From glamour-oriented idolatry to achievement-oriented idolatry: A framing experiment among adolescents in Hong Kong and Shenzhen

Xiao Dong Yue, Chau-kiu Cheung and Dennis Sing Wing Wong
Department of Applied Social Studies, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

The present study examined the framing effect of two modes of idolatry among a sample of 1095 secondary school students in Hong Kong and Shenzhen. Two experimental conditions were set up: in the glamour frame condition, subjects were exposed to frames that enhanced perfection and mystification of idols’ personal or ideological characteristics; in the achievement frame condition, subjects were exposed to frames that enhanced emulation and identification of idols’ pro-social behaviours or desirable dispositional traits. The experiment selected a prominent pop music and movie star well known in Chinese societies, Andy Lau, as the target idol. Subjects showed a consistently and significantly greater desire to glorify, idealize, identify with, emulate, and attach to Andy Lau in the achievement frame condition than in the glamour frame condition. The finding suggests that an achievement frame can heighten young people’s adoration of an idol by emphasizing the idol’s achievement processes. This suggestion is favourable to the possibility of transforming an idol into a role model for young people to learn to pursue career success.

Key words: adolescent, China, framing idol worship, Hong Kong, idolatry, Shenzhen.

Introduction

Idolatry, or idol worship, is an unreciprocated or unarticulated attachment to a significant person characterized by frequent occurrence of fantasies in which the personal attributes of the idol are overly enhanced or idealized (Fromm, 1967). It typically consists of five acts: vainglorification, idealization, identification, emulation, and attachment (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Yue, 1999, 2000; Cheung & Yue, 2000). Specifically, glorification represents worshipping the idol’s luxurious lifestyle and status; idealization represents worshipping the idol’s perfect and supernatural properties; identification represents regarding the idol as similar to oneself; emulation represents regarding the idol as a reference role model with talents and performances for self-learning; and attachment represents regarding the idol as a friend (Greene & Adams-Price, 1990; Ellison, 1991; de Jong, 1992; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994; Pleiss & Feldhusen, 1995; Larose & Boivin, 1998; Cheung & Yue, 2000).

Recent studies show that young people nowadays typically worship two kinds of idols: star idols (i.e. celebrities in the entertainment and sport industries) and luminary idols (i.e. celebrities in political, scientific/technological, literary, and artistic domains) (Yue & Cheung, 2002; Cheung & Yue, 2003). Specifically, movie stars have traditionally been the gods or goddesses of the movie industry and score highly in the stratification system of society (e.g. Levy, 1990). Heavy metal singers are considered ‘absolute heroes’ and ‘fantasized lovers’ by adolescents (e.g. Jeffrey, 1991). Sport stars also capture young people’s imagination and aspiration (e.g. Balswick & Ingoldsby, 1982). Luminary idols, however, commonly draw people’s admiration for their personal achievements, social influence, charisma, life beliefs, and the like (e.g. Simonton, 1996; Cheung & Yue, 2004).

Worshipping star idols can have a detrimental effect on adolescents’ self-development (Cheung & Yue, 2004) and often receives derogatory comments from educators, particularly about its impairing impact on an adolescent’s academic achievements (e.g. Schultz et al., 1991; Jenson, 1992). For example, love of heavy metal singers could contribute to juvenile problems, such as sexual promiscuity, drug abuse, Satanism etc. (e.g. Martin & Segrave, 1988). Adoring pop singers may increase adolescents’ vainglory and illusory romance (Arnett, 1991; Wan, 1997; Cheung & Yue, 2000; 2003) and enhance their admiration of the idols’ ecstatic and bizarre behaviours (North & Hargreaves, 1995; Raviv, Bar-tal, Raviv, & Ben-horin, 1996). Worshipping luminary idols, however, could inspire young people to strive for higher goals in life (Cheung & Yue, 2003). Just as idols can forge and distort social norms, they can champion or reinforce social norms (Klapp, 1962; Kroger, 1996).
Emulation typically occurs when an idol or a role model has some normally demonstrable achievement for the audience to learn (Simonton, 1996, 2001). In fact, worshipping star idols could facilitate the adolescent’s identity formation as long as the admired star idols are taken as role models of personal successes. Alternatively, by demystifying the successes of star idols and highlighting their prosocial behaviours, adolescents may alter their worship of the idols to increase their self-efficacy, and identity achievement in themselves (Yue, Cheung, & Wong, 2003). The intense admiration and reverence of idols may be reoriented into a critical appreciation of their worthwhile behaviours. As an illustration, Gash and Conway (1997) conducted an experimental study to challenge American and Irish adolescents to reconsider their ideas about heroic figures and to promote pro-social attitudes in concrete ways. Unfortunately, such experimental studies of reorientation of idol worship behaviour are extremely rare.

Glamour and achievement are two salient framing characteristics alleged to induce young people to worship idols (Buxton, 1983; Fraser & Brown, 2002). A frame refers to the fundamental theme of a message presented to influence the reader in an expected way (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynep, & Sasson, 1992; Holler, Hoelzl, Kircher, Leder, & Mannetti, 2008). Such framing characteristics pertain to two modes of idolatry: glamour-oriented idolatry (GOI) involving mystification or glorification of admired idols, and achievement-oriented idolatry (AOI) comprising identification with and emulation of admired idols (Yue, 1999, 2000). The GOI is celebrity focused, augmenting all desirable attributes in one or a few selected idols (Wan, 1997; Fraser & Brown, 2002), whereas the AOI focuses on attributes, absorbing different desirable attributes from different idols (Yue, 1999). The distinction between the two modes lies in a dichotomizing, hexagon-like contrast between attributes of idealism, romanticism, and absolutism for the GOI and the attributes of rationalism, realism, and relativism for the AOI (Yue & Cheung, 2000).

It appears that the GOI is largely a function of media influence and the commercial profit making of the entertainment industry (Boninger, Krosnick, Berent, & Fabrigar, 1995; Brewer & Chapman, 2003), whereas the AOI is primarily a joint attempt of personal choice, parental preference and school civic/moral education (Leung, 1997; Yue, 2003; Cheung & Yue, 2003, 2004). These two modes of idolatry can profoundly influence young people’s perception and appreciation of idols’ physical, social, and dispositional characteristics.

**Idol worship in the Chinese context**

Idol worship has become increasingly popular in Chinese societies, particularly in Hong Kong (Yue & Cheung, 2000; Cheung & Yue, 2003). Hong Kong young people mostly idolized pop singers, movie stars, and sport stars (So & Chan, 1992; Wong & Ma, 1997) and relied on idols for forming moral judgments (Chan, Cheung, Lee, Leung, & Liu, 1998). Hong Kong young people tended to mystify their idols such that vainglory and illusory romance were usually associated with worship of star idols (Yue & Cheung, 2000; 2002, Cheung & Yue, 2003). Furthermore, Hong Kong young people mainly cared for their idol’s romantic and sexual characteristics, whereas Mainland Chinese young people mainly cared for their idols’ ideological and dispositional characteristics (Yue, Cheung, & Wong, 2003). Hong Kong youngsters’ idolization of stars is attributed to promotion by the entertainment industry. In contrast, Chinese youngsters’ idolization of luminary figures is attributed to ideological goal setting for moral education (Shen, 2001; Yue & Cheung, 2002; Hou, Zhang, & Huang, 2003; Wu, 2003).

According to the notion of framing, exposure to a frame in a message could influence judgment and orientation consonant with the frame. For instance, Hong, Ip, Chiu, Morris, and Menon (2001) created Chinese and American frames to influence individuals’ collectivistic and individualistic orientations, toward such concerns as collective duties and individual rights. They reasoned that when both collectivistic and individualistic self-constructs are available, their relative accessibility evoked by the frame would determine which self-construct to apply. Besides, framing of political, medical, institutional, economic, environmental, ethnic, and cultural messages has been influential on people’s orientations or decisions. The decisions include those about nationality, voting, donation, recycling, studying, social services, and public policy (Iyengar, 1987; Guagnano, Dietz, & Stern, 1994; Schock, 2001; Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001; Mitchell, Tetlock, Newman, & Lerner, 2003; Hay, Reich, & Utsch, 2006; Lam, Chiu, Lau, Chan, & Yim, 2006; Holler et al., 2008; Vansteenkiste, Lens, Soenens, & Van den Broeck, 2008).

Similar to the above studies, the present study attempts to show that framing of attributes for idolatry is likely to influence the individual’s orientation to idol worship. This expectation would importantly indicate the presence of the two forms of idolatry, the GOI and the AOI, and the choice of one way or another is contingent on external influence, such as framing. With reference to relevant research findings, the GOI likely arises from exposure to a glamour frame, whereas the AOI likely results from exposure to an achievement frame. A glamour frame emphasizes the idol’s charm, attractiveness, and endowments, whereas an achievement frame describes the idol’s efforts, virtues, and life experiences. Because of existing observations that the AOI reflects a personal choice in response to education or persuasion, the AOI-based achievement frame would induce a conscious orientation to idol worship (Leung,
1997; Yue, 2003; Cheung & Yue, 2003, 2004). In contrast, existing findings relate the GOI to impulsive, romantic and enchanted infatuation, which is separate from conscious evaluation as in the report of various forms of idol worship. The expectation thereby specifies a general hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis: Idol worship (including glorification, idealization, identification, emulation, and attachment) is higher following exposure to the achievement frame than following exposure to the glamour frame.

For a rigorous test of the hypothesis, controlling for background characteristics that potentially differ between students assigned in the two framing conditions is necessary. This is because background characteristics, such as gender, school grade (or age), location, and parental education may make a difference in idol worship. Existing research and theory have suggested the influence of age (Giles & Maltby, 2004) and social class (Jenson, 1992) on idol worship. Notably, idol worship may serve a compensatory function for young people of a lower class (Argyle, 1994). Moreover, young people may prefer idols of the opposite sex (Lin & Lin, 2007).

Method

Subjects

Data for this study came from 758 high school students in Hong Kong and 337 high school students in Shenzhen, which are two contiguous cities in China. In the Hong Kong sample, 51.4% were males, 48.6% were females, with a mean age of 14.3 years (SD = 1.5); in the Shenzhen sample, 54.6% were males, 45.4% were females, with a mean age of 15.1 years (SD = 1.5). The two metropolitan cities are neighbouring each other, and they are comparable in size, population, and urban planning. Students enlisted in the study attended similar grades in schools in the two cities.

Experimental design

Two experimental frame conditions applied to different students according to a between-subject design: in the glamour frame condition, participants were exposed to a description of an idol’s charm and status attributes; in the achievement frame condition, participants were exposed to a description of an idol’s striving and experiences. The features of the glamour frame included the following foci (Yue, 2000): (i) popularity: how popular the star idol was (e.g. awards, rankings, fans club etc.); (ii) glamour: how glamorous the idol was (e.g. appearance, figure, manners, talents, charisma etc.); and (iii) wealth: how well off the star idol was (e.g. property, bonuses, earnings from advertisement etc.). In contrast, the features of the achievement frame included the following foci: (i) dispositional desirability: how many socially desirable personality traits the star idol had (e.g. kindness, persistence, endurance, personal integrity, charity work, responsibility and commitment to society etc.); (ii) personal variability: how many ups and downs the star idol experienced in his or her life (e.g. family background, early life experiences, education, achievements and setbacks in personal life etc.); and (iii) occupational variability: how many ups and downs the star idol experienced in his or her career pathway (professional training, variability in popularity ratings and career development, recognition by fans and non-fans etc.). In either case, the frames included such cues as posters, photos, newspaper clippings, video presentations etc.

Andy Lau (劉德華), a Chinese pop music and movie star was selected as the target idol for three reasons: (i) he has been highly visible in Chinese societies; (ii) he has won numerous awards, including that of the ‘One of the Top 10 Outstanding Youth in Hong Kong’ and that of the ‘One of the Top 100 Outstanding Chinese since 1949’; and (iii) he has been a modest, self-inspiring and hard-working person and has thus maintained a very positive image in China. Two separate 20-minute Powerpoint presentations were prepared for this study, of which one highlighted his remarkable fame, wealth and glamour, whereas the other one highlighted his positive life beliefs, pro-social behaviours, and occupational ups and downs. Such information stemmed mainly from various magazine features, newspaper clippings, and various Web pages about him.

Procedure

Of all the sampled students, half of them were randomly assigned to the glamour frame condition and the other half to the achievement frame condition. In either of the two experimental conditions, groups of 30–40 people were exposed to the 20-minute Powerpoint presentation about Andy Lau. A Year 3 psychology student at the City University of Hong Kong was specially trained to deliver the Powerpoint presentations and, for consistency, the same student helper delivered the two versions of the Powerpoint presentations in Hong Kong using Cantonese as well as in Shenzhen using Putonghua.

Measures

To measure the differential framing effect on participants’ idol worship modes, the Idol Worship Questionnaire (IWQ) was used (Yue & Cheung, 2000). It consisted of 25 items covering different acts in idol worship. These items are categorized under the following five dimensions (composite measures) including: (i) glorification: glorifying,
beautifying a star (three items, i.e. I think that Andy Lau is the best person in the world; I feel that Andy Lau is irreplaceable; I feel that Andy Lau is the most capable person in the world); (ii) idealization: mystifying and enhancing a star (three items, i.e. I believe that Andy Lau is truly tall and handsome; I believe that Andy Lau is full of charisma; I believe that Andy Lau is very capable); (iii) identification: inspiring oneself after the idol (three items (i.e. I wish to become a person like Andy Lau; I take Andy Lau as a role model for personal accomplishments; I feel inspired whenever I think of Andy Lau); (iv) emulation: role modelling or social learning of a star (three items (i.e. I wish to be as accomplished as Andy Lau; I wish to be as reputable as Andy Lau; I admire very much the fame Andy Lau accomplishes); and (v) attachment (two items, i.e. I wish to be a friend of Andy Lau; I fantasize to chat with Andy Lau freely). Respondents rated on a 1–5 Likert scale (1 = least agree, 5 = most agree) their responses to the IWQ items. The IWQ had been used on a sample of 763 young people in Hong Kong and three other cities in China. The reliability, in terms of internal consistency, of each composite measure of idol worship behaviour, was typically in the range of 0.701 to 0.895. The IWQ was in traditional Chinese characters for the Hong Kong sample and in simplified Chinese characters for the Shenzhen sample. Moreover, the scales showed their validity in upholding a hexagonal model of idol worship by means of multidimensional scaling (Yue & Cheung, 2000).

### Analyses

For the test of differences due to the frame, sex, location, and their interactions, univariate and multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were useful. The findings showed the unique differences or effects due to various factors, controlling for the student’s grade in school and parental education. Whereas the univariate analysis of variance handled each of the five dimensions of idol worship separately, the multivariate analysis of variance examined all the five dimensions altogether. Using the five dimensions as dependent variables, the MANOVA tested the main effects of the framing, location, gender, grade in school, paternal education, and maternal education.

### Results

The ANOVA of each of the idol worship indicators showed that the framing effect or difference between the glamour frame and the achievement frame was significant in most of the idol worship indicators (Table 1). In addition, the MANOVA affirmed the significant effect of framing on the five idol-worship indicators as a whole (Table 2). These findings held even controlling for background characteristics. Specifically, idealization, emulation, and attachment, among the idol worship indicators, were significantly higher, but glorification was lower, following an exposure to the achievement frame than following the glamour frame (Table 3). The AOI frame appears to increase some positive forms of idolatry, but to decrease vainglorification, a negative form of idolatry. In contrast to the above significant findings, AOI framing did not significantly affect identification (Table 3). Partly supporting the hypothesis, the findings suggest that exposure to the AOI frames tended to increase a student’s desire to identify with, emulate, and attach oneself to Andy Lau.

#### Table 1 Results of the ANOVA of each of the idol worship indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idol worship</th>
<th>Framing</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>$\eta^2$</td>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>$\eta^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glorification</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>0.05*</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idealization</td>
<td>18.28</td>
<td>0.17***</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>33.31</td>
<td>0.03***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emulation</td>
<td>16.56</td>
<td>0.02***</td>
<td>41.27</td>
<td>0.04***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td>16.31</td>
<td>0.01***</td>
<td>36.31</td>
<td>0.19***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

#### Table 2 MANOVA results affirming the significant effect of framing on the five idol-worship indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Wilks’ $\Lambda$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$\eta^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Framing</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>5.87***</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>17.48***</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade (as a categorical)</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>1.84*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade (as a continuous)</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>3.77**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal education</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal education</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. Hypothesis d.f. = 5; error d.f. = 1034. A hierarchical test tested main effects first and interaction effects later.
Apart from framing, location and school grade were two of the background characteristics that manifested a difference in idol worship, according to the MANOVA (Table 2). Specifically, location showed significant differences in three of the five idol worship indicators, whereas grade displayed significant differences in three of the indicators (Table 1). The former differences pertained to higher identification, emulation, and attachment in the students of Shenzhen than in the students of Hong Kong (Table 3). For the latter differences, the students of higher school grades exhibited less idealization, emulation, and attachment (Table 4). Hence, the grade difference suggested a declining trend in grade, when the MANOVA treated grade as a continuous variable (Table 2). In contrast, gender and parental education did not make a difference in idol worship.

### Discussion

The present findings show that exposure to the achievement frame about Andy Lau significantly increased students’ desire to identify with, emulate, and attach to him, as compared with exposure to the glamour frame about Andy Lau. However, the AOI frame decreased vainglorification, a clearly negative form of idolatry. In the meantime, identification with Andy Lau was unaffected by AOI framing. These findings only partially support the hypothesis that the AOI frame activates all forms of adoring the idol. However, the findings refine the hypothesis by distinguishing positive effects on positive aspects of idolatry and a negative effect on the glorification of the idol. All these effects, nevertheless, purport that the AOI frame can be useful to transform idol worship in a favourable way. The AOI frame thereby would foster the emulation of the idol’s achievement, striving, or tortuous life experiences. Alternatively, adolescents might benefit from the frame to promote the AOI if their admired idol’s mystical, illusive attributes are minimized whereas their pro-social and self-inspiring attributes are maximized (Yue, 2004). By reducing star idols’ vainglory, the AOI frame would transform star idols’ godly glamour and charisma into role models of personal aspirations and self-determination. Consequently, the AOI frame appears to accomplish its function of raising adolescents’ achievement orientation in adoring or learning from idols.

Among the factors examined, location appeared to make the greatest difference in idol worship (Table 2). Specifically, the students in Shenzhen identified, emulated, and became attached to Andy Lau more than did the students in Hong Kong (Table 3). For the latter differences, the students of higher school grades exhibited less idealization, emulation, and attachment (Table 4). Hence, the grade difference suggested a declining trend in grade, when the MANOVA treated grade as a continuous variable (Table 2). In contrast, gender and parental education did not make a difference in idol worship.

### Table 3  Adjusted means by framing and location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idol worship indicator</th>
<th>Glamour frame (N = 568)</th>
<th>Achievement frame (N = 479)</th>
<th>Shenzhen (N = 328)</th>
<th>Hong Kong (N = 719)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glorification</td>
<td>36.74</td>
<td>32.27</td>
<td>29.27</td>
<td>29.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idealization</td>
<td>27.17</td>
<td>36.73</td>
<td>32.57</td>
<td>31.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>49.61</td>
<td>53.98</td>
<td>59.67</td>
<td>43.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emulation</td>
<td>43.08</td>
<td>52.69</td>
<td>56.41</td>
<td>39.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td>49.86</td>
<td>60.32</td>
<td>63.87</td>
<td>46.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: see Table 1 and Table 2 for the ANOVA and MANOVA test results.

### Table 4  Adjusted means by framing and grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idol worship indicator</th>
<th>Grade 7 (N = 244)</th>
<th>Grade 8 (N = 345)</th>
<th>Grade 9 (N = 111)</th>
<th>Grade 10 (N = 347)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glorification</td>
<td>33.09</td>
<td>29.29</td>
<td>27.10</td>
<td>28.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idealization</td>
<td>36.75</td>
<td>31.55</td>
<td>31.26</td>
<td>28.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>54.44</td>
<td>52.82</td>
<td>51.49</td>
<td>48.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emulation</td>
<td>54.27</td>
<td>47.76</td>
<td>47.32</td>
<td>42.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td>62.07</td>
<td>53.56</td>
<td>56.05</td>
<td>48.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: see Table 1 and Table 2 for the ANOVA and MANOVA test results.
in the entertainment industry in Hong Kong, which is certainly more active and profit-oriented than its counterpart in Mainland China (Wan, 1997; Yue, Wong, & Cheung, 2000). Because of the perennial surge of new idols, Andy Lau has had to shift to the market in Mainland China. He therefore gains more visibility and favouritism among Mainland Chinese students than among Hong Kong students. The finding is therefore in line with the claim about the production of idol worship through the mass media (Lin & Lin, 2007) and the entertainment industry (Buxton, 1983; Giles, 2000).

The school grade (or age) manifested a negative effect on idol worship and this might be attributable to students’ cognitive and social development. The influences of cognitive development and social development are consistent with some existing findings (Moriarty, 1992; Giles & Malby, 2004). Accordingly, cognitive development makes the young person autonomous and independent from the influence of the mass media and idols (Seiffge-Krenke, 1997). With social development, the young person would attach oneself more to friends and dating partners than to idols. This argument would reflect the compensatory and competing roles between idols and friends (Feldman & Wentzel, 1990).

Inevitably, the present study has several limitations. First, the present study involves a relatively small sample in Hong Kong and Shenzhen. A larger sample covering diverse Chinese populations would hence be required to substantiate the hypothesized framing effects. It would be interesting to examine how young people living in rural areas of China would select and transform their favourite idols into role models as compared with those living in urban areas. Second, the present experimental design would still need improvement. Instead of having the two framing conditions, it would be necessary to include a control condition, including one based on participants’ own favourite idols. It would be interesting to compare the differential framing effects on those having idols with those not having idols. It would also be interesting to compare the differential framing effects on those who are fans of Andy Lau with those who are not. Third, further research will benefit from including people within a wider variety of educational backgrounds and occupational characteristics. This would help to validate the generalizability of the present framing effects on adolescent idolatry. Finally, further research needs to gauge in explicit ways as to how the achievement frame shapes the communicative influence on adolescent identity formation.

Acknowledgement

This research was funded by a grant from the City University of Hong Kong (Grant no. 7001886).

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