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Postprint: Body Simulacrum Characteristics and Aesthetic Transformation of Virtual Idols in the Variety Show “2060”

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Abstract

[Objective] This study aims to analyze the underlying social phenomena and issues, thereby providing insights for the aesthetic transformation of domestic virtual idols. [Method] The article employs content analysis as the primary research method, coding the bodily simulacra of 25 virtual idols featured in the variety show “2060”. [Results] The study reveals that the absence of middle-aged and elderly representations among virtual idols reflects contemporary appearance anxiety. Capital furnishes fans with a set of aesthetic symbol illusions, engendering new aesthetic concepts through the deconstruction of the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity. Meanwhile, virtual images are predominantly and profoundly influenced by foreign two-dimensional (anime/manga) culture, hindering their ability to develop a distinctive style or transcend subcultural boundaries. [Conclusion] The development of China’s virtual idols can seek inspiration for aesthetic transformation through three avenues: strengthening realist core values, aligning with the everyday lives of the general populace, achieving diversified image-based communication and dialogue, and integrating traditional Chinese cultural resources.

Full Text

An Exploration of the Simulacrum Characteristics and Aesthetic Transformation of Virtual Idols’ Bodies in the Variety Show “2060”

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Abstract

Purpose: This study analyzes the underlying social phenomena and issues reflected in virtual idols to provide insights for the aesthetic transformation of domestically produced virtual idols in China. **Method:** Using content analysis as the primary research method, the study encodes the bodily simulacra of 25 virtual idols appearing in the variety show “2060.” **Results:** The research finds that the absence of middle-aged and elderly images among virtual idols reflects modern appearance anxiety. Capital provides fans with a set of aesthetic symbolic illusions, generating new aesthetic concepts through the deconstruction of the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity. Meanwhile, virtual images are generally deeply influenced by foreign 二次元 (ACG) culture, making it difficult for them to develop a unique style or break into mainstream circles. **Conclusion:** The development of China’s virtual idols can seek inspiration for aesthetic transformation from three aspects: strengthening realist core values to align with everyday life, achieving diversified image-based dialogue and exchange, and effectively integrating traditional Chinese cultural resources.

Keywords: virtual idol; “2060” ; bodily simulacrum; subculture; aesthetics

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1. Research Status of Virtual Idols

1.1 Development Status and Operational Models Virtual idols originated in Japan and have gradually demonstrated unique value in contemporary China. Early mature domestic virtual idols include Luo Tianyi and Yuezheng Ling. With technological development, computer-generated virtual characters have become increasingly “human-like,” evolving from 2D animated characters to 3D hyper-realistic virtual figures. Virtual idols have inevitably become important actors in the metaverse, pioneering its integration with the real world. “2060” is an original domestic anime character stage competition program broadcast by Jiangsu Satellite TV in October 2021, and the first televised variety show featuring virtual characters. Compared with early similar online programs, “2060” brings together top animation designers from across China, offering more sophisticated technology and high-quality visual experiences that bring virtual life into broader public view. The author takes the V-life virtual idols from this program as research subjects, encoding their bodily simulacrum characteristics to examine underlying social phenomena and problems, and further explores how domestic virtual idols can achieve effective aesthetic transformation.

As consumption levels rise and interest communities grow, alongside continuous improvement in artificial intelligence technology, China’s virtual human industry is in a stage of rapid development. According to data from iMedia Research,

China's virtual idol industry has maintained stable growth, with a total market size of 107.49 billion yuan in 2021. The core virtual idol market was 6.22 billion yuan in 2021, Chinese netizens' attention to virtual humans increased by 87.8% in 2022, and the pan-entertainment market is expected to exceed 1.7 trillion yuan by 2024 [1]. Whether virtual idols can gain large fan bases and strong financing capabilities depends largely on young people's consumption preferences, technological R&D and marketing capabilities, and safety issues. The current operational model for virtual idols is basically "entertainment agency + technology agency," where entertainment agencies are responsible for image development, character building, and advertising, while technology agencies mainly provide relevant technical support. Popular virtual idols generally have high levels of personality and appearance recognition. Once their character design matures, they further achieve monetization through brand endorsements and live-streaming sales based on sufficient traffic support [2].

1.2 Z-Generation's Self-Psychological Projection Generation Z's love for 二次元 (ACG) culture exerts an important influence on popular culture. Their digital and virtualized lifestyles, social interactions, and consumption have made virtual idols part of mass culture, attracting an increasing number of brands to adopt virtual KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) for traffic generation. With the promotion of subcultures and rising consumption power among Gen Z, virtual idols have captured the psychological needs of this demographic, offering perfect character settings and a sense of zero distance, providing independent imaginative space, and fulfilling the social interaction and recognition lacking in real life, thereby generating ideal and emotional 寄托 [3]. As cultural consumption symbols, virtual idols represent one way for fans to confirm their essential human powers. Audiences project their hopes and dreams onto virtual idols, whose every move thus becomes an ideal lifestyle model for fans of specific social strata, ages, and personalities [4]. Virtual idols can enable fans to obtain recognition and satisfaction through long-term, highly creative and innovative interactive processes [5].

1.3 Deconstruction of Traditional Entertainment Ecology Computer technology has fully penetrated contemporary film and television production, forming a digital modern generation logic. The virtual idol group creates a new round of consumption spectacles, undergoing ontological changes from the manifest technical and material to the latent artistic and linguistic, which will inevitably cause changes in traditional entertainment ecology and push it toward new forms of industrialization, intelligent entertainment, and gamified entertainment [6]. As the name suggests, motion capture is a technology that records and digitizes movement [7]. In addition to motion capture, virtual idols are also based on Vocaloid systems and holographic projection technology. Based on the virtual bodily dimension, virtual idols provide a collective ecosystem platform where fans can communicate with each other and even create their own "virtual idols," experiencing the joy and sense of achievement in the shaping process

[8]. This fan participation breaks through the power relations of traditional fan culture, subverting and reconstructing traditional entertainment ecology. As production objects, virtual idols overcome the physiological and psychological limitations of real people, have more sustainable character settings, and have given rise to a “third type of production” where real idols and virtual idols perform together on stage [6].

1.4 Disappearance of “Aura” Under Technical Manipulation In post-modern visual society, reality is constructed. People live in a “hyper-real” world, which is primarily expressed through the imaginative representation of the real world via media technology [9]. The “hyper-real” existence of virtual idols, enhanced by technology and displayed in different contexts, strengthens public cognition, makes audiences dependent on media-produced illusions, and unconsciously turns them into objects of capital consumption [10]. Through technology and media, virtual idols construct idealized body images that transcend reality, extending them into a mass-coded body industry. Bodies manipulated by technology have long lost their “spirituality,” gradually transforming authentic bodily experiences into replicable industrial production [11].

1.5 Temperament Discipline and Symbolic Consumption Under Patriarchal Gaze Foucault’s power theory states that discourse is, in a sense, the embodiment of power, which operates within the discourse of cultural mechanisms [12]. Baudrillard points out that symbolic value means when an item is consumed as a sign, its value is determined by the power and social status it represents rather than by cost or labor value [13]. Through the empowerment of power discourse and technology, virtual idols’ bodies are digitally encoded and symbolized, constructed as symbolic landscapes that can be watched and evaluated by the media [14]. Through technological and media mechanisms, virtual idols construct female body landscapes that conform to patriarchal social expectations, internalizing gender ideology to satisfy users’ symbolic consumption desires under the combination of 二次元 (ACG) culture and femininity [11]. Through mastery of technology, fans possess the dual emotional experience of simultaneously performing emotional labor and emotional consumption, while also achieving the discipline and consumption of femininity [5].

2. Research Questions and Significance

Domestic research on virtual idols has increased rapidly since 2018. After reviewing relevant literature, the author found that there is still a gap in research themes focusing on specific quantitative analysis of virtual idols’ simulacrum bodies. The author believes that only by understanding the virtualized body itself can we deeply comprehend the meanings inscribed upon its “body,” thereby guiding industrial development. Therefore, using the concept of “simulacrum” combined with body aesthetics, this study encodes these representative virtual images from the variety show “2060” across different, distinctive, and important

dimensions. Based on this analysis, the study examines existing problems in current domestic virtual idols to provide insights for their aesthetic transformation in China.

3. Research Methods

This study primarily employs content analysis as its specific research method, operationalizing and encoding the simulacrum bodies of various characters in “2060” to conduct quantitative analysis of their image characteristics.

4. Coding Implementation Process

The research subjects include all 25 human and 1 non-human virtual images appearing in “2060,” specifically: Dianzanxian, Lingqiu, Wuxian Shaonü, Xian, Gong, Xingtong, Qihai, Mengjiang, Zhizhi, Tianqi Azhun, Yunyoyo, Linqi, Nongmouxian, Qi, Muxi, Fuyouer, Airuisi, Jixuaner, Xuancai, Xiangchu, Feihong Haili, KUMA, ZOZO, Xiaotu, Zhiyue, and TV Chicken. The following table presents the specific encoding of their bodily simulacra, with numbers in parentheses indicating the count of virtual idols possessing a particular simulacrum characteristic. Due to significant differences in simulacrum characteristics, the non-human image is not included in this table with other characters.

Body Simulacrum Categories and Encoding Elements

5. Hair: Long hair: twin tails (7), other styles (12); Medium-short hair (2); Short hair (4)

4. Clothing Style: Modern (15); Mecha (4); Ancient style (4); Mixed style (2)

5. Research Findings

5.1 Absence of Middle-Aged and Elderly Images: Appearance Anxiety and Aesthetic Illusion The absence of middle-aged and elderly images among virtual idols reflects modern appearance anxiety. Improved living standards have rapidly increased people’s daily aesthetic needs and symbolic consumption demands, which is both an inevitable result of development and a new challenge on the development path. However, countless people have fallen into the trap of “appearance is justice,” making appearance anxiety a widespread “mental illness” among young people. Appearance anxiety refers to the psychological distress caused by dissatisfaction with one’s looks or figure, primarily driven by monolithic mainstream aesthetics that leave individuals lacking confidence in their appearance. Simultaneously, individual cognition is integrated into group consensus via the internet, gradually evolving into a significant social phenomenon, while mass media continuously reinforces the body itself as a consumption object. Virtual idols thus become one of many consumption methods to alleviate appearance anxiety, reflecting aesthetic youthfulness through their nearly “perfect” appearance and figures, satisfying fans’ worship and pursuit of

beauty. Under capital's control of audience psychology, fans become immersed in the beautiful fantasies packaged by virtual idols, leading to aesthetic alienation and escape from reality. The simulacrum characteristics of uniformly long legs and big eyes, to some extent, limit people's definition of "beauty," creating a misconception that aesthetic trends are monotonous.

5.2 Deconstruction of the "Masculine" and "Feminine" Binary: New Aesthetic Concepts The aesthetic styles and concepts presented by virtual idols' simulacrum bodies break the traditional aesthetic view of binary opposition between "masculine" and "feminine," pursuing diversified gender temperaments. From the production perspective, some Chinese designers have begun packaging female V-lives with cool mecha elements, presenting a mature and domineering style different from traditional female V-life images. Meanwhile, male V-lives have become feminized and neutralized. This reflects both the conscious aesthetic creation of Chinese animation designers and a mainstream aesthetic style shift, aiming to win more aesthetic cultural leadership through virtual idol design and production. In fact, aesthetics cannot be static; rather, it is dynamic and pluralistic. The production of this new aesthetic concept is commendable for breaking single aesthetic fields and guiding aesthetics toward diversity and inclusiveness. However, virtual idol production should not take consumers' fleeting aesthetic tastes as the sole standard, nor should it pursue absolute aesthetic differentiation. It should shoulder the responsibility of creating Chinese characteristic aesthetic culture while respecting reasonable aesthetic needs.

5.3 Deep Influence of Foreign Culture on the Reception End: Difficulty in "Breaking Circles" As virtual idols remain a subcultural phenomenon within a niche circle in China, most active fans in this circle are 二次元 (ACG) otakus deeply influenced by Japanese culture. Some aesthetic creations are sometimes difficult to accept for highly stylized groups, causing various diverse-style virtual images to be eliminated early. Only virtual idols with so-called 二次元 "moe" (cute) characteristics are considered to have more lasting economic potential. This is evident from the obvious head characteristics of female virtual idols in "2060." For instance, twin tails represent "tsundere" (hot-and-cold personality), white hair represents bravery, dark scheming, and super strength—these are all recognized cultural symbols in Japanese ACG culture. They are simulacrum elements set by designers oriented toward fan interests, reflecting distinct Japanese cultural input and reproduction behind China's virtual idols. In the long run, as one of the important carriers of the future metaverse, if virtual idols only develop within the framework of foreign virtual idols and merely satisfy the aesthetic needs of subcultural circle insiders, they will struggle to be recognized by broader groups and cannot achieve "circle-breaking" growth. The development of China's localized metaverse will have no foundation. Escaping the potential cultural aesthetic colonization by developed countries and pursuing a more open and diverse virtual idol body aesthetics is

an urgent imperative.

5.4 Forced Integration of Chinese Style Elements: Difficulty in Developing Unique Characteristics From the decorative yet minimally functional body appearances of virtual characters in “2060,” the integration of simulacrum bodies with Chinese style elements is merely simple addition. The presentation of Chinese culture through bodily simulacra remains at an elementary stage with thin cultural connotations, and similar character types are highly replaceable—one reason why it is difficult for audiences to develop empathy. Although mixed styles like ancient style + mecha are more popular than pure modern attire because they combine ancient and futuristic 科技感, audiences are only temporarily attracted by the advanced special effects produced overnight by designers. After all, the biggest difference between the AR virtual world and the real world is the ability to let people experience scenarios impossible in reality, yet the Chinese style elements intentionally added by designers to characters have not attracted attention. Except for the brush held by Wuxian Shaonü that was actually used in performance, the Chinese style elements on other virtual idols hardly conveyed any cultural symbols’ meaning or value to the audience. This reflects that Chinese virtual idol designers’ understanding of traditional culture is not profound enough to showcase its specific cultural connotations through performance, and also shows there remains substantial room for integrating domestic virtual idols’ bodily simulacra with Chinese culture. Excellent Chinese characteristic animation images await further excavation.

6. Implications for Aesthetic Transformation

6.1 Core Driving Force: Realist Spirit Virtual idols need to take realist spirit as their core driving force. For virtual digital humans to become “vivid,” the most important factor is support from high-quality stories filled with warmth and realist values to connect with the real world and effectively enable audiences to project emotions. Emotion is an indispensable core element in virtual space. Virtual idols are not mere shells; while comforting people’s hearts, they should give people the courage to face reality and convey positive, correct values to alleviate modern people’s inner anxiety. In this regard, Douyin virtual influencer Liu Yexi is a typical successful case. Every short video she releases adds value to her character. Initially somewhat flashy makeup and attire were effectively supported by a series of subsequently presented stories with strong realist spirit cores. Audiences not only do not perceive her as a cold, exquisite robot but rather feel she is a real human friend living among people. Additionally, TV Chicken, the only non-human virtual life that entered the top 4 in “2060,” precisely because of its rich story and emotional support, was able to defeat many virtual lives with advanced special effects using its special, extremely simple body image and gain emotional feedback from audiences.

6.2 Achieving Equal Dialogue: Diversified Aesthetic Systems Aesthetic diversity is a unique human charm and key to ensuring social and cultural

inclusiveness. Building an open and diverse virtual image aesthetic culture and establishing correct aesthetic values is the aesthetic responsibility the virtual idol industry should undertake. As a youth subculture, some stylistic characteristics of virtual idols' bodily simulacra differ from traditional mainstream values. As guest Tang Guoqiang' s evaluations of virtual idols in "2060" reflected, there are aesthetic differences between old and new generations—simulacrum characteristics like mismatched socks and white hair are not easily understood by older generations. On the other hand, today' s youth subculture also produces a certain feedback effect with their parents' culture and mainstream culture. In Zhou Xiaohong' s book *Cultural Cultivation: Intergenerational Revolution in a Changing Society*, he mentions that older generations initially could not accept emerging popular subcultures but gradually changed their minds with social changes, partially accepting younger generations' new ideas and cultural fashions, and increasingly aligned their aesthetic concepts and life tastes with younger generations to gradually keep pace with a changing society. For example, older generations once sternly rejected disco dancing introduced by young people, considering it a cultural disaster, but soon showed the same enthusiasm and love as younger generations [15]. In recent years, entertainment enterprises have actively followed China' s socialist cultural powerhouse construction, and virtual idols have also begun seeking inspiration from traditional aesthetic cultures, drawing on traditional opera, dance, musical instruments, and other artistic elements to enrich their stage effects. This shows that emerging aesthetic views and traditional aesthetic views, subcultures and mainstream cultures are always in a process of mutual interaction, mutual reference, and mutual integration. The footsteps of historical development will not stop, and more diverse aesthetic needs in the future will have their place to achieve aesthetic inclusion, exchange, and coexistence.

6.3 Inheriting Tradition: Effective Utilization of Chinese Aesthetic Resources Breaking free from foreign cultural aesthetic hegemony and building China' s own original virtual idols is an important step in promoting the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese culture. In the operation of virtual idols, there have already been some successful attempts in this regard. For example, virtual idol Luo Tianyi has worn hanfu and sung ancient-style songs on television stages multiple times. At the recent Beijing Winter Olympics Cultural Festival, Luo Tianyi wore a Chinese-style qipao and performed "Time to Shine" to support the Winter Olympics, aligning with the opening ceremony' s spirit of technology-art integration and demonstrating China' s great nation demeanor to countries worldwide, achieving positive responses. Chinese style is popular because Chinese culture itself possesses abundant aesthetic resources that can awaken the cultural genes deep in Chinese people' s hearts. The integration between Chinese style elements and virtual idols should not be superficial or forced; it should take excellent traditional cultural spirit as its core, permeating it through all aspects of virtual idols' bodily performances to explore more advanced and natural aesthetic forms rather than

simply pursuing gorgeous and complex costume appearances. Combining China's national conditions and integrating realist spirit into virtual idols' "script" creation to promote socialist core values will enable them to stand firm, go far, and smoothly achieve "circle-breaking" development, eventually being co-opted by mainstream culture in various forms to usher in a larger market.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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