouTube)?					
31. How frequently do you spend money on celebrity-related products (albums, merchandise, clothing, etc.) or celebration projects (birthday support, performance events)?					
32. How often do you share or browse celebrity-related content with your friends?					

To what extent do you know the following?

	Not at All	Slightly	Somewhat	Quite Well	Completely
33. How well do you know your idol's life (e.g., family background, hobbies) and career (e.g., work, awards, events)?					
34. How actively do you seek information when your idol releases new work or major updates in life or career?					