Cognitive theory and adolescent idol worship

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Abstract: The phenomenon of adolescents "following celebrities" is a highly salient social issue that has been extensively and deeply studied by numerous sociologists, researchers on adolescent issues, and others from their respective professional perspectives. Some scholars have also interpreted this phenomenon from the perspective of human cognition. Drawing on the framework of cognitive linguistics, this paper analyzes the phenomenon of adolescents "following celebrities" from the perspectives of the Idealized Cognitive Model (ICM) and psychological space, with the aim of examining the inevitability of this phenomenon and identifying its underlying causes, as well as exploring the cognitive roots of adolescents' "celebrity following."

Keywords: "fan-chasing" phenomenon, cognitive interpretation, ICM, psychological space

1. Introduction

Almost everyone develops admiration for certain celebrities in the entertainment or sports industries during their adolescence, making them objects of admiration and personal idols. At the same time, they strongly aspire to become someone who resembles their idol; some "fans" even envision their idol as their future romantic partner, spouse, or similar figure.

2. Adolescent idol worship from the perspective of cognitive linguistics

The phenomenon of "idol worship," a widespread social trend, has already garnered extensive attention from all sectors of society. According to statistics (Sun Yunxi, 2002), idol worshippers account for one-fifth of the city's total population, with primary and secondary school students constituting the largest group, representing 70%. "Idol worship" can motivate young people to strive for excellence and to take their idols as role models. However, this phenomenon of "idol worship" can sometimes become a serious social problem and may have severe negative effects on adolescents. They may devote excessive amounts of time and money to gathering information about their idols' personal details and recent activities, and may deliberately imitate the idols' words, behavior, and preferences. The misconduct or personality flaws of certain celebrities may even lead adolescents astray. For example, not long ago, the media reported a highly publicized case in which a young woman "pursued" Andy Lau, spending a vast sum of money and ultimately causing the collapse of her family and the death of her relatives. Therefore, we believe that the phenomenon of "idol worship" warrants further attention.

Regarding the phenomenon of "star worship," many scholars (ibid.; Sun Tianwen et al., 2002) have conducted research from sociological, adolescent-development, and educational perspectives, attempting to unravel the mystery of why adolescents engage in "star worship." However, since "star worship" is inherently closely linked to adolescents 'psychological cognition, examining this issue from a cognitive perspective may be more persuasive and yield more effective results. Consequently, other scholars (Liu Yuhong, 2005), drawing on cognitive linguistics, have explored the phenomenon from the perspectives of concept composition theory, mental-space theory, and empathy theory (empathy involves projecting one's own identity onto others); they have analyzed the cognitive and psychological processes underlying adolescents' "star worship" behavior and dissected the root causes of the phenomenon. Cognitive science seeks to study human psychology, intelligence, and intelligent behavior; the ultimate goal of cognitive linguistics is "to characterize the types of cognitive events whose occurrence constitutes a given mental experience" (Longaker, 1986). Therefore, by employing the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics,

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the phenomenon of adolescent "star worship" may be better explained. This paper intends to analyze adolescent "star worship" from two perspectives: the idealized cognitive model and mental space.

3. Idealized Cognitive Model (ICM)

3.1. Categorization and Idealized Cognitive Model (ICM)

When people perceive things, they extract the common characteristics shared by similar things and treat them as the typical characteristics of that category. On this basis, they form an abstract concept of the category and then name it; this process is called categorization. From a cognitive perspective, Lakoff (1987) refers to conceptual categories as a set-theoretic cognitive model; members of a category are individual cognitive models, and the typical members of a category are termed idealized cognitive models (ICMs). For example, when we discuss the category "birds," its typical characteristics include "having feathers," "being capable of flight," and "having a beak," among others. These characteristics together constitute the ICM of "birds."

3.2. Construction of an idealized cognitive model of the concept of "success"

Adolescents are at a critical stage of their lives, filled with hope for the future and aspirations for success. Their desire for success is one of the primary drivers behind their "star-chasing" behavior. Sun Yunxi (2002) argues that "the fame of pop and film stars, along with the glory and wealth that accompany it, gives adolescents a vivid, albeit idealized, glimpse of success; they therefore yearn to become such successful individuals." Through social interactions, they encounter a wide variety of "successful" figures—film and television stars, sports stars, and so on—and gradually develop their own perceptions of these individuals and of "success" itself. They abstract and extract the distinctive characteristics of their objects of cognition—namely, the various celebrities—then integrate and synthesize these elements to form a conceptual understanding of "success." In their fantasies, they extract the handsome appearance of Celebrity A, the melodious voice of Celebrity B, the creative talent of Celebrity C, and the luxurious lifestyle of Celebrity D, among other attributes; by bringing these together, they construct an idealized cognitive model of "success." This process can be illustrated in Figure 1.

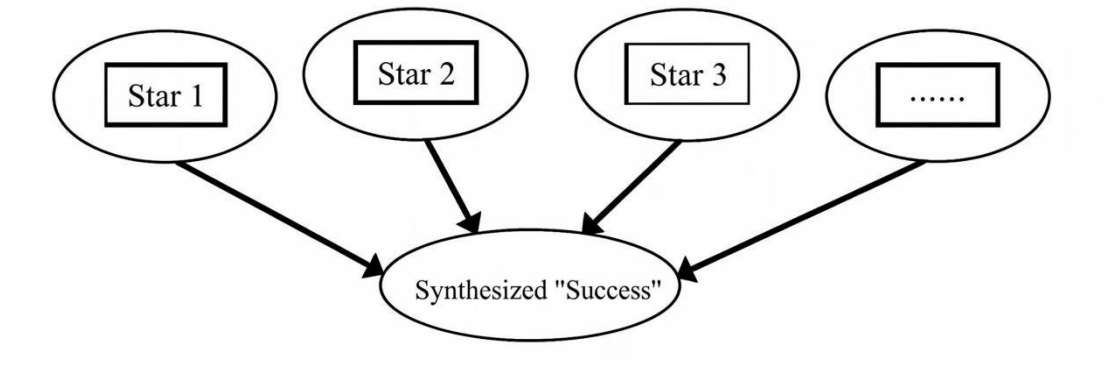

Figure 1: Synthesis of "successful" ICM

3.3. Construction of an idealized cognitive model of the "ideal lover/partner" concept

During this period, adolescents, owing to their physiological maturation, develop feelings of attraction and curiosity toward the opposite sex. The ideal image of a romantic partner or lover begins to take shape in their minds, and this image becomes increasingly clear. Sun Tianwen and Yang Zhigang (2002) also argue that sexual maturation intensifies adolescents' curiosity about the opposite sex to the point that "every adolescent has a mental outline of their ideal romantic partner." How, then, does the concept of a "lover or romantic partner" emerge? The process resembles Figure 1: adolescents search among the celebrities they encounter for the characteristics of everyone; they then combine the characteristics of

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different celebrities to form an idealized cognitive model of the "lover or romantic partner." During this period, adolescents, owing to their physiological maturation, develop feelings of attraction and curiosity toward the opposite sex. The ideal image of a romantic partner or lover begins to take shape in their minds, and this image becomes increasingly clear. Sun Tianwen and Yang Zhigang (2002) also argue that sexual maturation intensifies adolescents' curiosity about the opposite sex to the point that "every adolescent has a mental outline of their ideal romantic partner." How, then, does the concept of a "lover or romantic partner" emerge? The process resembles Figure 1: adolescents search among the celebrities they encounter for the characteristics of everyone; they then combine the characteristics of different celebrities to form an idealized cognitive model of the "lover or romantic partner."

4. Psychological space projection

4.1. Overview of the psychological space theory

The theory of mental spaces proposed by the American linguist Gilles Fauconnier in his work *Mental Spaces* (Faucon Nier, 1985) is a highly significant theory within cognitive linguistics. The book systematically examines how human cognitive structures and human linguistic structures are manifested within cognitive structures. The concepts he introduced—such as spatial constructions, base points, foci, and viewpoints—have become widely accepted and exerted a profound influence; they have even become common terminology in literary linguistic analysis. Mental spaces are possible worlds constructed by individuals when discussing entities and their various relationships, as well as information containers pertaining to a particular domain. The fundamental idea underlying the construction and linking of mental spaces is that, when people think and converse, they are subject to the pressures of grammar, context, and culture, which leads them to construct and link mental spaces. As discourse progresses, individuals create a network of mental spaces and, by means of the accessibility principle, connect the base space with new spaces M.

4.2. Principles of connection, projection, and recognition in psychological space

"The theory of mental spaces posits that the fundamental function of linguistic structure is to exploit and describe the distinguishability of information from different cognitive perspectives; examining the use of language is therefore an important tool for cognitive research." The connection or projection between mental spaces enables people to use a word as a trigger to refer to another target entity within another mental space; these connections or projections include pragmatic functions, metonymy, metaphor, and analogy. "Faucon Nier proposed the identification principle to regulate the relationship between an entity and the words that refer to it. The identification principle holds that if the second cognitive domain can be identified within the first cognitive domain, or if there is a connection between the trigger word and the target word, then a word used to name and describe an entity (the trigger word) can identify an entity in another cognitive domain (the target word)."

The projection of the psychological space is a component of the organization of human thought. Although language provides considerable material for this projection, projection itself is not linguistic; rather, it exists within the process of conceptual formation.

Projection techniques were originally employed in psychological measurement as a method for assessing personality. "Projection refers to the psychological phenomenon in which an individual unconsciously projects their attitudes, desires, emotions, motivations, and other personality traits onto external objects or other people; that is, the process by which an individual's personality structure influences the way they perceive, organize, and interpret their environment."

4.3. The manifestation of psychological space projection in adolescent idol worship

Adolescents yearn for success; when they encounter vivid examples of celebrities achieving success one after another, they expend considerable cognitive effort—primarily through imagination and role-playing—projecting their own consciousness onto the material existence of these celebrities and thereby forming a fantasy-based conceptual structure. When they view a celebrity as the outline of an ideal romantic partner, they project their self from the real world into a fantasy space, where they treat the

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opposite-sex celebrity as their lover, romantic partner, or even spouse. This spatial projection can be illustrated in Figure 2. Adolescents who follow celebrities are more likely to develop favorable feelings toward celebrities of the opposite sex. Once they identify with the dyadic relationship within this fantasy space (between the fan and the celebrity), that relationship is continuously reinforced through their daily celebrity-following activities, causing them to equate their fantasy space with their real-world space and live a life in which reality and fantasy become indistinguishable. Once they discover that a celebrity has a partner or has married, they may feel profoundly devastated by the celebrity's abandonment, leading to irreparable emotional loss.

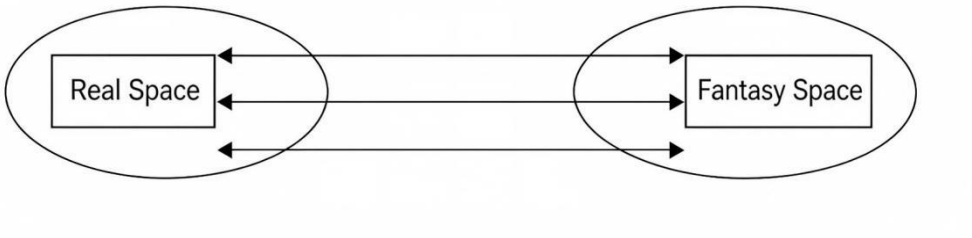

Figure 2: Schematic diagram of spatial projection

5. Conclusion

From the perspectives of idealized cognitive models and psychological space, we have conducted a preliminary analysis of the phenomenon of adolescents "following celebrities" and explained the reasons behind its formation. Through their perception of celebrities, adolescents acquire an idealized cognitive model of "success." Whenever a celebrity aligns with this model, the celebrity becomes a representative figure of that model and consequently serves as an idol for the adolescents. Adolescents admire and "chase" celebrities because they project their own real world and the real world of celebrities onto the imagined world, allowing the two to influence each other. Based on this analysis, teachers and social workers should provide guidance to adolescents from psychological and cognitive perspectives, encouraging them to learn from the positive aspects of celebrities while discarding the negative ones, thereby promoting their physical and mental well-being.

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