

PERCEIVED AUTHENTICITY, PUBLIC PERSONA INCONSISTENCY, AND CURRENT FAN–IDOL RELATIONSHIP STATUS AMONG YOUNG FANS

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Abstract: Perceived inconsistency between an idol’s behavior and public persona raises questions about how young fans evaluate authenticity and adjust their relationships. This study examined perceived authenticity, perceived persona inconsistency, intermediate relationship states, and factors associated with current relationship status. An exploratory cross-sectional online survey study used convenience sampling and snowball recruitment. Of 125 responses, 100 met the screening criterion; most respondents were aged 16–17, and 73% identified as female. Respondents generally viewed the public persona as credible and connected to a real self while remaining more cautious about whether they truly knew the idol. Relational distancing—continuing to follow with reduced enthusiasm—was the most common status among those reporting perceived persona inconsistency. Strong support was reported by 31.8% of this group and 61.5% of those reporting no such experience; Fisher’s exact test indicated an association, $OR = 0.29$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.80], $p = .016$. After Holm correction, the most robust associations involved persona-rupture response, core attraction, relationship connection, and perceived authenticity. These exploratory findings cannot be generalized beyond this small cross-sectional sample.

Keywords: Perceived authenticity; Public persona; Parasocial relationship; Relational distancing; Idol fandom

1 INTRODUCTION

How do young fans differ in their relationship responses when they perceive a mismatch between an idol’s behavior and an established public persona? This question concerns how fans evaluate authenticity, interpret the identity presented by the idol, and reassess the fan–idol relationship.

In this study, the term *Idol* refers to a contemporary public performer whose career involves sustained image management, repeated media exposure, staged or platform-based interaction, and active fan participation. Contemporary idol culture may include, but is not limited to, K-pop-related forms of fandom. Fans encounter idols through performances, interviews, livestreams, social media, promotional materials, and fan communities. Across these settings, repeated self-presentation contributes to a recognizable public persona. Following Goffman, this presentation may be understood as organized for particular audiences without being assumed to be false [1]. The central question comes down to whether fans regard the persona as credible, coherent, and connected to what they believe to be the idol’s authentic self.

Relevant scholarship includes Chinese studies of fan communities, consumption, digital labor, and fan–celebrity relationships [2–4]. Celebrity and influencer research examines authenticity within mediated and commercial self-presentation [5–8]. Parasocial research addresses familiarity, attachment, and relational expectations [9–11], while trust-repair scholarship offers a limited comparative perspective on reassessment after perceived violations [12].

However, existing research offers less empirical evidence on adolescent fans’ divergent responses upon perceived persona inconsistency. To address this gap, this study employs an exploratory cross-sectional online survey to examine perceived authenticity, experiences of perceived persona inconsistency, and current fan–idol relationship status among adolescent fans. Particular attention was paid to fans’ intermediate states in which an idol was still followed but with reduced enthusiasm and an increased level of scrutiny. The study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: How do young fans evaluate the authenticity of an idol’s public persona?

RQ2: How does current relationship status differ between fans who have and have not experienced perceived inconsistency in an idol’s public persona?

RQ3: What intermediate relationship states appear after perceived persona inconsistency, and what scope remains for continued support or reconsideration?

RQ4: How are duration of following, spending amount, spending pressure, participation, and the exploratory composite dimensions associated with current fan–idol relationship status?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Chinese Fan Culture and Fan–Idol Relationships

Research on Chinese fan culture increasingly examines fandom as a socially organized practice rather than only an individual preference. Relationships with public figures may be shaped through online communities, collective participation, consumption, and digital labor. Repeated interaction and emotional exchange can strengthen group identification within online fan communities [3]. Fans may also act as consumers, organizers, distributors, and producers of media content rather than as passive audiences [2]. The fan–idol relationship is therefore situated within platform structures and community expectations.

Research on perceived fan–celebrity relationships further suggests that media contact, interaction, and treatment of fans may shape relationship perceptions [4]. This scholarship explains relationship formation and emotional connection, but focuses more on community and relationship building than adjustment after an idol’s public persona appears inconsistent.

2.2 Self-Presentation, Public Persona, and Mediated Authenticity

A public persona may be understood as a relatively stable public identity produced through repeated self-presentation. Goffman argued that individuals organize their conduct for particular settings and audiences and manage the impressions formed by others [1]. Applied to public figures, this account helps explain how performances, interviews, livestreams, and social media posts contribute to a recognizable persona. Selective presentation does not in itself establish that the persona is false; the relevant issue is whether audiences regard it as credible and coherent.

Research on social media celebrity practices has examined how authenticity is communicated under increased visibility. Direct address on Twitter may create impressions of personal communication and apparent access behind the public performance [7]. Celebrity authenticity has been defined as an audience judgment that a celebrity acts in accordance with a perceived true self, with stability and rarity as important antecedents [8]. Because this work concerns celebrities as human brands, it provides context rather than a direct model of idol fandom.

Influencer research further indicates that mediated authenticity is produced under commercial and platform constraints. Duffy and Hund described an “authenticity bind” in which creators may appear either excessively exposed or insufficiently genuine [6]. Audrezet et al. identified passionate and transparent authenticity in influencer–brand partnerships [5]. Although these settings differ from idol fandom, they show that audiences may evaluate authenticity without assuming that public communication is unplanned. Here, mediated authenticity provides theoretical background, whereas perceived authenticity refers to fans’ judgments that an idol’s public persona is credible, coherent, and connected to a real self.

2.3 Parasocial Relationships and Relationship Disruption

Horton and Wohl introduced parasocial interaction to describe the sense of intimacy that audiences may experience with media figures despite the absence of reciprocal personal contact [11]. Repeated exposure and direct address can contribute to familiarity and emotional significance. Over time, this experience may develop into a parasocial relationship involving expectations that extend beyond the evaluation of performances or products. In idol fandom, this perspective helps explain why apparent sincerity, consistency, and the treatment of fans may acquire relational meaning.

Research on parasocial breakup addresses relationship disruption more directly. Cohen developed a measure of anticipated reactions to losing access to a media figure [9], and later found that stronger parasocial relationships were associated with stronger anticipated breakup responses [10]. These studies mainly concerned television characters and termination of access, and cannot establish how idol fans respond to persona inconsistency while the idol remains active. They nevertheless suggest that changes involving a media figure may be experienced as relational loss rather than simply a change in entertainment preference. Parasocial breakup should therefore refer to substantial relationship termination rather than every decline in enthusiasm.

2.4 Trust Repair as a Limited Comparative Perspective

Trust-repair scholarship offers a comparative perspective on responses to inconsistency or perceived violation. In organizational settings, explanations, apologies, denials, compensation, responsibility judgments, and later conduct may shape how trust is reassessed [12]. This literature concerns organizational and interpersonal trust rather than parasocial fan relationships, and cannot show that an idol’s response will restore support or that fan–idol relationships follow an established repair process. Its relevance is limited to questions about responsibility, motive, future conduct, and the possibility of reassessment without full restoration.

2.5 Research Gap

Existing research explains fan communities, participation, parasocial relationships, mediated authenticity, relationship loss, and post-violation reassessment within their respective settings. Less is known about intermediate fan–idol

relationship states or differentiated responses after perceived persona inconsistency. This study addresses that gap through an exploratory analysis of young fans' authenticity judgments and current relationship status.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this study, public persona, perceived authenticity, and parasocial relationship were treated as connected analytical concepts rather than as a tested structural model. A public persona refers to the relatively stable identity presented across performances, interviews, social media, and other public settings. Goffman's account of self-presentation provides a lens through which such an identity may be understood as organized for particular audiences [1]. Selective presentation does not necessarily mean that the persona is false. Fans may instead evaluate whether public performances remain credible, coherent, and connected to what they understand as the idol's real self. Perceived authenticity therefore refers to the fan's subjective evaluation of the public persona, not direct knowledge of the idol's private identity.

Parasocial relationship theory provides a second lens for considering why these evaluations may have relational significance [11]. Repeated media exposure and continued fan participation may support familiarity, attachment, and expectations concerning consistency or sincerity. When an idol's behavior is perceived as inconsistent with an established public persona, the experience may be associated with a reassessment of both authenticity and the current fan-idol relationship. This framework does not assume that all fans respond in the same way or that relationship change follows a fixed sequence.

The term *authenticity within acknowledged boundaries* is used here as a working interpretation. It describes the possibility that fans may recognize that an idol's public self is selectively presented and professionally managed while continuing to expect credible and consistent elements. From this perspective, a perceived inconsistency may become important when it appears to cross previously accepted boundaries, although this process was not directly tested in the present study.

Relational distancing is used as an interpretive concept corresponding to the Q3 category "still followed but with reduced enthusiasm." It identifies a relationship state between strong support and more substantial disengagement, but it is not treated as a universal stage. Strong support, marked distancing, and being largely disengaged remain distinct responses. The open-ended responses also suggested that the core basis of attachment may shape how a controversy is evaluated. This remains a tentative hypothesis rather than an established mechanism.

4 METHOD

4.1 Research Design

This exploratory cross-sectional online survey study examined perceived authenticity, perceived persona inconsistency, and current fan-idol relationship status. It combined descriptive statistics, exploratory inferential analyses, and limited thematic analysis. Because data were collected once, the analyses identified associations rather than causal relationships.

4.2 Participants and Sampling

The questionnaire was distributed online from June 2 to June 15, 2026, through classmate groups, personal social media contacts, and acquaintance sharing. Convenience sampling and snowball recruitment produced 125 responses. Twenty-five respondents selected "No" to the screening question on continuously following at least one idol or group and ended through skip logic, leaving 100 responses for the main analyses. The sample was not treated as representative.

4.3 Questionnaire Development and Structure

One week before formal data collection, the questionnaire was piloted with five Grade 10 students recruited from the researcher's classmates and friends. The pilot was used to revise item wording and skip logic and to clarify that authenticity did not mean the absence of image management. The final questionnaire covered screening, current relationship status, duration of following, spending, spending pressure, participation, reasons for liking the idol, perceived authenticity, experience of perceived persona inconsistency, a persona-inconsistency scenario, and one optional open-ended question.

Q3 measured current fan-idol relationship status using four ordered categories: strong support, relational distancing, marked distancing, and largely disengaged. The categories were coded so that a higher Q3 score indicated a weaker current relationship. Duration of following, spending amount, spending pressure, and participation were also coded as ordered variables. Q8 used a five-point importance scale, whereas Q10 and Q12 used five-point agreement scales. Three Q10 items assessed perceived authenticity. Q11 offered "Yes," "No," and "Uncertain" responses to experience of perceived persona inconsistency; no respondent selected "Uncertain." Q12 included scenario-based items on negative reinterpretation, perceived deception, possible attitude change after a response, and continued support.

Five exploratory composites were calculated as means of component items on a 1–5 scale, with no reverse scoring. Table 1 presents their composition and Cronbach's alpha estimates. Alpha was used only to assess internal consistency, not scale validity.

Table 1 Exploratory Composite Measures

Measure	Items	Component content	α
Core attraction	3	Performance/works/ability; appearance/style/demeanor; personality/personal appeal	.753
Relationship connection	2	Sincere attitude toward fans; companionship/connection	.723
Perceived authenticity	3	Public self close to actual self; not merely performing a persona; sense of knowing the idol	.776
Persona-rupture response	2	Feeling deceived; reconsidering past words/actions	.782
Continued support/repair	2	Continued support; attitude change after a serious response/explanation	.742

Note: All composites were calculated as item means on a 1–5 scale. The measures were exploratory and were not treated as formally validated scales.

4.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics included frequencies, percentages, means, sample standard deviations, and medians where appropriate. For RQ2, Fisher's exact test compared strong support with all other states between respondents with and without persona-inconsistency experience. The no-experience group was the reference; a sample cross-product odds ratio and log-Wald 95% confidence interval were reported.

For RQ4, nine two-sided Spearman correlations used Q3 as the sole outcome. Correlates were following duration, spending amount, spending pressure, participation, and the five exploratory composites. Holm correction was applied across these nine tests. The separate Fisher comparison was not included in this family.

4.5 Open-Ended Coding, Ethics, and Data Management

The optional open-ended question produced 49 non-empty responses. Fourteen did not meet the standard for a substantive response and were excluded, leaving 35 for analysis. The researcher used inductive thematic coding, and one response could receive more than one code. A second item-by-item review of all 35 responses produced no changes. No independent second coder was used, and no inter-coder reliability statistic was calculated.

Participation was voluntary. The questionnaire requested no names, school names, or telephone numbers. Because the platform retained technical fields, collection was not described as anonymous. Technical identifiers were excluded from the analysis file, and only de-identified data were used. Files were stored in the project folder without a formal retention or deletion schedule.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Sample Characteristics and Current Relationship Status

The main analysis included 100 respondents. Most were aged 16–17 (80%), and 73% identified as female. Current fan–idol relationship status was distributed across four ordered categories: 55 respondents reported strong support, 36 reported relational distancing, six reported marked distancing, and three were largely disengaged. Overall, 91 respondents remained in one of the two categories that involved continuing to follow the idol, although the categories represented different levels of enthusiasm and support.

All five Q8 items concerning reasons for liking an idol received relatively high ratings, with means ranging from 3.92 to 4.76 on the five-point scale. Performance, works, or ability received the highest mean ($M = 4.76$), followed by personality or personal appeal ($M = 4.70$). The distributions showed substantial ceiling effects: 82% selected the maximum score for performance, works, or ability, and 41 respondents gave the maximum score to all five items. In addition, 89 respondents had two or more items tied for their highest rating. The Q8 data were therefore retained as item-level results and exploratory composite measures rather than used to classify respondents into fixed fan types.

5.2 RQ1: Perceived Authenticity of the Public Persona

The three Q10 items showed a descriptive difference between evaluations of persona credibility and respondents' sense of knowing the idol. Agreement was highest for the statement that the idol was not merely performing an appealing persona ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 0.96$). The item stating that the idol's public presentation was close to who the person really was also received a high mean rating ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.85$). By comparison, the statement that the respondent knew the idol to some extent received a lower mean ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.25$). No inferential test was conducted to compare the three item means. The exploratory perceived-authenticity composite had a mean of 4.25 ($SD = 0.86$) and an internal-consistency estimate of $\alpha = .776$.

5.3 RQ2: Perceived Persona Inconsistency and Current Relationship Status

Twenty-two respondents reported an experience of perceived persona inconsistency, while 78 reported no such experience. Among respondents in the experience group, seven (31.8%) remained in the strong-support category. Among those reporting no such experience, 48 (61.5%) remained strongly supportive.

For the primary comparison, Q3 was recoded as strong support versus all other current relationship states. A two-sided Fisher's exact test indicated an association between experience of perceived persona inconsistency and membership in the strong-support category, $OR = 0.29$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.80], $p = .016$. The odds ratio was the sample cross-product estimate, and the confidence interval was the corresponding log-Wald interval. This Fisher comparison was treated separately from the family of Spearman tests reported below.

5.4 RQ3: Intermediate Relationship States and Scope for Reconsideration

Among the 22 respondents reporting an experience of perceived persona inconsistency, 11 (50.0%) were in the relational-distancing category. Of the remaining respondents, seven reported strong support, three reported marked distancing, and one was largely disengaged. These categories described current relationship status and were not treated as a tested sequence of stages.

Q12 assessed attitudes toward a persona-inconsistency scenario. For respondents without such an experience, the items represented expected attitudes; respondents with experience may have answered with reference to actual events, although the wording remained scenario-based. The highest mean concerned whether a serious response might change the respondent's attitude ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.20$), followed by possible continued support ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.30$), reconsideration of the idol's earlier words and actions ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.49$), and feeling deceived ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.41$).

5.5 RQ4: Correlates of Current Relationship Status

Nine two-sided Spearman correlations were calculated with the four-level Q3 score as the single outcome variable. As higher Q3 scores indicated weaker current relationships, positive coefficients represented associations with weaker status, whereas negative coefficients represented associations with stronger status.

Four associations remained statistically significant after Holm adjustment. Persona-rupture response was positively associated with weaker current relationship status, $\rho = .517$, Holm-adjusted $p < .001$. Core attraction was negatively associated with Q3, $\rho = -.415$, Holm-adjusted $p < .001$. Relationship connection, $\rho = -.363$, Holm-adjusted $p = .001$, and perceived authenticity, $\rho = -.357$, Holm-adjusted $p = .002$, were also negatively associated with Q3.

Participation and continued support/repair showed weak unadjusted associations that did not remain significant after Holm adjustment. No statistically significant associations were found for duration of following, spending amount, or financial pressure. Table 2 presents the complete coefficients, raw p values, and Holm-adjusted p values.

Table 2 Spearman Correlations with Current Fan–Idol Relationship Status

Variable	Spearman ρ	Raw p	Holm-adjusted p
Duration of following	-.033	.745	1.000
Spending amount	-.113	.262	.787
Financial pressure	.065	.521	1.000
Participation	-.208	.038	.188
Core attraction	-.415	< .001	< .001
Relationship connection	-.363	< .001	.001
Perceived authenticity	-.357	< .001	.002
Persona-rupture response	.517	< .001	< .001
Continued support/repair	-.199	.047	.188

Note: Q3 was coded so that higher scores indicated weaker current relationship status. Holm adjustment was applied only to this family of nine Spearman tests.

5.6 Exploratory Open-Ended Themes

Of the 49 non-empty open-ended responses, 35 met the criteria for substantive analysis. Five themes were developed inductively, and one response could be assigned to more than one theme. The most frequent theme concerned inconsistency between public presentation and behavior, including contradiction, concealment, or perceived performance (13 codings). Other themes concerned moral or intimate-relationship controversies, public opinion or uncertain evidence, perceived responsibilities within the fan–idol relationship, and whether the issue affected a reason central to liking the idol. As the themes overlapped and were coded by one researcher, they are reported as exploratory descriptions rather than population estimates or evidence of a validated mechanism.

6 DISCUSSION

This study examined how young fans evaluated an idol's public persona, how perceived persona inconsistency was associated with current fan–idol relationship status, and which forms of attachment were most clearly related to that status. Overall, respondents could regard a public persona as credible without claiming direct knowledge of the idol's private self, while perceived inconsistency was associated with weaker current relationships. The findings also indicate that relationship adjustment was not limited to either strong support or complete disengagement.

The Q10 pattern distinguishes persona credibility from the feeling that one knows the idol. Because the three items were not compared inferentially, this difference is descriptive. One interpretation is that fans may recognize selected,

professionally managed communication while judging whether it remains coherent and connected to a real person. This is consistent with research showing that mediated authenticity does not require unfiltered private access [5-8]. Authenticity within acknowledged boundaries is therefore a working interpretation, not a validated construct.

Respondents reporting persona-inconsistency experience were less likely to remain strongly supportive. Fisher's test establishes an association, not causation. Reverse interpretation is possible: already weaker relationships may make earlier behavior more likely to be identified as inconsistent. Incident seriousness, prior attachment, or other unmeasured factors may also explain the group difference.

Relational distancing was the most common current status among respondents who reported perceived persona inconsistency. This directly observed pattern suggests that continued following with reduced enthusiasm deserves attention alongside strong support and disengagement. Parasocial-breakup research has emphasized reactions to relationship loss or termination [9-10], whereas the present findings indicate that some fan relationships may remain active in a weakened form. However, relational distancing should not be understood as a universal stage or evidence of a fixed sequence. The cross-sectional design recorded current categories rather than changes within the same individuals over time.

The correlation analysis provided the strongest quantitative evidence for associations between current relationship status and relationship-meaning variables. After Holm correction, stronger persona-rupture response was associated with weaker current relationship status, whereas higher perceived authenticity and stronger relationship connection were associated with stronger status. Although these associations were statistically robust within the specified family of nine tests, they remain correlational. A possible interpretation is that feelings of deception and retrospective doubt may accompany weaker relationships, while perceived credibility and relational connection may accompany continued support. The data do not indicate whether these evaluations preceded, followed, or developed alongside relationship change.

Core attraction was also robustly associated with stronger current relationship status. The open-ended responses suggested that some fans evaluated a controversy partly according to whether it affected what they regarded as central to liking the idol. This qualitative pattern supports only a tentative hypothesis of a core basis of attachment: responses may differ depending on whether the perceived inconsistency threatens a central or peripheral basis of attachment. As the survey did not directly measure this proposed mechanism and the open-ended coding was exploratory, the hypothesis requires examination through more focused measures or interviews.

By contrast, duration of following, spending amount, and financial pressure were not significantly associated with current relationship status. This result does not demonstrate that time or financial investment is unimportant in fandom. The measures used broad ordered categories, and their associations may vary according to the type of controversy, available resources, social participation, or the meaning attached to spending. Participation and continued support/repair also showed only weak unadjusted associations that did not remain significant after Holm correction. These findings should therefore be regarded as inconclusive rather than as confirmed correlates.

Taken together, the findings distinguish intermediate relationship states and show that relationship-meaning variables were more consistently associated with current status than several quantity-based indicators in this sample. Authenticity within acknowledged boundaries and the core basis of attachment remain provisional interpretations that require further testing.

7 LIMITATIONS

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. Convenience sampling and snowball recruitment mainly reached the researcher's peer network, and the sample was concentrated among female respondents aged 16–17. The findings, therefore, cannot represent all young fans across ages, genders, platforms, or cultural settings.

The cross-sectional self-report design also limited the analysis. It identified associations but could not determine causal direction, temporal order, or individual change. Respondents whose relationships were already weaker may have been more likely to report persona inconsistency. The study, therefore, cannot show how the same fan–idol relationship developed over time.

Several variables were measured through researcher-developed items or exploratory composites. Cronbach's alpha assessed internal consistency but did not establish construct validity. Perceived persona inconsistency was also subjectively reported, and event types and levels of seriousness were not systematically distinguished.

Finally, Q12 measured expected attitudes among respondents without prior experience, whereas experienced respondents could draw on actual events. The open-ended analysis included 35 substantive responses and no independent second coder, although the researcher completed a second review. Future research should use larger, more diverse samples, longitudinal surveys, validated measures, and interviews on specific forms of persona inconsistency.

8 CONCLUSION

This study examined how young fans evaluate an idol's public persona and how perceived persona inconsistency may be associated with fan–idol relationship adjustment. The findings suggest that fans may regard a public persona as credible and connected to the true self while remaining cautious about claiming that they know the person behind it. Authenticity judgments may therefore coexist with awareness that public self-presentation is selective and professionally managed.

The findings also show that relationship change was not limited to strong support or complete disengagement. Relational distancing—continuing to follow an idol with reduced enthusiasm—represented an important intermediate state in this sample. Perceived persona inconsistency and several relationship-meaning variables were associated with current relationship status, although the cross-sectional design cannot establish causal direction or sequence. These conclusions are based on a small exploratory sample concentrated within the researcher's peer network and should not be generalized as universal patterns. More representative samples, longitudinal designs, and more precise measures of persona inconsistency and relationship adjustment are needed to test these interpretations further.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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