



# Para-social Interactions Mediated by Objects

## —A Study of Fans' Consumption of Photocards

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**Abstract.** In the current fan economy, the little card, as a peripheral product, presents the triple characteristics of object, symbol and medium, and its consumption by fans has also appeared in multiple practices. From objects to people, and then to emotions and behaviors, the practice of fan consumption of photocards constitutes a kind of para-social interaction in which fans and idols are "connected" or even "communicated" through the medium of photocards, and the relationship between fans and objects and idols is also reconstructed. This paper explores the motivation and practice of fans' photocard consumption through in-depth interviews, analyzes fans' emotions and behaviors based on Nvivo11 coding of interview texts, reveals the role of photocards as a medium between fans and idols, and deepens the understanding of the para-social interactions that photocards contribute to between fans and idols. At the same time, it is also necessary to guard against the alienation of emotions and consumption from the love of "people" to the love of "things" under the "idol-object love".

**Keywords:** Photocards; Peripheral Products; Para-social Interactions; Fans Economy.

## 1 Introduction

With the booming of the entertainment industry, fan economy has become the focus of capital attention nowadays. In addition to albums and posters, more and more peripheral products continue to appear and flood into the fan market. As one of the hottest peripheral products nowadays, photocards creates huge commercial value, while promoting fans to generate brand-new consumption practices. The essence of the fan economy is cultural identity, so the focus of the fan economy is to give products unique symbols and meanings, and construct new cultural identities for fans.<sup>[1]</sup> Take the cultural products adapted from IP as an example, no matter whether it is a novel or a game adapted into a film or television work, the huge fans behind the screen can be transformed into a consumer group based on the cultural identity of the IP, which in turn creates commercial value, and the fan economy highlights the great advantage.<sup>[2]</sup> To a certain extent, the fan economy can reflect the emotion of fans to idols, in the process of consumption idols exist in the form of symbols, with the help of emotional factors to stimulate the consumption desire and behaviors of fans.

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Photocards with the development of the fan economy, is the purchase of idol albums as a bonus, a photocard is only about three inches in size, the card face printed with a photo of the idol, the back of the card is printed with symbols related to the idol, the album or the idol's handwritten text content. Photocards was born in the collection of significance is to stimulate the sales of albums, and later the major entertainment companies began to follow the example of one after another. Nowadays, photocards have become the most popular peripheral products in the current fan market, and the consumption practices of fans on photocards are becoming more and more diversified, such as collecting, speculating, taking photos, and decorating. Photocards seem to be transformed into a kind of medium that connects idols and fans. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze the characteristics of photocards compared to other peripheral products through the study of "photocards culture", revealing the possibility of the existence of media attributes of peripheral products as objects under the fan economy, and then analyze the emotions and actions of fans in depth, exploring how the consumption practices of fans on photocards constitute para-social interactions.

## 2 Research Method

The research employed semi-structured in-depth interviews, focusing on three aspects: (1) Motivation: What factors drive fans to purchase photocards? (2) Practices: What specific behaviors do fans engage in when purchasing photocards? (3) Cognition: How do fans perceive photocards and the consumption practices associated with them?

Following the interviews, the researcher utilized NVivo11 to analyze the raw data through three stages of coding. In the first-level coding, key words were extracted from the raw interview data sentence by sentence or event by event, resulting in 610 initial concepts. Based on the similar relationships between concepts, the 610 initial concepts were clustered into 27 initial dimensions. In the second-level coding, the 27 initial dimensions were compared and analyzed, and logical relationships were synthesized, resulting in six secondary nodes. In the third-level coding, after summarizing and generalizing the scope and subjects of the secondary nodes, three core dimensions were ultimately identified (See Table 1).

**Table 1.** Three-level Nodes Statistics

Selective Coding	Axial Coding	Open Coding	Number of Reference Nodes
Dual Attributes of Objects	Product Attributes	Corporate Joint Marketing; Reflecting Idol Popularity; Shopping and Consumption Experience	72
	Media Attributes	Penciling Calendar; Convenient to Carry and Display; Appreciating Collections; Decorating Protection	70

Fans Community	Cultures of Fan Communities	Fans Culture; Identity Symbol of Fans; Collective Memory of Fans; Common Currency for Fans	90
	Emotions in Fan Communities	Conformity Psychology; Enhancing Influence	27
Individual Fans	Individual Pleasure Emotions	Sense of Achievement; Vanity; Meeting Aesthetic Preferences	41
	Imagined Intimate Relationships	Privatization of Idols; Companionship; Bringing the Distance Closer; Adapt to Personal Life	310

### 3 Objects, Symbols, and Emotions: Fans' Motivation for Photocard Consumption

#### 3.1 Dual Attributes of Objects

##### 1. As Merchandise Attributes of Peripheral Products

Photocards, as peripheral products, transform the idol and symbolic representations into tangible forms. As peripheral products, photocards primarily possess merchandise attributes, providing fans with a shopping consumption experience. In recent years, due to the emergence of various idol groups, the competition in the entertainment industry has continued to increase. Companies, in order to expand revenue sources, choose to collaborate with other brands, using photocards as bonus items to increase the sales of joint products. On this basis, this not only expands the visibility of idols but also generates considerable revenue from joint promotions. For example, the idol group "ive" collaborated with the Puma brand in a joint event, where purchasing a pair of sneakers endorsed by the idol group entitled the buyer to receive a photocard. This collaborative marketing creates new value and experiences for existing fans and potential consumers.

The rise of the Korean pop culture industry as a symbol of South Korea's neoliberal service sector has rapidly escalated, with K-pop idols becoming one of the most strategically significant cultural commodities.<sup>[3]</sup> According to this "idol commodity theory", the price of photocards, as subsidiary products, reflects the price of idols as "commodities." The higher the price of idols' photocards, the higher the level of fans' consumption and purchasing power, which to a certain extent reflects the popularity and commercial value of idols.<sup>[4]</sup> To showcase the popularity and value of idols, purchasing photocards has become the most cost-effective choice for fans.

## 2. As Media Attributes Connecting Idols and Fans

Photographic media serve as "memory mirrors", not only acting as carriers of objects but also effectively enhancing human society's ability to resist the passage of time and loss of memory, becoming an important medium for people to traverse time.

Compared to other peripheral products such as posters, light sticks, and banners, photocards exhibit unique attributes of being compact, portable, and easy to store, enabling fans to have the possibility of "display". The ultimate purpose of fans' consumption of photocards is "display", whether the object of display is the fan themselves or others. In the process of "display", photocards present not only the idol's photos but also symbols representing the fan's identity and the fan's emotions towards the idol. The process of display is also the process of spreading fans' personal memories, enriching and strengthening fans' memory resources, and promoting fans' strengthening of emotions towards idols and their perception of these emotions. It is both a pure collectible and a medium full of symbolic meaning, directly participating in fans' practical actions, connecting fans' emotions, bodies, daily lives, memories, and linking fans with idols.<sup>[5]</sup> It can be said that photocards are a medium condition for para-social interaction between fans and idols.

### 3.2 General Symbols of Fan Communities

In fan communities, photocards serve as general symbols of identification, proving fans' affiliations while fostering the formation of fan communities. According to Baudrillard, in modern consumer society, an item serves not only as a symbol but also as a consumable object, where consumption revolves around the item's individuality and uniqueness. Different idols and their respective photocards represent distinct symbols, and fan identities are transformed into different symbols through the purchase of various photocards.<sup>[6]</sup> These diverse symbols converge to form different fan communities. Hence, consumer behavior propels the formation of fan communities. In many fan communities, if a fan wishes to join an organization or participate in activities, there is an identity verification checkpoint requiring fans to provide screenshots of purchased related merchandise to prove their fan identities.<sup>[7]</sup> Photocards can be considered as credentials, serving as fans' "tickets" to join the collective.

Photocards also serve as mnemonic symbols. Besides proving identity, photocards are an essential component of fan enjoyment, blending emotional elements while aligning with the logic of neoliberal consumption. Consumer behavior facilitates the writing of fan memories, continually expanding into a fan cultural universe between the pursuit of novelty and nostalgia, wherein symbols form collective memories among fans. Building upon identity affirmation, they construct collective memories shared by the group. For example, Wonyoung Jang 's beret-styled photocard is iconic, representing not only a significant milestone in her idol career but also her achievement of winning first place with fan support during a music competition. Subsequently, this photocard serves as a symbol with directed significance within the fan community, facilitating the dissemination of collective memories through material carriers.

### **3.3 Personal Subjective Emotions of Fans**

#### **1. Individual Pleasure Emotions**

Although photocards serve as a common symbol within fan communities, whether as identity symbols, memory symbols, or value symbols, the essence of the symbolic significance of photocards still revolves around the interaction between idols and individual fans, thus bringing subjective emotional value to fans.<sup>[8]</sup> For instance, fans with stronger consumption power tend to receive more attention within the fan community. Photocards can serve as indicators, with fans possessing a greater quantity or higher-priced photocards enjoying higher status within the fan circle. They gain more visibility and exposure by showcasing their photocards, often receiving attention and support from other fans, thus deriving satisfaction and a sense of achievement through the symbolism of the idol.

#### **2. Imagined Intimate Relationships**

The consumption behavior of photocards serves as a "non-verbal means of fully conveying informational functions", which has long catered to the needs of fans to store memories, showcase themselves, and construct their images. In traditional consumption behavior, tangible products are at the core. However, the influence of tangible products on fans' consumption decisions seems to be continuously weakened nowadays. Media can touch us, move us, and enable us to feel.<sup>[9]</sup> Fan interactions with idols possess specificity, and their interaction types are most likely to be converted into real-world social interactions, termed as "first-order para-social interactions". The inherent potential for this relationship transformation endows immense real-world tension to idol-fan relationships. Due to the accessibility of the emotional projection object in the real world, idol fans often generate richer emotional needs and behavioral impulses, frequently exhibiting more fervor, which also affects the extent of emotional expression they possess.

## **4 Para-Social Interactions: Fans' Practice of Photocards Consumption**

### **4.1 Possession of Objects**

#### **1. Value Conversion: The Private Collection of Idols**

If fans' purchase of photocards stems from their love for idols, then upon owning the photocards, fans will personalize them, transforming the photocards from "their own commodity" to "idol vessels," engaging in para-social interaction with them to fulfill emotional needs. Fans often seek points of resonance with photocards from dimensions such as idol adoration, personal aesthetics, and emotional connections. They selectively, individually, and personally interpret the standardized faces and backs of photocards and derive pleasure from the creation, consumption, and collection of meanings in their daily usage, achieving emotional self-satisfaction. This is also why para-social interaction is formed.<sup>[10]</sup> As consumers of photocards, fans actively project their personal interests, memories, and emotions onto the photocards, transforming "popular,"

"trendy," and "best-selling" photocards into "private," "unique," and "exclusive" ones. Through the process of personalizing photocards, fans accomplish the "de-otherization" of identity identification and play the role of actors in the practice of consuming photocards, interpreting and even reconstructing the symbolic meanings of photocards.

## **2. Emotional Transfer: Attachment from Object to Person**

The consumption behavior towards idols also undergoes generational changes: from cassette tapes to CDs, from posters to photographs. We find that fans' past consumption objects were still related to the idol's voice, appearance, music, or image, mainly appreciating and consuming their appearance or artistic products. However, today, catalyzed by the entertainment industry, idols' personal belongings have become another mainstream object of fan consumption. This bears similarity to the narrow concept of "fetishism," where idols' clothing, everyday items, etc., with the symbol of the idol's personalization, have sparked fans' particularly intense desire for them. Especially with photocards, the photos on the cards are often selfies of the idols, items directly related to the idols themselves, thus creating a special soil for "idol fetishism." Objects related to idols trigger fans' infinite satisfaction of emotional experiences in a "god of objects" manner. At the same time, this desire can also extend into a positive "psychological suggestion," transforming the idol's emotions into self-desires for objects and consumption motivations.

### **4.2 Closeness to Idols**

#### **1. Creating Intimacy: Utilization and Fulfillment of Para-social Relationships**

From the perspective of cultural functions, "all commodities can be used by consumers to construct meanings related to self, social identity, and social relationships." Elizabeth Bird believes that fans are involved in a variety of practices that are both active and media-related. The theory of para-social interaction was initially proposed by American scholar Donald Horton to describe a psychological relationship that audiences form with media figures. By observing and independently interpreting the appearance, gestures, voice, dialogue, and behavior of media figures, audiences feel closely connected to them, as if they were intimate friends.

Photocards cater to this trend, using various means to reinforce the authenticity of imagination. On the face of the photocards are printed selfies of idols, subjective selfies can convey the authenticity of the idols themselves more than objective ones, and can also evoke emotions from fans towards the idols. On the back of the cards, idols may write messages according to different activities and time points. For example, some fans will write blessings for the Chinese New Year on the back of photocards distributed before and after the Spring Festival. This not only enhances the sense of interaction and response but also allows fans to feel the sincerity of the idols, mobilizing their enthusiasm and strengthening the level of para-social interaction between both parties.

## 2. Observing the "Backstage": The Performance in the Middle Zone

Photocards provide a middle zone for idols to show fans their backstage selves, which is called the "middle zone." The middle zone performance includes some elements of the initial frontstage and backstage behavior patterns, but it is neither as formal as the original frontstage behavior nor as casual as traditional backstage behavior. With the emergence of the middle zone, the original frontstage used for formal performances and the backstage used for relaxation have shifted to a more open "front-front zone" and a more secretive "deep backstage." Photocards break the boundaries of time and space in the interaction between fans and idols, creating a new mixed scenario, breaking the static "frontstage" and "backstage" and forming a dynamic "middle zone" situation. For example, some photocards are taken when idols are eating, traveling, or exercising. The appropriate presentation of the idol's private life makes fans feel "involved" in the idol's life, experiencing a strong sense of participation, invisibly narrowing the distance between idols and fans, and deepening the level of quasi-para-social interaction between them. In addition, voyeuristic psychology leads fans to tend to understand the private aspects of idols' lives.

## 5 Conclusions

In summary, fans' consumption of photocards reflects both the agency of fans and idols in para-social interactions in the post-subcultural era and the erosion of fans by commercial culture. Photocards are cultural products mass-produced by cultural industries and consumed by the masses, with the ultimate goal of maximizing profits. The power of capital not only controls the production of fan peripherals represented by photocards but also regulates their circulation and consumption. The exorbitant prices of some peripherals do not reflect their true intrinsic value but are the carefully woven result of capital's pursuit of profit. When fans express their emotions towards idols through consumer frenzy, attempting to liberate themselves from the dilemmas of real life, a paradoxical logic emerges: fan consumption enables media to present meanings and symbols, constructs para-social interactions with idols, and stimulates fans' proactive and striving will. However, manipulated by entertainment companies, photocards ruthlessly use their commodity value as leverage, shattering illusions and creating a consumerism trap for fans, potentially alienating them from being "lovers of idols" to being "lovers of things." Fans should consume photocards prudently, prioritizing their emotional value, and manifesting their subjectivity and agency in their consumption practices.

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