

GLORIFICATION AND BACKLASH - THE NATURE AND MECHANISM OF IDOL "BACKLASH" IN FAN CULTURE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF DISCOURSE ARCHAEOLOGY

YuFei Jiang

SDSZ International Department, Beijing 100023, China.

Abstract: This study takes Foucault's "Archaeology of Knowledge" as the core theoretical perspective, integrates the theory of emotional contract and the theory of social exchange, and focuses on the occurrence of backlash frequently faced by many Chinese idols and how their fanbase holds a different conception of what type of speeches or behaviors should be considered as backlash from the general public. . It explores how the Chinese idol industry is constructed and maintained through ongoing discourses Arguing that the essence of defining an idol's "backlash" lies in the rupture of the single or dual discursive archive rule of emotional contracts and social values. This study constructs an "emotion-value" dual-axis dynamic coordinate model for the study of idol culture, The X-axis focuses on the emotional contract of fans while the Y-axis focused on the social value recognized by the public for the evaluation of backlash. At the same time, it clarifies the two-way penetration between the two axes and defines the threshold boundary of the "absolute backlash determination zone". The explanatory power of this model will then be verified through cases across different fields. This model can provide concrete value in diagnosing the causes of the backlash, predicting the trend of public opinion, guiding public relations actions, and serving as a theoretical as well as practical toolkit for China's idol industry.

Keywords: Fan emotional contract; Social value discipline; Discursive archive rules; Diagnostic model

1 INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of the idol industry within the Chinese entertainment sector, accelerated by the digital era, has necessitated a critical re-examination of how idol identities are constructed and maintained. Nowadays, the social role of idols has shift dramatically; they are no longer merely actors, singers, or e-sports players, but have instead become complex cultural products. Through the strategic operation of capital, these figures are built upon a convergence of business, professional, policy, and fan-driven narratives discourses, creating a unique field that attracts a bunch of dedicated followers. However, as these individuals evolve from professional practitioners into glorified idols, a precarious discourse system emerges. The high expectations of the public, coupled with the intense emotional bonds of fans and the rapid flow of information, have shortened the life-cycle of these discourse systems from construction to disintegration. Consequently, the "backlash" of an idol's public persona has transitioned from an anomaly to a regular phenomenon.

This environment of frequent persona disintegration is further complicated by a significant cognitive rift between the general public and fan communities regarding what constitutes a "backlash." It is now common to observe contradictory scenarios where a singer is perceived as having backlashed by their fan base while the public remains indifferent, or conversely, where the public condemns an actor's actions while fans maintain their unwavering support. Such discrepancies highlight that the boundaries of what defines a backlash are increasingly blurred. Despite these developments, existing academic research lacks a rigorous definition of the essence of this backlash from the perspective of discourse archaeology, and there is an insufficient mechanical explanation of the underlying discourse rules. From an industry standpoint, there is an urgent demand for quantitative analysis tools that can assist idol agencies, brand partners, and regulatory bodies in accurately determining the nature of a backlash and predicting public opinion trends.

This research is guided by three primary questions: first, how do fans, agents, and idols collaboratively build and maintain a stable idol discourse system through the interaction of various discourses; second, what is the nature of an idol's "backlash"; and third, what specific factors cause the differences in backlash judgment between fans and the general public? The significance of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it seeks to define the nature of a backlash as a rupture in discourse system, thereby enriching the theoretical frameworks surrounding fan culture and the idol industry. Practically, this study aims to provide a theoretical basis and precise guidance for public relations, offering standardized tools for agents, brands, and regulatory institutions to use.

The methodology employed to investigate these issues is multifaceted, incorporating three distinct approaches. The research begins with a comprehensive literature review to synthesize classic theories and existing scholarship related to discourse archaeology, emotional contracts, social exchange, and fan culture. This is followed by a case study analysis, which selects representative instances of "backlash" and "non-backlash" across the fields of acting, music, and e-sports to conduct model substitution analysis. Finally, a comparative analysis will be utilized to examine the differences in bi-axial thresholds across these various fields, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the discourse dynamics.

2 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The theoretical foundation of this study is primarily rooted in Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* [1], which offers a rigorous analytical framework for examining discourse production and the rule-governed operations of the idol industry's discourse archive. Central to this perspective is the premise that discourse is not merely linguistic expressions but an amount of multifaceted statements that constructs knowledge, defines truth, and facilitates the distribution of power [1]. Within a specific field, these discourses coalesce into a distinct knowledge archive expressed through their norms, and such archives can only be analysed as fragmented, bounded systems separated by historical discontinuities [1]. By extending this theory to the sphere of cultural production, one can observe how the idol industry integrates multiple stakeholders—including capital, professional, and policy interests—to construct glorified personas and fan identity systems through systematic discursive practices. These practices rely on the accumulation of diverse "statements," which serve as the basic unit of discourse practice, such as fan rhetoric, media reports, marketing strategies, and the idols' own public utterances. Consequently, the idol industry's "archive" acts as the operational system governing these statements, and the phenomenon of "backlash" is fundamentally understood as a "rupture" within these systems, occurring when the system is subjected to external shocks [1].

The Theory of Emotional Contract also serves as a theoretical foundation. It is derived from organizational behavior [2], which focuses on the implicit psychological agreements formed between parties based on emotional expectations. In the idol industry, this contract manifests as a consensus regarding the rights and obligations shared by fans and idols [3]. As Lu Tong observes in her research on mimicry intimate relationships, the emotional labor performed by "girlfriend fans" is essentially an act of fulfilling this emotional contract, which stipulates an "expectation-reward" mechanism wherein fans invest emotions, time, and capital in exchange for an idealized "boyfriend" image [4]. Notably, any perceived "breach of contract"—where an idol's behavior undermines this implicit connection—directly results in the cessation of that labor, providing a critical psychological logic for understanding why a persona backlashes.

This relational dynamic is further elucidated by Social Exchange Theory [5], which interprets the operational mechanism of the emotional contract through the lens of cost and benefit. The relationship between fans and idols functions as a reciprocal system where fans invest time, capital, and emotion to support idols in anticipation of emotional satisfaction. As Zhang Chenrui's research suggests, the core of persona marketing lies in maintaining this exchange balance [6]. When an idol's behavior fails to meet these established expectations, it triggers a break in the exchange relationship, leading to emotional burnout and a significant shift in fan identity.

The evolution of fan culture research further informs this study, particularly through the perspective of "participatory culture" as proposed by Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* [7]. Jenkins' work subverts the traditional image of the passive audience, arguing instead that fans—as the primary consumers and supporters within the industry—actively participate in the construction of idol image through various kinds of reproduction and interaction such as texts and videos within the community, thereby adding new statements to the idol's discursive archive. Building upon this, from a psycho-political perspective, Wu Changchang identifies fan emotional labor as the primary driving force for maintaining these archives. Within this framework, agents create and manipulate idols according to fans' preference, shaping idols into glorified and idealized objects, ensuring the industry's continued expansion through the strategic management of these complex social and emotional exchanges [8].

3 "EMOTION-VALUE" DUAL-AXIS DYNAMIC COORDINATE MODEL

3.1 Construction of the "Emotion-Value" Dual-Axis Dynamic Coordinate Model

3.1.1 Model background and conceptual framework

The cognitive rift observed between the general public and fan communities regarding the phenomenon of "backlash" is fundamentally a difference between two distinct discourse systems. Drawing upon Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*, the essence of an idol's "backlash" within the Chinese industry can be defined as a rupture in discourse rules across two primary dimensions: the "emotional contract," which governs fan projection, and "social value," which reflects public expectations. Consequently, a "backlash" occurs when there is a significant mismatch between expectations and returns at either the fan or public level. In this model, the X-axis represents the emotional default utilized by fans, while the Y-axis represents the value failure recognized by the public. Although these two groups prioritize different levels of disconnection, the layers of discourse are not isolated but rather permeate one another.

3.1.2 Introduction to the dual-axis coordinates and quadrant analysis

The X-axis measures the strength of the emotional contract. Increased investment leads to a stronger emotional connection and higher expectations, thereby decreasing the tolerance for any breach of projection. A low X-value indicates an instrumental, easily replaceable relationship characterized by shallow emotional investment and a high tolerance for projection defaults. Conversely, a high X-value represents a deeply bounded relationship with minimal tolerance for deviations from the projected persona. The primary indicators for this axis include the degree of fan capital and time investment, the cohesion of the fan community, and the specific personality traits of the idol. A defining characteristic of the X-axis is its intense subjectivity; the criteria for judgment are established exclusively by the fan community, often operating through emotional rather than rational logic and influenced by in-group opinion.

Parallel to this, the Y-axis quantifies the idol's social value score, representing the total functional value recognized in the public domain. This score is a weighted sum of three sub-values: morality, professionalism, and commercial

viability. A low Y-value suggests that the idol's moral, professional, and commercial standings are questionable or insufficient, while a high Y-value shows moral integrity, professional excellence, and widespread recognition. Unlike the subjective X-axis, the Y-axis is characterized by objectification, grounded in explicit laws, social norms, and industry standards. Here, the power of judgment resides with broader social rules and the market.

The intersection of these axes creates a rectangular coordinate system with four distinct quadrants. The first quadrant (positive X and Y) represents a state of high emotional connection and high social value. While this is the most stable and ideal state, lots of idols that are well-known and glorified by the public to the greatest extents locate here. However, it is also uniquely vulnerable, the threshold for backlash is extremely high, but a breach—such as a criminal offense or a moral transgression like cheating that contradicts the fan-projected image—is devastating and results in a total rupture of discourse. The second quadrant (negative X, positive Y) encompass idols with high social value but weak emotional connection, such as respected actors who possess professional acclaim but lack a loyal, active fan base. The primary risk of “backlash” here is a decline in social value; while emotional fluctuations are minimal, professional or moral flaws lead directly to status degradation.

In the third quadrant (negative X and Y), idols possess both weak emotional connections and low social value, often including transient internet influencers. For these individuals, the glorified image was never built, making the definition of “backlash” vague; they may simply vanish from the industry if they lose their limited support or voluntarily escape due to the failure to receive expected rewards. From fans' perspectives, they can be replaced easily, while the public do not care about them. Finally, the fourth quadrant (positive X, negative Y) highlights the most severe “cognitive rift.” These idols may be ridiculed or sanctioned by the public due to their weak professional ability, bad virtue and low popularity, yet they maintain a fortress of extremely loyal fans. In this scenario, the emotional contract is often even strengthened by a “siege mentality” against the outside world, and a true “backlash” only occurs if the idol betrays the fans.

It is critical to note that professional fields—such as e-sports, acting, or “nurturing” idols—have varying tolerance thresholds; for instance, e-sports fans prioritize performance over private morality, whereas nurturing idol fans focus heavily on personal conduct.

3.1.3 The double-dimensional bidirectional penetration mechanism

Social value and emotional contracts are not static; they exhibit a mechanism of bidirectional penetration. In the idol discourse system, social value is often highlighted by fan activity; for example, an idol's commercial value is frequently a direct result of the financial investment made by fans. Therefore, a breach in the emotional contract can trigger a simultaneous decline in commercial value scores. This “projection default” by fans can lead to “value failure” in the public eye; if a mass exodus of fans causes endorsement sales to plummet, the idol's commercial value fails. Furthermore, if fans disseminate negative “statements” or engage in illegal activities, the idol's moral and social standing will be severely undermined. Conversely, a “value failure” from the public level can invalidate the fans' projection. If an idol's moral failure removes the legitimate basis for fan adoration, it creates a sense of shame and betrayal that terminates the supportive behavior.

3.1.4 Determination of the “backlashed” area

To provide practical utility, this model introduces the “Backlashed Area,” an L-shaped shaded zone. This area posits that a backlash is determined by whether a specific event pushes their coordinates across an irreversible non-returnable threshold. This boundary allows for an immediate determination of whether a discourse system has permanently ruptured, representing a consensus of an idol is officially “backlashed” between the public and the fans, helping to bridge the cognitive gap between the public and fans. On the Y-axis, a universal “red line” is defined by law and fundamental public order; crossing this line (e.g., through criminal activity) constitutes a total societal backlash regardless of fan sentiment. On the X-axis, the red line is reached when behavior causes an irreversible emotional exodus of majority fans. This threshold is contingent upon the specific idol type; for a “Growth-oriented” idol, an exposed romantic relationship might cross the line, whereas for an actor, it might not. Once an idol enters the area below these red lines, the backlash is considered officially happened, though the model excludes the negligible presence of “die-hard” outliers who remain after the system has broken down.

3.2 Dynamic Influence Factors of the Coordinate Model

In the contemporary entertainment landscape, characterized by rapid information dissemination, any single incident can reshape an idol's public image or the emotional contract between idols and their fan base. Grounded in Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, an idol's “archive” can be interpreted as a continuous accumulation of diverse dispositions from fans, capital, and the artists themselves. Consequently, an idol's position on the X and Y axes is inherently dynamic; subtle shifts—whether upward, downward, or lateral—are driven by “statements” that either reinforce or undermine the discourse system. This fluidity allows for the visualization of the “glorification” process as idols move toward ideal positions or the “backlash” process as they drift into the determination area. The distribution within the four quadrants is thus a snapshot of a constantly evolving discursive rule system that alters alongside these coordinate changes.

Various discursive “statements” serve as the catalysts for these coordinate shifts. Fan-driven statements can push an idol's position to the right on the X-axis (+X) through the construction of “hardship,” or “boyfriend” narratives, while simultaneously pushing them upward on the Y-axis (+Y) by buying products to improve commercial sales data, controlling public reviews to simulate a “good reputation,” or gaining professional awards for their idols through

collective voting. Conversely, fans can also trigger a leftward shift on the X-axis (-X) through mass unfollowing, or a downward Y-axis shift (-Y) when Fan's own irrational behavior generates a widespread negative public perception of their idol. Business statements exert similar influence; brands strengthen the X-axis (+X) by organizing fan-caring personas and events, while enhancing the Y-axis social value score (+Y) by granting formal titles like "brand spokesperson" or "brand ambassador." However, business involvement can also cause negative shifts, such as when an idol aligns with a brand of bad reputation—making fans feel exploited (-X)—or associates with low-end brands that invite scorn from authoritative fashion or business people (-Y).

Professional statements also play a critical role; professional achievements foster "common glory" that reinforces the emotional contract (+X) and directly improves social value through awards and viewership data (+Y). A decline in performance or professional quality conversely erodes the basis for fan worship (-X) and invites public ridicule (-Y). Finally, policy statements provide institutional validation; official praise integrates into the collective fan identity, creating "common glory" (+X) and enhances social credibility (+Y), whereas official characterizations of misconduct can destroy fan faith (-X) and irreversibly damage moral, commercial, and professional standing (-Y). An illustrative application of this dynamic involves an idol initially positioned in the third quadrant (medium X, low Y); through the agents' production of intimate video content, fans begin to project fantasies (+X), while professional training and curated positive exposure gradually elevate their public recognition (+Y) (Figure 1).

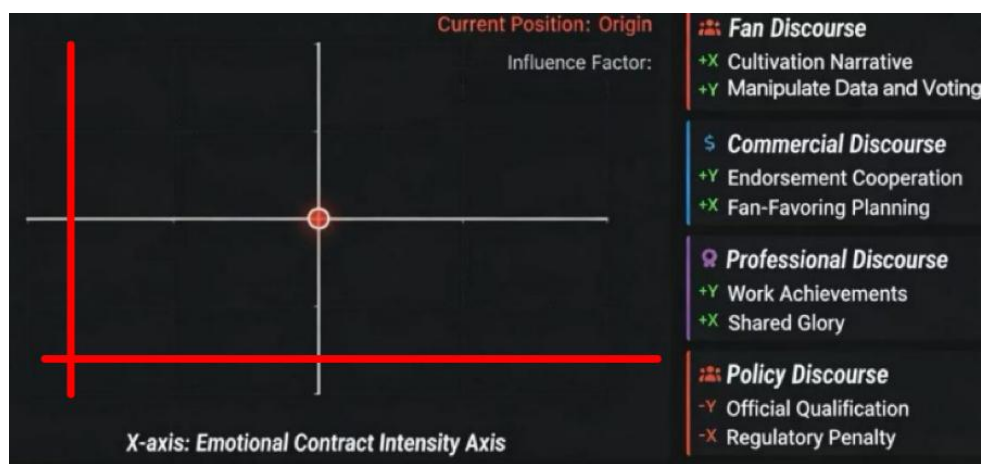


Figure 1 "Emotion-Value" Dual-Axis Dynamic Coordinate Model

3.3 Model's Practical Significance

The application value of this model extends to the industry's multifaceted stakeholders. For the general public and fans, it redefines the nature of "backlash" as a rupture of discursive rules between the emotional and social layers, revealing that the divergence in judgment is a competition for the right to define the idol rather than a simple cognitive rift. For idol agents, the model facilitates precise fan operations—allowing them to for instance strengthen the X-axis for Growth-Oriented idols or the Y-axis for actors and e-sports players—while providing a framework for precise crisis public relations. Brands can utilize this model for risk assessment by monitoring dynamic changes to avoid idols nearing the backlash zone, while regulatory institutions can rely on the rigid Y-axis "red line" to enforce moral and legal standards through policy discourse. Furthermore, the model serves a social function by guiding fans toward healthier entertainment life thus reducing the irrational defense mechanisms caused by the sunk cost of their emotional investment.

4 CASE STUDIES ON IDOLS ACROSS DIFFERENT FIELDS

The selection of case studies for this research is governed by three primary principles designed to ensure the robust application of the "Emotion-Value" dual-axis model. First, the Multi-field Coverage principle necessitates the selection of typical figures from the idol training system, the film and television industry, and the e-sports sector, thereby including varying intensities of emotional contracts and diverse social value weightings. Second, the Multi-quadrant Distribution principle ensures that the cases span across different quadrants within the model, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of various idols' situations. Finally, the Typicality Principle dictates the selection of cases with significant social influence that effectively represent the unique discourse rules inherent to their respective professional fields.

4.1 Growth-Oriented Idols: The Primacy of the Emotional Contract

In the field of *Growth-Oriented* idols, the weighting of the X-axis (emotional contract) significantly exceeds that of the Y-axis, with the moral sub-item carrying the highest significance. ZhangJunhao's 2024 relationship controversy serves as a representative case. Initially, he occupied a position in the first quadrant close to the X-axis, characterized by high emotional value but medium-to-low social value. The controversy's impact was concentrated on the X-axis; the

revelation of a relationship constituted a breach of the implicit contract within the trainee system, which requires idols to maintain a single image to facilitate fan projection. Lots of fans stop supporting because Zhang Junhao betray the emotional contract between him and his fans, the projection is gone, causing the coordinates to drop toward the X-axis red line.

While the unsubstantiated nature of the revelations placed the case within the "backlash judgment zone," the result was a bifurcated fan response: while a substantial portion of the fan base exited, others maintained a high level of tolerance due to the psychological sunk cost. To repair this rupture, the agent issued a formal statement of singleness while admitting to improper interactions [6], attempting to pull the X-axis back from the red line through sincere apologies. Simultaneously, the dissemination of fan-made "victim narrative" videos on social media sought to reshape the discourse. By pivoting toward the release of high-quality works and transitioning the subject's identity from a trainee to a professional singer, the agent successfully initiated a gradual recovery of the Y-axis.

4.2 Film and Television idols: Professional Value and Public Image

For film and television actors, the Y-axis carries greater weight than the X-axis, with professional capability and public image serving as the dominant sub-items. Liu Haoran's 2023 relationship exposure incident demonstrates these dynamics [7]. Initially positioned in the first quadrant near the Y-axis, Liu possessed a medium-to-high emotional contract—rooted in his "National Little Brother" and "youthful" persona—alongside high social value as a mainstream actor with a strong professional background. The exposure of a romantic relationship primarily affected the X-axis, as the contrast between his youthful image and real-life maturity caused a perceived projection breach for some fans.

However, displacement judgment reveals that because romantic life does not touch upon the core professional requirements of acting, the incident did not enter the absolute backlash zone. The result was a state of crisis rather than a terminal backlash; the long-term accumulation of professional work fostered high fan tolerance, preventing the disintegration of the core community and shifting fan focus toward "supporting the work rather than the character." The restoration path involved reducing variety show exposure and focusing on serious artistic roles, such as in the film *Decoding*, to reshape social value through professional skill. This successfully redirected discourse on platforms like Douban and Bilibili toward acting quality, verifying that for second-quadrant actors, backlash risks stem almost exclusively from Y-axis failures.

4.3 E-sports Stars: The "Score-First" Discourse

In the e-sports field, professional value on the Y-axis accounts for approximately 95% of the total weight, while tolerance for private morality remains exceptionally high. Analysis of the player Yino regarding controversial speech showed only slight fluctuations on both axes, resulting in no significant impact; this confirms that the "score-first" rule of the competitive circle effectively weakens the influence of moral sub-values. Conversely, the case of Naiyou [8] — who was involved in match-fixing—demonstrates a terminal backlash. The professional ethics violation caused the Y-axis professional sub-value to fall directly below the red line, necessitating a repair path of serious review and suspension. These cases verify the extreme weighting of professional sub-values and the distinct Y-axis thresholds unique to e-sports.

4.4 An Extreme Case: The Y-Axis Deal Breaker

The deal breaker of the Y-axis red line is most clearly exemplified by the case of Kris Wu [9]. Originally positioned in an ideal, stable state within the first quadrant, the confirmation of rape charges and subsequent intervention by policy-driven forces caused his social value to plummet directly below the universal rigid red line. This resulted in an absolute backlash recognized by the entirety of society. Crucially, the model illustrates a dual-axis penetration mechanism: the complete breakage of the Y-axis triggered an immediate and rapid disintegration of the fans, significantly moving to the left on X-axis. The fundamental rupture of the social value layer destroyed the possibility of emotional faith among fans, proving that regardless of the strength of an emotional contract, a violation of the Y-axis red line leads to a devastating and irreversible backlash of both discursive axes.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH PROSPECTS

The findings of this study indicate that the idol discourse system is jointly established by four primary discourse subjects: fans, commercial entities, professional institutions, and policy-making bodies. Each of these subjects actively influences the dynamic positioning of an idol along the axes of emotional contract and social value through specific discursive statements. A critical observation of this research is the existence of a bidirectional penetration mechanism between these two dimensions, wherein a rupture in one discursive layer—whether emotional or value-based—frequently precipitates a chain reaction that destabilizes the other. Fundamentally, the essence of an idol's "backlash" is defined as the rupture, which means the betrayal of the emotional contracts or the disproved social value. Consequently, the frequently observed divergence in judgment between fan communities and the general public should not be dismissed as mere cognitive bias; rather, it represents a profound competition between distinct discourse systems for the right to define and evaluate the idol, specifically regarding whether the interpretive emphasis is placed on the Y-axis of social utility or the X-axis of emotional projection. Furthermore, the "emotion-value" dual-axis dynamic model

developed herein offers significant application value as an analytical framework. It provides a structured methodology for diagnosing an idol's fundamental market position, establishing a clear threshold for what constitutes a backlash, and offering strategic guidance for public relations interventions, thereby serving as a robust tool for idol management, brand partnerships, and industry-wide supervision.

Moving forward, several avenues for further research can be done to refine this current model. First, there is a clear necessity for quantitative empirical research to detailized the proposed dual-axis scoring system to a clear and standardized number. By utilizing big data analysis, future studies can verify the specific sub-value weights within the social value dimension, thereby quantifying the precise scales and thresholds of the model to enhance its predictive accuracy and operational utility. Second, the scope of this research could be broadened through cross-cultural comparative studies. By examining the discourse systems and backlash mechanisms inherent in international idol industries, researchers can explore how varying cultural backgrounds and divergent policies influence the dual-axis thresholds. Such comparative analysis would clarify the specific rules governing discursive ruptures across different global contexts, providing a more nuanced understanding of the idol industry and fan culture as a global cultural product.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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

REFERENCE

- [1] Foucault M. The archaeology of knowledge. Routledge, 1972.
- [2] Levinson H, Price C R, Munden K J, et al. Men, Management, and Mental Health. Harvard University Press, 1962, 3: 38.
- [3] Rousseau D M. Psychological contracts in organizations. 1995.
- [4] Lu T. A study on emotional labor of “girlfriend fans” from the perspective of mimetic intimate relationships. Zhejiang University of Media and Communications, 2025.
- [5] Homans G C. Social behavior as exchange. American Journal of Sociology, 1958, 63(6): 597–606.
- [6] Zhang C R, Wang X H. Construction, dissemination and collapse: The crisis and countermeasures of idol persona marketing in the social media era. Media Forum, 2023, 22.
- [7] Jenkins H. Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture. University of Iowa Press, 1992.
- [8] Wu C C, Gu M M. The collapse of idols and the spiritual politics of popular culture. Jiangsu Social Sciences, 2023.