

Portrait of Two-Sided Lives: The Economics behind Underground Idols

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Abstract: In recent years, with the continuous integration of foreign cultural trends, large-scale organized support systems have spread to China and gained recognition among domestic fans. Underground idol culture has become popular among young people, providing Generation Z with an outlet for stress relief and emotional fulfillment. This has spurred a related fan economy, emerging as a significant force in the market economy. This paper examines the dual nature of the underground idol economy by analyzing fans' emotional projections onto idols and the resulting economic behaviors. Through the lenses of behavioral economics and gender economics, it explores the motivations behind fan spending. Based on current trends and impacts, it proposes strategies for sustainable development of the underground idol economy.

Keywords: underground idols; fan economy; emotional projection; value; countermeasures

1. Introduction

With the rise of popular culture and evolving media landscapes, star-chasing has become commonplace. Fan activities demonstrate high initiative and organization, particularly online. In December 2019, People's Daily featured "fan economy" in its editorial section, marking its entry into public discourse as an influential market force[1]. The fan economy leverages "traffic" (attention) and converts it into sales, evident in brands' competition for celebrity endorsements. Alongside mainstream idols, underground idols — fueled by imported fan cultures — have become a new mode of engagement for Generation Z. This study analyzes the dual dynamics of this idol economy.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Underground Idols

Underground idols are a distinct Japanese cultural phenomenon. Post-Meiji Restoration, community theater diversified, remaining a key entertainment form despite television and internet proliferation. These idols rely on local theater fanbases for viability. Typically, they perform in community theaters, avoid mainstream media, and comprise teens/twenties trainees from small agencies or working independently. Lacking promotional resources or professional training, many are part-time workers (e.g., students, programmers) who rehearse 10–20 hours weekly but earn only ¥100–300 per performance after expenses. Venues include small live houses, bars, and streets — often underground spaces — hence the name.

In 2005, Yasushi Akimoto formed AKB48 (selecting 24 members from 7,500+ applicants); unsuccessful candidates returned to community theaters to form independent groups. In China, Lunar (2011) was Shanghai's earliest underground group, followed by Baidu Tieba-originated teams like "Shenlong Sister Group" and "Idol School." Post-2023, as live performances resumed, underground idols gained traction[2]. Fans now flock to malls, theaters, and live houses to support idols, drawn by characteristics like high interactivity, realism, affordability, and a participatory "cultivation" ethos[3-5]. However, challenges include unstable careers, copyright disputes, diverse audiences, and regulatory gaps. Underground idols represent a cultural product for modern stress relief, where aspirations are projected onto idols.

2.2 Fan Economy

The fan economy diverges from traditional models: instead of producers dictating goods, it leverages fan culture. Capital exploits fans' emotional/psychological states to drive consumption, creating a symbiotic relationship where the economy fuels cultural expansion. Per Ye Kai's Fan Economy, it is "a business model based on fan participation, social capital, and trust relationships."

China's fan economy emerged later than the West's. The 1990s "Korean Wave" attracted early adopters, but 2004's Super Girl talent show marked its domestic launch[6]. It features diverse stakeholders, fluid business models, and cross-domain integration. Brands use emotional/symbolic ties to fans for economic and social gains. However, conceptual ambiguity persists — either overextending "fans" to include frequent consumers or reducing them to marketing targets.

Thus, the fan economy is defined as: A capital-guided system where fans actively engage with and disseminate content

related to their idols[7], driving sustained direct/indirect consumption to generate economic value.

3. Emotional Projection and Economic Dynamics in Underground Idol Culture

Underground idols are deeply intertwined with their fans through a complex interplay of emotional labor, economic motivations, and systemic structures. This dynamic not only shapes their public personas but also drives fan behavior, creating a cycle where emotions are both a currency and a product[8-9].

3.1 Emotional Projection: Crafting Connections Through Labor

Underground idols engage in extensive emotional labor, carefully constructing personas to resonate with fans. In digital spaces, they become consumable symbols, each carrying a distinct appeal that sets them apart. Historically, idol culture has often fixated on physical appearance, overshadowing the emotional work critical to their survival—especially for underground idols, who rely heavily on fan support to grow[10]. This labor takes two primary forms: surface acting and deep acting.

Surface acting, as defined by Hochschild (1983), involves adjusting expressions, tones, and language to create a persona that aligns with fan expectations while differentiating the idol from peers[11]. To sustain this image, idols practice what Foucault termed "self-technology," disciplining their bodies and minds offline to maintain an illusion of perfection. This labor is not arbitrary but circumscribed by capital-driven demands, as their public image becomes a commodity shaped by market forces.

Deep acting, by contrast, is aimed at retaining fans through more intimate bonds[12]. Idols share personal anecdotes to simulate friendship, monitor and react to fan activity online, and disclose curated snippets of their private lives to keep engagement high. The blurring of online and offline boundaries demands constant self-regulation, yet this internalized emotional skill also allows strategic expression of negativity — for example, to elicit sympathy or strengthen fan loyalty. Importantly, all this labor centers on fans, embedding both idols and supporters in a cycle of value extraction driven by capital[13-14].

3.2 Economic Motivations: The Invisible Hand of Emotional Investment

Fan consumption may seem voluntary, but it is guided by an "invisible hand" that links emotional investment to spending[15]. This dynamic is rooted in the evolution of idols themselves: as Lowenthal (1961) observed, idols have shifted from "production idols," admired for tangible achievements, to "consumption idols," packaged primarily for their appeal[16]. Underground idol industries, drawing from Japanese and Korean models, operate as "idol factories," training young talents to fit this consumable mold[17]. These factories often cede partial control to fans, framing spending as a way to "determine" an idol's success — whether through buying votes or merchandise — turning affection into purchasing power that fills both the industry's coffers and fans' personal voids.

Monetizing fan emotions relies on symbolic value rather than the use-value of traditional commodities. Merchants leverage this through tiered sales targets, where reaching purchase milestones unlocks exclusive perks like photo cards, and paywalled platforms that promise "closer ties" in exchange for stronger spending[18]. This system, where fan spending directly dictates an idol's perceived value, intensifies consumption, making it a cornerstone of the industry's economics[19-20].

3.3 Motivations Behind Fan Behavior: Behavioral and Gender Perspectives

Fan spending is shaped by psychological and gendered dynamics. From a behavioral economics lens, reference dependence drives fans to prioritize underground idol events, as tickets often cost less than a third of mainstream shows, creating a perception of relative value[21]. Status quo bias leads fans to overspend even amid income changes to maintain their support habits, while mental accounting (Thaler, 1985) causes them to segregate "idol spending" into a separate category—often prioritizing it over other "unnecessary" expenses.

Gender economics further complicates this landscape[22]. Female fans often consume male idols' "masculinity" as a cultural symbol, with merchandise serving as emotional proxies. They also act as "productive consumers," providing free labor through data generation and promotion that enhances the idol's commodity value. Conversely, male fans of female idols may face stigma, dismissed as "appearance-driven," while female idols often attract high-value female consumers focused on merchandise and intimate interactions.

3.4 Trends, Challenges, and Pathways to Sustainability

The underground idol industry faces significant challenges. Short career spans and aging fan bases threaten retention, with frequent performances offering only a temporary solution[23]. Artistic development is often sidelined by a focus on fan interactions like handshake events, leading to lip-syncing and derivative content that limits mainstream appeal. Post-fame scandals are also common, fueled by intense career pressures.

Operational issues compound these problems: cultural mismatches leave local audiences confused by certain

performances, inconsistent discipline (with light penalties for rule-breaking to protect popularity) undermines management, and slow responses to fan feedback hinder growth[24]. Scalping, too, is rampant — limited venues allow scalpers to hoard tickets via bots, while lax enforcement of real-name policies inflates costs and discourages genuine fans.

To address these, sustainable strategies are needed. Fostering positive fan engagement through values-driven initiatives — such as idols sharing motivational stories or organizing charity events — and tech-enhanced interactions (VR/AR experiences, live streams) can deepen connections[25]. Enhancing idol professionalism via rigorous training in vocals, dance, and original music, alongside stylistic innovation, can boost artistic credibility. Standardizing operations with clear regulations on conduct, copyright, and fan interactions, paired with labor protections (fair pay, capped hours), will create stability. Finally, combatting scalping through AI monitoring, strict real-name verification, and cross-agency collaboration can ensure fair access.

4. Conclusion

In essence, the underground idol industry thrives on the delicate balance between emotional projection and economic gain. By addressing its challenges with intentional strategies, it can evolve into a more sustainable ecosystem that values both idols and fans beyond their roles in the cycle of consumption.

The underground idol economy has transcended entertainment to become a significant socio-economic force. To ensure longevity, stakeholders must: harness the internet's long-tail effect; deepen fan engagement; professionalize idols; standardize operations; and eradicate scalping. Innovations like monetized communication channels offer replicable models for broader entertainment industries.

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