

## Can fans' idol worship be converted into travel intention? Evidence from Chinese concert goers

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### Abstract:

After the passage of the pandemic, identifying effective ways to allure tourists to visit/revisit destinations becomes a new challenge to destination marketing offices. Organizing events and particularly inviting celebrities/idols to organize concerts in the destination is one frequently used practice since fans/followers tend to have higher willingness to spend on merchandise or events associated with their idols. This study (1) examines the impact of fans' idol worship on travel intention and (2) examines whether this relationship is moderated by three contextual factors. Drawing on the survey data provided by 167 respondents, this study finds that fan's idol worship induces a positive impact on their travel intention. This positive impact is more pronounced when the idol is rated as more popular (according to his/her volume of fan and level of achievement) and when the concert is set to be held in a more attractive destination.

**Keywords:** Idol worship; idol perceived popularity; destination attractiveness; behavioral intention.

### 1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has devastated the global tourism industry, significantly declining tourist arrivals and revenue for destinations worldwide (Sigala, 2020). As destinations strive to revitalize their tourism sectors in the post-pandemic era, identifying effective ways to allure tourists to visit/revisit destinations becomes a new challenge to their destination marketing offices.

Organizing events and particularly inviting celebrities/idols to organize concerts in the destination is one frequently used practice. Concerts, as cultural and entertainment events, possess the potential to attract a large and devoted fan base, thereby creating opportunities for tourism destinations to capitalize on fan-driven tourism (Bang, Joo, Seok & Nam, 2021; Black, Fox & Kochanowski, 2007). Recently, Taylor Swift's "The Eras Tour" created and demonstrated the remarkable influence of concerts on tourism. According to a report from CNN (2023), the concerts alone generated nearly USD 210 million to the global hotel industry over the past summer. Her two-day shows in Pittsburgh attracted approximately 80% of the audience from outside the city, boosting the city's hotel occupancy rate to 95%. Another significant

contributor to tourism is the renowned Mandopop artist Jay Chou. Chen (2023) reported that Jay Chou's four-day concerts in Haikou generated approximately RMB 980 million in tourism revenue.

The examples presented above clearly show that organizing concerts can attract fan-based consumption and rejuvenate tourism destinations. Indeed, the "fan economy" stands as a powerful marketing strategy that generates substantial direct and indirect revenue potential (Zhao, 2022). Although many studies (e.g., Zarur Guarisa, de Figueiredo, & Machado, 2024; Zhang & Fung, 2017) have been conducted to prove the economic impact of concerts from the revenue management and marketing standpoints, existing knowledge about its underlying mechanism and particularly how different perceptual factors shape fans' travel intention remains scarce at the moment of this writing.

To redress this knowledge void, this study seeks to examine how four distinct perceptual factors – (1) fans' idol worship, (2) idol's fan-based perceived popularity, (3) idol's achievement-based perceived popularity and (4) destination attractiveness – interactively affect fans' travel intention in order to enrich our theoretical understanding on "fan economy". Fans' idol worship, which symbolizes fans' profound dedication and admiration towards their favored celebrities (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990), is one of the key factors highlighted in this study. The impact of fans' idol worship on their travel intention has been under-researched. The findings are thus expected to contribute some new knowledge to the realm of fan-based tourism. To be specific, this study aims to achieve the following two objectives:

- **Objective 1:** *To examine the impact of fans' idol worship on their travel intentions.*
- **Objective 2:** *To examine whether the impact of fans' idol worship on their travel intentions is moderated by idol's fan-based perceived popularity, idol's achievement-based perceived popularity, and fans' perceived attractiveness of the destination.*

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Impact of fans' idol worship on their travel intention

In recent years, the fan economy, which utilizes fans' worship towards celebrities to drive them to make consumption decisions, has become a mainstream trend in the market. Celebrity worship stems from a person's psychological identification with another person, in which the individual cognitively and emotionally admires actors, models, pop stars, and idols' appearance, behavioral patterns, and values, and imitates them (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990). Based on the admiration of idols, fans tend to establish a psychologically intimate connection with their idols by adopting values, imitating idols' behavior, and having interactive experiences with them (Leets, De Becker & Giles, 1995).

Recent research has explored the relationship between idol worship and fans' consumer behavior in the tourism context. For instance, Chen (2021) demonstrated a direct influence of idol worship on motivation, co-created experience, satisfaction, and loyalty. Tian and colleagues (2024) conducted an online questionnaire survey among Chinese fans who had previously embarked on idol pilgrimage tours. Their results reveal that idol worship positively affects fans' travel motivation and post-evaluation of their travel experiences. Considering the findings in recent investigations about the influence of idol worship on fans' travel behavior, this study hypothesizes that:

*H1. Fans' idol worship has a positive impact on their intention to travel to the destination where the idol's concert will take place.*

## *2.2. Moderating impact of idol popularity*

Much past research tested and proved the efficacy of celebrity endorsements in tourism, the impact of celebrities on destination attractiveness, as well as the role of popular media in inducing tourism. According to Yen and Teng (2015), celebrities play a pivotal and positive role in inducing viewers' behavioral intention and destination selection procedures. Celebrities are vital because they are individuals known to the public for their achievements in various areas (Friedman & Friedman, 1979).

In the travel and tourism context, since tourists perceive celebrities as people with high social status and positive images, tourism authorities often use celebrities as spokespersons and hire them to recommend destinations to domestic and international tourists (Pradhan, Moharana & Malik, 2023). In addition, prior studies have shown that celebrity endorsements can effectively enhance the awareness, branding and competitive advantage of hospitality and tourism businesses (Liu, Moyle, Kralj & Li, 2023). Furthermore, movies and TV series featuring celebrities can inspire viewers to visit destinations/places associated with film scenes. Recent studies (e.g., Kim, Kim & Wong, 2023) have proven that pop music and idols can contribute to consumers' familiarity with the music's country and willingness to travel.

Hofmann and Opitz (2018) highlighted that talent and popularity are key determinants affecting a star's ability to bring about economic benefits. Following their assertion, this paper will measure an idol's popularity from two perspectives: fan-based (popularity) and achievement-based (talent), respectively. Fan-based popularity means the volume of fans/followers is the proxy of one idol's popularity. Achievement-based popularity means an idol's popularity level is determined according to the amount of awards he/she won in the past (Ehrmann, Meiseberg & Ritz, 2009). Since prior studies often show that marketing campaigns made by popular idols can make the promotional efficacy become more pronounced, this study hypothesizes that the positive impact of fans' idol worship on their intention to travel to the destination will be more pronounced (attenuated) if the idol is perceived as more (less) popular. The specific hypotheses are presented as follow:

*H2a. The positive impact of fans' idol worship on their intention to travel to the destination is moderated by the idol's fan-based perceived popularity.*

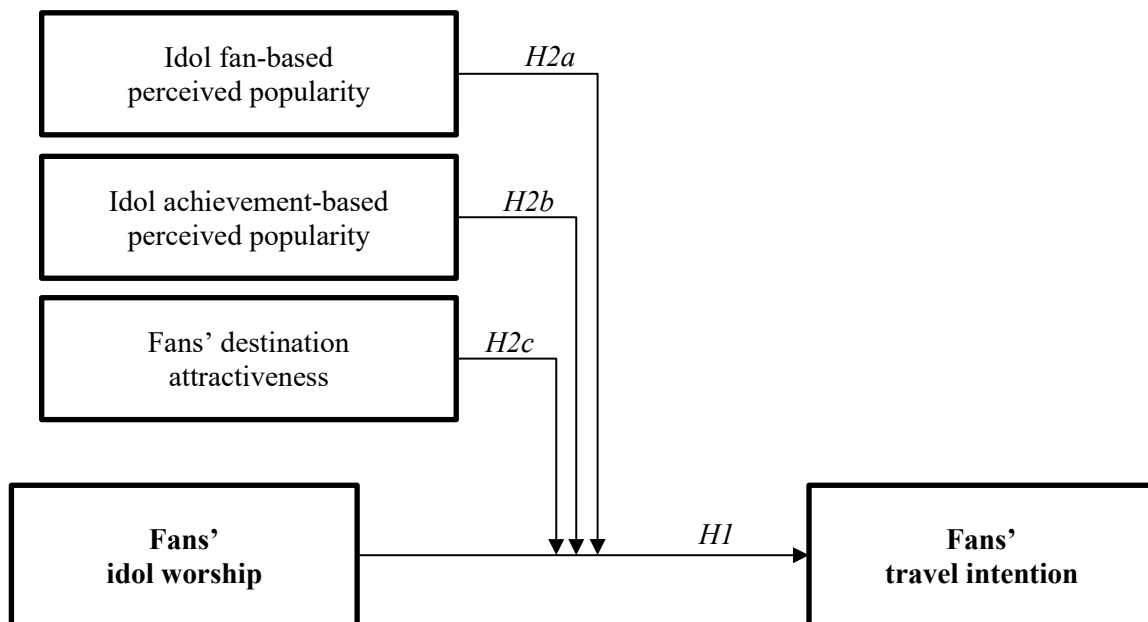
*H2b. The positive impact of fans' idol worship on their intention to travel to the destination is moderated by the idol's achievement-based perceived popularity.*

## *2.3. Moderating impact of destination attractiveness*

The perceived attractiveness of a destination plays a crucial role in determining one's final travel decision. According to Vengesai, Galloway and Gnoth (2009), destination attractiveness refers to tourists' perceptions towards a travel destination's ability to provide individual benefits and satisfy their vacation needs. Typically, the more tourists perceive a destination as being capable of fulfilling their needs and deliver desired benefits, the more attractive and more likely that destination would become as their destination choice (Formica, 2002; Reitsamer, Brunner-Sperdin & Stocburger-Sauer, 2016).

In this study, we hypothesize that fans' destination attractiveness would moderate the relationship between fans' idol worship and travel intention towards concert destinations due to three reasons. First, previous research (e.g., Weaver, Weber & McCleary, 2007) suggests that many contextual factors such as tourists' satisfaction levels from previous visits can impact the decision to revisit. Second, since humans are generally rational decision makers, it is believed that fans would not blindly/brutally visit a destination even though their idols are going to hold a concert at that place. Third, since fans would not only attend their idols' concerts but also participate in other tourist activities (e.g., sightseeing, dining), the attractiveness of a destination and particularly its variety of entertaining opportunities would still be taken into consideration. In view of the reasons listed above, this study proposes the following hypothesis and Figure 1 graphically illustrates this study's conceptual framework.

*H2c. The positive impact of fans' idol worship on their intention to travel to the destination is moderated by fans' perceived destination attractiveness.*



**Figure 1. Conceptual framework**

### 3. Methodology

To test the framework and hypotheses presented above, an online survey was conducted in May 2024. The target respondents of this study are those who traveled abroad to attend concerts organized by idols/singers, and we recruited a sample of 175 participants through Credamo. Eight responses were discarded because they were completed within an unreasonable time. For the remaining 167 valid responses, all providers declared that they had at least one overseas concert attending experience.

The online questionnaire includes a total of four sections. All questions used for measuring the testing variables were adapted from validated items in past studies (e.g., Hofmann & Opitz, 2018; Tian et al., 2024). The first section includes a short introduction of the study purpose and one qualifying question ("Have you ever traveled abroad to attend a concert at least once [Yes/No]"). In the second section, we randomly assigned one (out of four) idol and asked respondents to rate their fan-based perceived popularity ("By using fan base as a criterion,

*please rate the popularity of [name of the randomly assigned idol]” – [1: very unpopular; 7: very popular]”), achievement-based perceived popularity (“By using artistic career achievements as a criterion, please rate the popularity of [name of the randomly assigned idol] – [1: very unpopular; 7: very popular]”), as well as their level of worship towards the assigned idols (“Please rate your level of worship towards [name of the randomly assigned idol]” – [1: very low; 7: very high]”). Those four idols were selected according to the recommendations given by 20 hotel management students from a public university in Hong Kong. The most frequently mentioned ones were retained and randomly assigned to the survey respondents.*

In the third section, respondents were asked to indicate their level of intention to travel to Macau if the randomly assigned idol will hold a concert there (“If [name of the randomly assigned idol] will hold a concert in Macau, your intention to travel to Macau is [1: very low; 7: very high]”). Macau was chosen as the hypothetical destination because the Macau government and its tourism authority actively encourage reputable performers to hold concerts in their integrated resorts like the Venetian Macau. In the same section, respondents were also asked to indicate their perceived attractiveness towards Macau (“To you, Macau is a [1: very unattractive; 7: very attractive] tourist destination”). In the final section, respondents were asked to report their demographic information like gender, age range, highest level of education they attained and employment status.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Respondents’ profile

Table 1 summarizes the demographic profile of those 167 respondents who provided the complete and valid responses. Of those 167 respondents, 44.3% were male and 55.7% were female. Nearly 80% of respondents were aged below 40. 38.9% were aged between 18 and 29, and another 38.9% were between 30 and 39. Regarding their education level, nearly 90% of respondents were Bachelor degree holders and 19.2% possessing Master’s degrees. Regarding their employment status, nearly three-fourth (74.9%) of respondents were employed and another one-fourth (23.4%) were engaged in educational pursuits. Overall, it is believed that the majority of the recruited samples are financially independent and capable of making independent purchase decisions.

**Table 1. Profiles of the respondents (N = 167)**

		Frequencies	Percentage
Gender	Male	74	44.3
	Female	93	55.7
Age group	18-29	65	38.9
	30-39	65	38.9
	40-49	37	22.2
Educational level	High school	1	0.6
	Associate degree	19	11.4
	Bachelor’s degree	111	66.5
	Master’s degree	32	19.2
	Doctoral degree	4	2.4
Employment status	Student	39	23.4
	Employed	125	74.9
	Self-employed	3	1.8

## 4.2. Hypotheses testing

Prior to the hypotheses testing, some data transformations were conducted. Firstly, since the data are not normally distributed but right-skewed, the samples were divided into two groups based on their ratings on idol worship (high worship [H-W] vs. low worship [L-W]), fan-based perceived popularity (more popular [M-FP] vs. less popular [L-FP]), achievement-based perceived popularity (more popular [H-AP] vs. less popular [L-AP]) and destination attractiveness (attractive [D-A] vs. not attractive [D-NA]). After completing the data transformation, several two-way ANOVA tests were conducted to test the main effect led by idol worship and interaction effects by different moderators like destination attractiveness.

### 4.2.1 Impact of fans' idol worship

The first two-way ANOVA test (with idol worship and fan-based perceived popularity) results show that fans' idol worship has a significant and positive impact on their travel intention ( $F = 120.194$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.424$ ). As shown in the contrast test column Table 2 (a), respondents' travel intention was 2.890 when their perceived worship towards the assigned idol was lower than the mean value. Conversely, respondents' travel intention was as high as 5.323 when their perceived worship towards the assigned idol was higher than the mean value.

The second two-way ANOVA test (with idol worship and achievement-based perceived popularity results) shows similar results ( $F = 68.428$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.296$ ). For those whose worship towards the assigned idol is higher than the mean value, their intention to travel to the place that his/her concert will be held is comparatively higher ( $M_{H-W} = 5.165$ ). In contrast, those whose worship towards the assigned idol are lower than the mean value indicated low level of intention to travel to the convert destination ( $M_{L-W} = 2.941$ ). Table 4 (a) shows that the third two-way ANOVA test (with idol worship and destination attractiveness) reports similar research findings ( $F = 92.099$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.361$ ). Considering that similar results were found no matter which moderator was added into the analyses, H1 is accepted, and fans' idol worship is proven to have a positive impact on their intention to travel to the destination where the idol's concert will take place.

### 4.2.2 Moderating impact of fan-based popularity

The first two-way ANOVA test results show that idol worship and fan-based perceived popularity interactively influence fans' travel intention ( $F = 6.542$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.074$ ). As shown in the contrast test column of Table 2 (b), when the assigned idol is rated as less popular (using fan base as the criterion), the high-worship group's travel intention and the low worship group's travel intention are 4.800 and 2.673, respectively. The mean difference between the high-worship group and low-worship group is 2.127 ( $p < 0.01$ ).

When the assigned idol is rated as more popular, the high-worship group's travel intention and the low worship group's travel intention are changed to 5.846 and 3.107. Under this situation, the mean difference between the high-worship group and the low-worship group has been increased to 2.739 ( $p < 0.01$ ). In view of the variation in mean difference, H2a is accepted, and the positive impact of fans' idol worship on travel intention is proven to be more pronounced when the assigned idol is rated as more popular (using fan base as the criterion).

**Table 2. Hypotheses testing (for H1 and H2a)**

	Type III	F	p <sup>a</sup>	$\eta^2$	Contrast test <sup>a</sup>
<b>(a) Main effect: Fans' idol worship</b>					
Travel intention	212.305	120.194	< 0.01	0.424	$M_{H-W} = 5.323$ ; $M_{L-W} = 2.890$
<b>(b) Interaction effect: Fans' idol worship + Idol fan-based perceived popularity</b>					
Travel intention	23.112	6.542	< 0.01	0.074	<i>If idol is rated as less popular:</i> $M_{L-FP+H-W} = 4.800$
					$M_{L-FP+L-W} = 2.673$
					<i>If idol is rated as more popular:</i> $M_{M-FP+H-W} = 5.846$
					$M_{M-FP+L-W} = 3.107$

#### 4.2.3 Moderating impact of achievement-based popularity

Similar to what the first ANOVA exhibits, the second two-way ANOVA test results also show that idol worship and achievement-based perceived popularity interactively influence fans' travel intention ( $F = 4.456$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.052$ ). As shown in the contrast test column of Table 3 (b), when the assigned idol is rated as less popular (using achievement as the criterion), the high-worship group's travel intention and the low worship group's travel intention are 4.615 and 2.724, respectively. The mean difference between the high-worship group and low-worship group is 1.891 ( $p < 0.01$ ).

But when the assigned idol is rated as more popular, the high-worship group's travel intention and the low worship group's travel intention are changed to 5.714 and 3.158. The mean difference between the high-worship group and the low-worship group under this situation has been increased to 2.556 ( $p < 0.01$ ). Considering that the mean difference varies across different situations, H2b is accepted, and the positive impact of fans' idol worship on travel intention is proven to be more pronounced when the assigned idol is rated as more popular (using achievement as the assessment criterion).

**Table 3. Hypotheses testing (for H1 and H2b)**

	Type III	F	p <sup>a</sup>	$\eta^2$	Contrast test <sup>a</sup>
<b>(a) Main effect: Fans' idol worship</b>					
Travel intention	123.802	68.428	< 0.01	0.296	$M_{H-W} = 5.165$ ; $M_{L-W} = 2.941$
<b>(b) Interaction effect: Fans' idol worship + Idol achievement-based perceived popularity</b>					
Travel intention	16.124	4.456	< 0.05	0.052	<i>If idol is rated as less popular:</i> $M_{L-AP+H-W} = 4.615$
					$M_{L-AP+L-W} = 2.724$
					<i>If idol is rated as more popular:</i> $M_{M-AP+H-W} = 5.714$
					$M_{M-AP+L-W} = 3.158$

#### 4.2.4 Moderating impact of destination attractiveness

The third two-way ANOVA test results show that idol worship and destination attractiveness interactively influence fans' travel intention ( $F = 6.314$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.072$ ). Table 4 (b) shows that the high-worship group's travel intention and the low worship group's travel intention are 4.826 and 3.333 when the destination is rated as not attractive. The mean difference between the high-worship group and low-worship group is 1.493 ( $p < 0.01$ ).

But when the destination is rated as attractive, the high-worship group's travel intention and the low worship group's travel intention are changed to 5.806 and 2.678. The mean difference between the high-worship group and the low-worship group under this situation has been increased to 3.128 ( $p < 0.01$ ). Considering that the mean difference varies across different situations, H2c is accepted. The positive impact of fans' idol worship on travel intention is proven to be more pronounced when the destination is an attractive one in the eyes of travelers.

**Table 4. Hypotheses testing (for H1 and H2c)**

	Type III	F	p <sup>a</sup>	$\eta^2$	Contrast test <sup>a</sup>
<b>(a) Main effect: Fans' idol worship</b>					
Travel intention	163.102	92.099	< 0.01	0.361	$M_{H-W} = 5.316$ ; $M_{L-W} = 3.006$
<b>(b) Interaction effect: Fans' idol worship + Fans' destination attractiveness</b>					
Travel intention	22.364	6.314	< 0.01	0.072	<i>If the destination</i> $M_{D-NA+H-W} = 4.826$
					<i>is not attractive:</i> $M_{D-NA+L-W} = 3.333$
					<i>If the destination</i> $M_{D-A+H-W} = 5.806$
					<i>is attractive:</i> $M_{D-A+L-W} = 2.678$

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

### 5.1. Conclusions

The results of this study illuminate how fans' devotion to their idols and their desire to travel to the location of their idol's concert are impacted by the idol fan-based perceived popularity, the perceived achievement of the idol, and the appeal of the destination. Being one of the limited studies on this topic, the findings of this study are expected to offer valuable insights on the influence of the fan economy within the tourism sector.

Delving into the research findings, the current study finds and proves the positive impact of fans' idol worship on their travel intentions to visit their idol's concert venue. Through comparing with prior studies like Chen (2021), the current study solidifies the positive effects of idol worship on consumer behavior and travel preferences, unveiling the dual influence of idol worship on both consumer actions and travel choices. Secondly, in terms of moderating effects, our findings suggest that among them, fans' perceived popularity of idols plays the most significant moderating role in idol worship, followed by fans' perception of destination appeal and idols' achievement-based popularity.

### 5.2. Implications

Fan economy has been introduced for years, but existing knowledge on this topic is relatively scarce. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is one of the limited studies which attempt to test and prove the impact of fans' idol worship on their travel intention. Complementing the existing literature by adding new knowledge to that realm is conceived as the academic contributions of this research.

The current study also contributes some actionable clues for destination marketers in selecting idols for hosting concerts in their cities/countries. As shown in the findings presented in this study, fans' idol worship has a positive impact on their travel intention. Hence, destination marketers shall strategically select those idols whose has a huge volume of fans with high (rather low) worship. As those fans have high admire towards their idols, they would be willing



to invest in travelling to any destination and watching their idols' concerts. Positioning the concerts at a part of the idol's pilgrimage tour is another approach to capitalize fans' idol worship to generate tourism revenue to the destination (Pratt, McCabe, Cortes-Jimenez & Blake, 2010; Tian et al., 2024).

### 5.2. Limitations and future research

Despite its practical and theoretical contributions, this paper has some limitations. First, the respondents who participated in this survey is small in size (i.e., 167) and they were all Chinese. Hence, researchers and readers should generalize the results with caution because the current findings may only reflect a fraction of Chinese consumers' opinions. Second, since this study selected Macau as the study site, the findings are expected to be different when the study site is changed. To improve the generalizability of the findings, future researchers should consider replicating this study by recruiting more participants in a global scope and including multiple destinations in the investigation.

Regarding directions for future studies, future researchers can expand the conceptual framework proposed in this study by adding other meaningful variables (e.g., willingness to pay, trip duration) in order to generate more insights. Another direction for future research is to incorporate more contextual factors (e.g., personal earning capacity, poor previous travel experience) as moderators. The findings are expected to provide tourism stakeholders with richer knowledge and insights in order to devise sound strategies to capitalize the economic benefits of fan economy.

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