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Fans and Friendships: The Power of Live Concerts among Chinese Young Adults

Yingjue Lyu^{1,*}

¹ Wuxi Dipont School of Arts and Science, Wuxi, Jiangsu, China

* Correspondence: Yingjue Lyu, Wuxi Dipont School of Arts and Science, Wuxi, Jiangsu, China.

Abstract: This qualitative study explores the concert-going experiences of Chinese young adults, focusing on the role of parasocial relationships and interactive ritual chains in shaping their emotional engagement and social interactions. Through in-depth interviews with nine participants, the research reveals how social media fosters parasocial relationships, enhancing fans' emotional connections with pop stars and motivating concert attendance. The study also examines the ritual of exchanging souvenirs, which strengthens communal bonds and distinguishes true fans through their non-commercial exchanges. The findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of the multi-faceted appeal of live pop music concerts.

Keywords: parasocial relationships; interactive ritual chains; live music concerts; social media engagement; fan culture

1. Introduction

China has experienced a remarkable resurgence in its concert scene since 2023. With the lifting of restrictions, the demand for live performances has skyrocketed. In the first three quarters of 2023, China saw a significant increase in commercial performances, with over 342,400 events taking place, which is a 278.76% rise compared to the same period in the previous year, generating a box office revenue of more than 31.54 billion yuan (\$4.44 billion) [12]. Pop music stars play a significant role in enabling this boom. When singer-songwriter Xue Zhiqian held concerts in Quzhou, a city in Zhejiang province, for instance, it led to record hotel occupancy rates and a surge in tourism [4]. Young fans, who are usually 18-30 years old, travel from different parts of the country to see these live performances, contributing to a vibrant "concert economy" [10].

Live pop music concerts have consistently been a popular form of entertainment, offering a unique experience that cannot be replicated through recorded music. Brown and Knox identified four key themes driving concert attendance: experience, engagement, novelty, and practical considerations. Their study revealed that attendees seek to "be there" and be part of something special, sharing the experience with like-minded individuals [2]. This aligns with the findings of Mulder and Hitters, who developed the Live Music Motivation Scale (LMMS) and found that people attend concerts for artistic reasons and the uniqueness of the live experience [11]. Attending a live pop music concert is also a characteristically social activity where audience satisfaction is influenced by the social company and the collective atmosphere of the event. Mulder and Hitters also noted that live music performances are attended particularly for social and personal reasons [11].

Although relevant studies abound, they usually focus on concert-going as a collective experience. Individuals' lived experiences and emotional engagement in these events are generally overlooked. Young adults are a major driving force behind the booming live music industry in China. Understanding how young adults feel, interact, form communities, and express their identities could shed light on broader social dynamics. This study

Published: 29 September 2024



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unpacks Chinese young adults' concert-going experiences by focusing on not only the concert themselves, but the relationships and emotional investment that make concerts appealing and popular. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 9 Chinese young adults, this paper asks: How do these individuals perceive and articulate their concert experiences? What role do social interactions and emotional connections play in their decision to attend concerts? How do these experiences influence their sense of identity and community? By addressing these questions, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of concert-going among Chinese young adults.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Parasocial relationships

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are one-sided relationships where an individual feels a connection with a media figure, such as a musician or performer, despite no real interaction occurring. The concept was first conceived by Horton and Wohl [7], and since then has been used extensively in the field of media and communication studies. The idea of PSR helps to comprehend the processes and the emotions that the fans utilize while going to concerts for their idol. In fact, it was only the beginning of the studies of parasocial relationships where Perse and Rubin [13] hypothesized that the experienced attributional belief from parasocial interaction will be equivalent to social interaction. This base research highlights the psychological mechanisms underlying the history of parasocial relations and the way such behavior influences one's desire to attend concerts.

According to research done in 2014 by Tukachinsky and Sangalang, PSRs can promote identification with media personae [14]. The parasocial attraction of the fans to the artists can as well be a reason that would influence them to attend the live performances. In this age where digital media has become prevalent, there are many ways in which PSRs are constructed. Chung and Cho in their 2014 report acknowledged the positive relationship between the viewing of "non-fiction" television programming and social networking and the audience identification with television characters [5]. This indicates that fans could use various platforms to interact with the performers, further help in intensifying their parasocial interactions. Moreover, digital platforms such as YouTube have been helping fans develop parasocial interactions with their favorite artists. Chen points out, for example, that digital platforms help celebrities to build a digital persona, thereby enhancing parasocial interactions and relationships [3]. This means that we need to consider the role digital platforms play in motivating concert attendance.

2.2. Interactive ritual chains

The theory of interactive ritual chains [6], created by Collins, gives us a useful way to look at going to concerts. This theory of symbolic interaction states that social interaction is like rituals that can therefore generate emotions, collective cohesiveness and feelings of togetherness among people. Collins holds that such rituals are effective when people co-ordinate on the target, are in the same directs, and step in tune [6]. Concerts, because they can be considered as group events, create rather powerful identities, thus making emotional relating and social bonding. Such communal tempo can bring about rejuvenation at concerts and make people among fans have strong feelings about group membership.

More evidence for this position was provided by Mulder and Hitters who also found out that live music events serve social and personal functions and the interactive rituals contribute to the level of satisfaction [11]. These findings indicate that social and emotional experiences of the live music concert are vital aspects that make the entire event appealing to the society.

2.3. Integration of theories

Based on the concepts of the parasocial relationships and the interactive ritual chains, the aim is to get the complete understanding why young adults are interested in the live pop music concerts. Parasocial relationships allows considering the sense of individuals' belongingness and their loyalty to the performers, whereas interactive ritual chains enable to analyze the interactions during the concerts. The theories underline that people attend concerts because of connection with the artists and in search of similar emotion arousing experiences with others. For instance, a fan would develop a higher enthusiasm and thrill about a concert, if they consider the pop star involved a friend. On the other hand, activities of the concert like singing along, dancing, feeling the music together with the fellow concert-goers bring about unity and happiness.

3. Methods

It is a qualitative study. The author conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews to elucidate how Chinese young adults experienced concerts. A total of nine participants were purposefully selected using convenience and snowball sampling methods. It should be noted that these participants are college students aged from 18 to 33 years from the east of China. Of the nine, eight identified as women and one did not disclose their gender.

Interviews were face-to-face or via video chat. In-depth interviews must be structured to maintain focuses [9], and semi-structured interviews were selected. This grounded approach revealed the intricate aspects of concert experiences, combining insights into people's motives for attending, their social context interactions and emotional connections. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, as this allowed the study participants to express themselves more freely. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed verbatim, as well as translated into English for analysis.

Thematic coding, a standard method in qualitative research for categorizing and reporting themes/styles [1], was used to analyze the interview data. The coding process began with an initial reading of the transcripts for a collection of information. Next, the data were categorized to identify key themes pertinent to research questions. These codes were grouped into potential themes, which were repeatedly reviewed and refined to accurately reflect the data. We came up with names for the final themes to be presented in a way that spoke to our participants' stories of attending concerts.

4. Findings

4.1. Building parasocial relationships through social media

Social media is now a key part of the music industry, especially in building connections between fans and pop stars. These online interactions are not just one-way; celebrities often reply to their fans with comments, shares, and direct messages. This two-way communication makes fans feel even closer to the artists they like.

"I just feel familiar with him. He's like an acquaintance of mine". When asked about their relationship with their idol, interviewee 1 made such a description. The statement exemplifies the personal connection that fans develop through social media interactions. This familiarity is often reinforced by the frequency and intimacy of the celebrity's online presence. Celebrities who share personal stories, behind-the-scenes content, and respond to fan comments create a narrative that fans feel they are a part of, which deepens their emotional investment.

Moreover, the immediacy of social media allows for real-time interactions, which can further blur the lines between private life and public persona. Fans can witness their favorite artists' reactions to events as they happen, creating a sense of simultaneity and shared experience. This timeliness enhances the perception of closeness and can lead to stronger parasocial relationships. Interviewee 4 described closely following a celebrity on social media, receiving immediate update notifications, and checking them multiple times

a day: "I followed him closely, and he would immediately send me update notifications, so I would click in to check them out". The higher the frequency of social media interactions, the stronger the parasocial bond between fans and celebrities. This continuous interaction creates a sense of ongoing presence and involvement in the celebrity's life, making the parasocial relationship more dynamic and engaging.

4.2. *Strengthening parasocial relationships through concert attendance*

One outstanding characteristic observed from the interview data is that fans are increasingly participating in not just one, but multiple concerts in different locations by travelling around the country. Participating in multiple concerts can significantly enhance the parasocial relationship between fans and idols. This phenomenon is evident in several interviews. For instance, Interviewee 3 attended two concerts for the same artist and even paid an additional 4000 RMB (around 560 USD) to secure a first-row seat for the second concert. She described the experience as surreal, stating:

"It's like the person you usually listen to in your headphones is just a few meters away from you, jumping and dancing around. It feels like a dream, like you've had this amazing dream and then suddenly woken up".

This proximity to the idol intensified her parasocial relationship, making the experience more personal and emotionally significant. Being physically close to the performer at the concert created a sense of intimacy that went beyond typical fan-celebrity interactions. However, going to multiple concerts can affect parasocial relationships differently. Interviewee 4 said that while the first concert felt like meeting the idol, the second felt more like meeting a friend. This change in feeling shows that the initial excitement of seeing an idol can turn into a more familiar and comfortable relationship over time. Similarly, Interviewee 9 mentioned she felt less excitement during later concerts because she expected to see the idol again: "I wasn't very excited because I know I'll go to the next concert and there will be more chances to meet."

These different experiences suggest that while attending multiple concerts can strengthen parasocial relationships, the level of impact may depend on personal feelings and expectations. The initial thrill of seeing an idol may lessen with repeated attendance, but the sense of familiarity and ongoing connection can still keep a strong parasocial bond.

4.3. *The ritual of exchanging souvenirs*

The exchanging of souvenirs could also be seen as a form of bonding that also emphasizes on uniting the fans for a certain purpose which is very important in live music events according to Van der Hoeven & Hitters [15]. When exchanging self-made souvenirs at the concerts fans not only enhance the meaning of such concerts in terms of social and cultural perspectives but also strengthen the bonds with their beloved artists.

Interviewee 4 highlighted the emotional energy created through the exchange of souvenirs: "It seems to be the energy of love production" 'Every person can exchange something and at the result one will be given all sorts of little pretty things that make us and the celebrity closer'. This comment seeks to put a lot of focus on the energy that is usually involved especially when it is performed during a live concert. The souvenirs are not only tangible objects; it refers to feelings that have been experienced during the concert and contributes to non-material cultural value of the live music concert [15]. Similarly, Interviewee 5 mentioned the meaningful connections made through these exchanges: "It is good that everyone is here because of the same interest, which is so nice, right? I believe that exchanging items is good to recall; maybe we should exchange something, I have quite many bracelets here, some of those have the nicest meaning to me".

Subsequently, swapping of the souvenirs during a live pop music concert enriches the social/cultural worth of the event. It renews parasocial interaction, builds up social belongingness, and incurs positive emotional effect.

4.4. Distinguishing “true fans” through interactive ritual chains

The ritual of exchanging souvenirs also distinguishes true fans from those who are only interested in commercial gain. Before concerts, many people sell souvenirs outside the arena, some at high prices for profit. However, “true fans” create and exchange souvenirs without asking for money. They are driven by a passion for the music and a desire to connect with others who share their enthusiasm. Interviewee 4 shared, for example:

“So we all like to draw some cartoon versions of him (the artist). Last year, I drew one myself and made it into a clip and a keychain to give out for free at his concert. Then last week, when I went to the concert, I saw someone with the same clip and keychain. It was such a special moment because it felt like a connection between true fans”.

This act of giving and receiving personalized items not only signifies a commitment to the artist but also fosters a sense of mutual recognition and validation among fans. Moreover, the act can also be seen as a form of gift-giving, which, as noted in relevant literature, is a social phenomenon known in all cultures and is often used to build and maintain relationships [8]. In the context of live music concerts, gift-giving through souvenir exchanges is not just about the exchanged objects but also about the social bonds and relationships that are solidified through the act.

In conclusion, the exchange of souvenirs at live pop music concerts is a significant practice that distinguishes true fans and contributes to the social and cultural values of live music. It is a ritual that strengthens interactive ritual chains, fosters a sense of community, and deepens the parasocial relationships between fans and the artists they admire, creating a more profound and meaningful experience for all involved.

5. Conclusion

The revival of pop music concerts in China since 2023 has unearthed insights about young adults’ social and emotional needs for venues like live concert venues. The study presented here therefore further qualifies the complexities of concert-going through elucidating processes of parasocial relationships in conjunction with interactive ritual chains. By the lens of parasocial relationships, research has proven that social media perfectly served as a platform through which fans’ emotional ties with their favorite artists were nurtured. And the perspective of participatory behavior in ritual chains provides an additional explanation of the social nature of experiencing music together.

The ritual of exchanging souvenirs is a key practice crucial for fostering collective ties among fans. It serves to separate the true fans from those just looking to make a buck, but it also acts as an actualization of the emotional connection and communal nature that is intrinsically tied up with attending live music. More broadly, the findings highlight the need for future research to better account both for individual motivations and social forces when explaining why people attend live music events.

With the changing landscape of the concert industry, it is important to understand what draws young adult attendees. The findings of this study can provide with insights relevant to ways in which fan engagement may be extended, opportunities for artist-fan interaction may be fostered and on broader terms why live music should sustain and remain active. Future academics could be future study how a parasocial relationships with the stars, or participatory rituals may affect the loyalty and long-term membership of fans over time. Additionally, what role exactly can virtual concerts play in recreating live experiences during which emotional and social ties are formed.

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