

The Relationship between Peer Influence and Teenagers' Celebrity Worship Phenomenon

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Abstract: *Celebrity worship phenomenon is increasingly prevalent among Chinese Adolescents, and it has impact on adolescents behaviourally and psychologically. This paper aims to clarify the role that peers play in the popularity of the celebrity worship phenomenon among teenager through discussing about the relationship between peer influence and teenagers' involving in celebrity worship in four aspects: teenagers' need for interpersonal relationships with peers, observational learning from peers, peer pressure and conformity, and accessibility of the Internet and the effect of media hype. By investigating the reasons behind, it helps us to better understand what teenagers are experiencing in peer fan groups, it can also be illuminating and meaningful to teachers and parents in adolescent education. This paper also gives possible suggestions to avoid negative effects of the teenagers' celebrity worship.*

Keywords: *Celebrity worship, Teenagers, Peer influence, Idolization*

1. Introduction

Celebrity worship is defined one-sided obsession with chosen celebrities, who are eminent people, especially popular and famous entertainers and sports stars. Worshipers establish a parasocial relationship with one or more celebrities (McCutcheon, Ashe, Houran & Maltby, 2003; Ang & Chan, 2018).

A survey on 6480 students from Chinese primary and secondary schools reported that, there are 69.2%, 70.9% and 62.7% celebrity worshippers in primary school students, junior school students and high school students respectively (Zhao, 2013). It revealed that there are a great number of teenagers engrossed in celebrity worship, they have even formed its unique and mature fan culture with organized groups and levels in recent years. Teen fans skip classes for their favorite pop-stars' music concerts, seize any opportunities to meet their idols, also are fascinated by their idol's expressions, gestures and signatures, and are excessively curious about their idols' personal lives, considering each detail concerning their idols glamorous to imitate. Teachers and parents deem a majority of behaviors of idolization as irrational and time-wasting, researchers attribute this phenomenon to adolescent rebellion, lopsided view of events, insecure attachment, and the desire for attention and love and so on. In view of explanations above, idolization among teenagers is spontaneous and intrinsic motivated. However, it also calls for attention that the external environment plays an important role in the popularity of the celebrity worship phenomenon among teenagers. In Li and Zhang's study (2008), 0.6% considered idolatry as such a trendy thing in their peer group that making them weird if not involved in, and Xia's study (2015), 3.5% of teenage interviewees were reported that their worship toward celebrities is affected by others, whereas Ang and Chan's qualitative study (2018) reveals that peer influence is one of three sources of adolescents' celebrity worship. However, there is rare research on the relationship between teenager's idol worship and peer influence. In this case, this article wants to sort out the reasons of celebrity worship behind this small teenage group, and emphasize on the discussion about peer influence on teenagers' celebrity worship from four aspects: teenagers' need for interpersonal relationships with peers, observational learning from peers, peer pressure and conformity, and accessibility of the Internet and the effect of media hype.

2. The need for interpersonal relationships with peers and emotional support

Adolescent boys and girls are experiencing the most fluctuant, restless period in their life, along with

the development of self-awareness and a sense of independence, they are full of curiosity, passion and expectation for society and future life. At the same time, they are suffering from sensitivity and mood swings, still depending on intimate ties and attachments to draw spiritual or emotional nourishment from other people to maintain security (Sun & Yang, 2002).

Erik Erikson (1968) discussed about self-identity in his book *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, indicating that the personal crisis is closely related to collective behaviors during adolescence. Adolescents are sensitive to judges and expect for recognition from outgroups, like peer groups or authorities. They face identity diffusion as they are willing to play a role as either leader or follower in peer groups or society. However, if they consolidate self-identity, the characteristic of fidelity can be acquired, which means commitment to others and acceptance of others with differences. Thus, celebrity worship can be seen as a self-identity searching and constructive process while teenagers are in role confusion.

The relationship between peer influence and teenagers' celebrity worship is based on the important role that peers play in the socialization process and developmental environment of a person. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) tells us that the need for belongingness and love encourages people to be positive in social interactions. According to Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), peers are in the microsystems, which has direct impact on the individual's development. In social settings, especially school settings, teenagers spend a lot of time with peers, they develop shared values and activities, thus are more immersed in peers' influence psychologically and behaviorally. In the relationship between teenagers and celebrities that they are not innately fond of, peers act as a bridge that links them together. Li (2016) and Xue (2019) found that teen students with good interpersonal relationship and extroverted personality are more likely to commit idolatry. Liu's finding (2020) further explained the significant positive correlation between peer relationship and idol worship. Peer acceptance has positive correlation to rational worship and negative correlation to irrational worship, while peer fear and inferiority has positive correlation to irrational worship and negative correlation to rational worship. It illuminates that the higher degree teenagers accepted by peers, the more rational worship tendency they have, and the more intense of peer fear and inferiority teenagers have, the more irrational worship tendency they have. The ones that are more accepted by peers has higher social status, and try to seek for higher level of needs rather than the need for belongingness. Whereas, the ones who are afraid of social interaction and self-abased are longing for external emotional attachment, which leads to irrational idolatry toward peers or idols of peers.

In fact, teenagers also tend to choose those who have similar values and attitude as their intimate and trustful friends. Celebrity worship creates common topics and similar experience among teenagers, with which, it is more likely to develop friendship and promote emotional communication with friends. If teenagers are willing to share someone or something they like, it expresses their eagerness to strengthen friendship with a certain person. A common favorite celebrity just like a shared interest, predicts a congenial friend and a bonding to the peer group, celebrities that teenagers having parasocial interactions with, are called pseudo-friends as well (Cohen, 1999). A data shows that, the degree that teenagers are accepted in peer groups has remarkable positive correlation with their recognition and emotional dependence on the same idols. It reveals that idolization enhances the similarity among teenagers, which is one of the causes for interpersonal attraction (Li & Han, 2004). According to Maltby, Giles, Barber and McCutcheon (2005), celebrity worship has entertainment-social value, and a celebrity attitude survey conducted by them showed that teenagers enjoy staying and talking with people who like their favorite celebrity, and discussing with their friends about activities that their favorite celebrities have attended. The most common way to know about idols is by chatting with friends online or face to face. Although the approach differs, the communication among worshippers is of great emotional significance to adolescents (Xia, 2015). It suggests that having the same favorite celebrity and talking about him/her is not only a recreational activity, it also becomes an important part when teenagers getting along with peers.

Celebrity worship also acts as a compensatory psychological defense mechanism (Xiao, 2005). When teenagers feel depressed and lost in their peer relationship or studying, they find idolatry a spiritual comfort and remedy, and get a sense of fulfilment by chatting with friends about the information they collected. Even though parents and peers are both the central elements of adolescent development, in the transitional stage of development when teenagers' independent consciousness and autonomy arouses, they hope to get rid of parents' control and seek for alternative emotional social support for fear of solitude. Teen fans present low level of parent attachment and high level of peer attachment. The celebrity worship phenomenon emerges driven by teenagers' need for love and intimacy, and the eagerness to become more similar to their peers and integrated into peer group (Giles & Maltby, 2004). In this context, teenagers are susceptible to the effects of peers' adoring attitude and worshipping behaviors toward celebrities.

3. Observational learning from peers

According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1971), teenagers learn things more from observing behaviors that others display, and then repeat the behaviors. During adolescence, except for parents and teachers, teenagers rely much on peer group, an alternative social agent, for support and guidance, and they conform to its values, attitudes and behaviors to make themselves acceptable in peer group (Raviv, Bar-Tal, Raviv, & Ben-Horin, 1996). Thus, teenagers tend to take peers' behaviors as reference. When surrounded by peer fans of a star, and keen on idolatry activities, teenagers will observe peers' behaviors, like searching detailed information about the star's personal life, collecting albums and posters, being interested in the TV programs the star attends, even being eager to get close contact with their idol, etc. A series fandom behavior modeled by peers facilitates teenagers' change in attitude from attention, interest, like to worship towards a certain celebrity figure, and similar worshipping behaviors are learned and reproduced through observational learning.

Furthermore, when peers set a celebrity as a model of imitation, teenagers also tend to have imitative behaviors to the celebrity. For example, teenagers will pay attention to the lifestyle of a star, who is worshipped by their peers and regarded as a fashion icon, and the star's behaviors will be followed. This observational learning process, which involves three components: an idol, peers, and a teenager, eventually develops into a result that the star becomes the reference group for both peers and the teenager, and both the star and peers become the models of the teenager, it indicates that the worshipping attitude is accepted and reinforced. In accordance with Wu's classification (2007), peer group and idols are the Significant Others in teen fans' personal growth, playing as the role of the interactive significant other and the idolized significant other respectively. Given these, the influencing process in celebrity worship can be concluded as a Model of ADMIRE (Table1).

Table 1: The Model of ADMIRE

Abbrev	Term	Manifestation	Function
A	Attention	be curious about whom peer fans are talking about.	interpersonal communication need achieved
D	Desire	be eager to know about the stars; collect information.	information acquired
M	Memory	retell the news and stories about celebrities to peers.	impression deepened
I	Interest & Identification	be engaged in idolatrous activities; imitative behaviors.	topics gained, self-esteem boosted; growing adoring attitude
R	Reinforcement	be more active in worshipping activities.	be acknowledged by peers; adoring attitude strengthened
E	Emotion	feel a sense of fulfillment; be more devoted economically and emotionally.	fan identity established; addictive tendency

4. Peer pressure and conformity

Except for the appreciation of a celebrity figure through observational learning influenced by peers, teenagers may fall into celebrity worship as a herding behavior because most teenagers are afraid of being different from others, or regarded as the outdated. Peer pressure forces them to conform to the mainstream to prevent themselves being rejected and isolated. As observational learning in idolization scenario refers to comparatively natural learning that occurs gradually in the daily ordinary school environment, celebrity worship under peer pressure is both passive and purposive.

If given status roles among peers, a trend will be shown that the minority (follower) with low status conforms to the majority (leader) with high status (Eagly & Wood, 1982). That is to say, teenagers make adjustments to their preferences and behaviors to conform to the peer group's mainstream ones, so as to resolve differences and eliminate the fear of divergence or being rejected. When their views on events and people are different from the majority of peer group, they are likely to make compromise and change attitude to a more universally accepted one to meet peer's expectation, even subconsciously. For example, if a teenager finds that the majority of his/her peers are the followers of a famous actress on Microblog, he/she may also click the button of "liking", it is not only about the interest in the actress and her works, but also an effort to create a perception that he/she has something in common with friends and peers

(Sopha, 2013; Zhao & Zhang, 2013). The study of Huang, Lin, Su, and Tung (2015) points out that peer norms are pivotal in idolization. As the youngsters are more susceptible to peer norms, the possibility of idol worship increases.

Also, peer referents exert strong impact on young consumers. Social comparison, which often leads to materialistic values, is strongly linked to peer communication and interactions about consumption, resulting in in-group comparison. As direct role models of similar age, friends and classmates' consumption views and material possessions contribute to adolescents as referents for self-enhancement, instead of self-evaluation (Chan & Zhang, 2007; Chan, 2008). Xiao (2005) figures out that the celebrity worship phenomenon among teenagers in nature is a yearning for reputation and wealth, or a compensatory substitute for their unrealized dream of becoming a star, while "celebrity" is only a symbol of an upper-class of wealth, talents and luck, celebrities and their lifestyles become the best models to imitate to feed youngsters' vanity. Materialism among the peer group often causes pressure to teenagers, because they care about how peers view on their social self-image and consumption habit. Pressure among peers resulted from comparison forces them to set celebrities as the models of imitation to keep up with peers' pursuit of material life and fashion. It seems like things will not get too bad if emulating the stars' fashion styles, or purchasing the products with celebrity endorsement. However, Social comparison with direct role models (peers) is more prevalent than social comparison with vicarious role models (celebrities). Therefore, here forms a circle that the materialistic value among peers can be a clue to the initial motivation of the teenagers' celebrity worship tendency, while the intensity of teenagers' involvement in idolization, in turn, has a positive correlation with their levels of social comparison and materialistic values (Lin & Lin, 2007; Chia & Poo, 2009).

Peer influence on teenagers' celebrity worship reflects a process from assimilation to internalization. When complying with the expectations of peers and becoming similar to them, teenagers are inclined to strengthen the attachment to the peer group and to prevent isolation, so they passively follow peers' fandom behaviors and imitate idol obsessions. Whereas when being immersed in fan culture, which creates a sense of stability and provides a supportive relationship, teenagers later in the process establish self-identity and gain a sense of belonging and recognition, their satisfied emotional fulfillment will encourage/motivate them to acknowledge celebrity worship and internalize worshipping attitudes, then induce more active and freewill worshipping behaviors (Maltby, Giles, Barber & McCutcheon, 2005; Chan & Zhang, 2007). When being more absorbed in celebrity worship, it creates an illusion that friendship among teenagers is fostered and maintained because of their mutual fan identity of a star. This reinforced and internalized worshipping attitude towards celebrities, as well as their sense of pride and cohesiveness for the fan group lead to further habitual worshipping behaviors. In this way, peer pressure indirectly strengthens the teenagers' idolatrous tendency.

5. Accessibility of the Internet and the effect of media hype

In addition, the Internet and new media facilitates the individual's engagement in celebrity worship, which create opportunities for youngsters to exchange messages and spread information among peers. It is easy for teen fans to find congenial peers in SNS or Internet forums, their roles in these "virtual families" satisfy teenagers' needs for friends and attention, as well as emotional support for being understood and recognized. In China, fans set up a group named "official fan club", the club members show their supports both online and offline, like airport pickups and ticket purchases, also help voting, promoting the idol's rankings and endeavoring to get acting chances, these activities are called Yingyuan. In return, stars will cater to their fans' tastes in music style or script choice, and frequently interact with club members in various social networking platforms, such as QQ or Microblog. Fan club works as a family, when gossip and comments intrude their idols' reputation, they will become Keyboard Man to fight back by words; they are also active in charity and do beneficial things to society to build their idols and the fan club with a positive image. In need of propaganda, entertainment agencies cooperate with media companies in publicity stunt, because juicy gossips about celebrities' private life can always develop into the topics among teenagers and can ignite their desire to click the news, media hype makes youngsters irrational consumers.

The development of internet technology breaks the barriers for teen fans from different areas. Online voting, which is eco-friendly and money saving, are popularized in talent shows and TV Awards, making distant worshipping possible. Teen fans are organized and become active participants in a virtual cyber world, bringing them more opportunities to interact with idols in QQ, Microblog and Tieba, and creating a feeling of being connected and being valued by each other. Based on factors like loyalty, attachment, etc., the researchers classified fan community as three levels: top fans, core fans and marginal fans (Ma

& Lin, 2018) or core fans, ordinary fans and passers-by fans/prospective fans (Wang, 2017). It's always a huge ego boost amongst peers when teen fans play a role in serving their idols in the organized and graded fan community. To be integrated into the higher level of the fan group and get closer to their stars, teenagers devote a lot of money and energy to express their loyalty.

6. Discussions

It is undeniable that celebrity worship has some benefits to the development of teenagers. If adolescents' involvement in idolization is at the entertainment-social level rather than intense-personal feelings or borderline-pathological tendencies, it will help to release life stress and promote their life satisfaction (Lin & Lin, 2007). With its own rules and regulations, the fan community has educational function and a function of social public welfare, and many fans participate in charity work in the name of their idols or encouraged by their idols. Moreover, every member takes his/her responsibility and get a platform to take full advantage and accumulate knowledge, such as event planning, poster designing, copy writing, video editing and so on. When teenagers participate in celebrity worship activities peer fans, they can get social skills, improve team spirit, and seek for emotional support from the fan group (Maltby, McCutcheon, Ashe, & Houran, 2001). However, there are also potent side effects of celebrity worship on teenagers.

In behavioral aspect, when teenagers are excessively absorbed in worshipping activities, they are prone to display stalking behaviors and impulsive buying behaviors (Yang, Wang, & Niu, 2008; Sansone & Sansone 2014), teen fans cost a lot of money in buying gifts to their idols, and spend time in supporting idols in airports, concerts, film's premieres or through the Internet, making them less sociable when with people outside the fan group. Also, involvement in idolization is negatively correlated with teenagers' effort level and performance in studying. For one scenario, adolescents of lower academic scores are more eager to turn attention to entertainment celebrities to get rid of academic anxiety. For another scenario, advanced level of involvement in idolization distracts them from academic work, and directly affects academic achievements (Li & Han, 2004).

Meanwhile, celebrities, as teenagers' direct or indirect models of imitation, sometimes set bad examples, which cause harm to teenagers' values and moral development, resulting in problem behaviors, like drug abuse, violence, relentless pursuit to be thin, addiction to cosmetic surgery, and extravagant life style etc. Being attracted by the lavish lifestyle and a considerable income that some "Internet Celebrity" shows, teenagers are easily misled to make thoughtless career choices at the expense of school studying. Some public figures and newspapers rely on making up rumors and sensationalist headlines to make profits, which is misleading and disturbing among teenagers. The casual private lifestyles and indiscreet attitudes toward love and marriage among some celebrities, which is contradictory to virtues, cause excess negative energy to youngsters. What's worse, a Korean research verified that celebrity suicide can trigger copycat suicides, and more exposure to media reports about celebrity suicide leads to increasing copycat suicides (Yi, Hwang, Bae, & Kim, 2019).

In the long run, the negative effects are mirrored in psychological aspect, teenagers constrain their autonomy when conforming to peers' celebrity worship behaviors, also stimulate anxiety, depression, and social phobia (Yue & Cheung, 2021). Deng's research (Deng, 2020) shows that teenage students sometimes are experiencing verbal attack from peers because of their idols. When their favorite idols are belittled and mocked, they feel ashamed and afraid of peer interaction gradually. McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran (2002) proposed a psychological absorption-addiction model to explain celebrity worship, which contains two dimensions, absorption refers to the delusion of a heightened sense of idols' image and associations with idols, while addiction means a demand for more intimate involvement and connection to idols. Part of teen fans think the morality does not matter only if their idol's appearance and works are good enough, they can still offer bottomless forgiveness and support even when idols have immoral or illicit behaviors (Guo, 2015). Teen fans become intolerant cults that never question what their idols do, hold blind trust in celebrities and considering it as true love and a basic principle of fan community. When stars' negative gossips spread out, they follow the herd and furiously fight against in forums and microblog comments with peer fans, and it will gradually suppress their development of self-identity and self-determination. The research of Maltby, McCutcheon, Ashe and Houran (2001) found that celebrity worship may cause poorer mental well-being, excessive celebrity worship towards the celebrity and addictive tendency is related to unrealistic thinking, even anxiety and depression.

7. Implications

Given these concerns above, it is necessary to guide teenagers to correctly deal with peer influence and celebrity worship, the following efforts can be made:

First, it is necessary to build teenagers with self-awareness and confidence, help forming self-identity during adolescence, thereby they can have a better understanding of the characteristics of things and their relationships, and can realize their role and fulfill their personal value to society; to educate teenagers to be independent-minded and can rationally treat the celebrity worship phenomenon among peers and peer influence on idolization, and to accept individual difference and preference; to encourage teenagers to participate in more social activities to get in touch with real society and obtain rational cognition about the world, thereby avoiding irrational conformity to peer group and idolatry advocated by mass media. Based on these, as teenagers' cognition about idol becomes clearer with age, their choice of idol comes from self-determination rather than conformity.

Second, celebrity worship is a subculture among teenagers with cultural, educational and public welfare functions, it can be seen as teenagers' desire for independence and involvement in social groups, which reflects their effective interaction with the society. Stars' quality of perseverance and optimism, professional dedication and legendary experiences are part of explanations to celebrity worship. There is no doubt to accept its existence and respect teenagers if they truly adore excellent and talented celebrity figures. Meanwhile, it is a task for parents and teachers to lead teenagers to be rational fans, including avoiding unconditional support and over-prettification of idols, facing up to idols' deficits and accepting others' critiques of their idols, controlling their emotions and unrealistic fantasies toward idols, as well as differentiating idolatry from reality, as it cannot be the only interest and focus of their life. When parents and teachers find teenagers have extreme idolatrous tendency, and waste a lot of time, energy, and money in worshipping activities, it is necessary to take intervention in time.

Third, educators should help teenagers to cultivate positive aesthetic ability, judgement and morality. What kind of star teenagers choose to worship and what style of their worshipping behaviors expose teenagers' value orientation and reflects their view of life. As Lin and Lin's research (2007) shows that exterior traits serve as worship facilitators and the most vital factor in worship intensity, it is understandable that teenagers appreciate the attractive appearance, dressing, and works celebrities present to the public. Nevertheless, rather than deeming those unconventional or unorthodox as the a standard of idolization, the professional level and internal characteristics that celebrities possess should be the most essential thing to pay attention to. Except for entertainers and sports stars, there are also many other positive figures that deserve adoration and learning, such as social workers, medical workers, scientists, etc. Adams-Price and Greene (1990) came up with two types of secondary attachments to describe adolescents' attachment to celebrity figures: romantic attachments and identificatory attachments. The former one refers to a desire to be an idol's romantic partner, while the latter one refers to a desire to be like the idols, the attachment objects of the two types are complementary or similar to adolescent self-concept respectively. On the premise of rational choice of idols, it will be beneficial if romantic attachments can be turned to identificatory attachments, as well as teenagers' passion for idolatry can be turned to a motivation for self-improvement and self-identity formation. Thus, celebrity figures are endowed with the responsibility of good exempling to the public, especially the youngsters.

In contrast to the absorption-addiction idolatry model mentioned above, which consists of entertainment-social, intense-personal, and borderline-pathological, proposed by McCutcheon et al. (2002), Yue, Cheung and Wong (2010) proposed an identification-emulation idolatry model. This model introduced the charisma-based/achievement-oriented admiration, which refers to someone is identifying, emulating and attaching to idols because of appreciation to their talents, personality, achievement, etc., rather than enjoying glamour-based adoration, which pays attention to and glorifies idol's appearance, wealth, honor, reputation, etc. Identification-emulation idolatry means idol is regarded as a role model and an ideal roadmap of personal ambition and self-growth, idolatry is more than a pursuit of socializing and entertainment, so teenagers are less susceptible to fan group's influences (Cheung & Yue, 2019). Otherwise, which model of idolization teenagers prefer is not only about their own choice, but also can be influenced by social guidance.

Fourth, in view of psychological causes and effects of celebrity worship, parents and teachers should be a good listener with respect and be empathetic to understand their children's inner world, help to relieve their confusion and pressures through communications, and care more about teenagers' emotional needs. Since parenting style has a predictive effect on adolescents' self-identity and their idol worship, and secure attachment predicts healthy idolization (Wang & Liu, 2010; Xie, 2020), it is crucial to maintain a reliable parent-child attachment during adolescence, which will prevent them from turning to

worshipping activities and unrealistic thoughts to obtain psychological satisfaction or emotional support.

Last but not the least, other efforts can be made by our society to create a positive atmosphere for teenagers' growth. The Report on Teenagers' Idolatry and Model Education (2012), which was announced by China Youth & Children Research Center, showed that the star worship phenomenon is the most popularized among middle school students, entertainers and sports stars are the most favorite among 68.4% of teenagers, and teenagers' choice of an idol is led by commercial packaging and operation; while the Survey Report on National Family Education (2018) launched by Beijing Normal University indicates that the most admired person among middle school students is parents, then entertainers and sports stars, historical or cultural figures comes the third. It might imply that the idols of teenagers are changing with social environment. The government and society should call for celebrities' setting good and healthy examples to teenagers, encourage youngsters to learn from positive celebrity figures, arouse public awareness of mass media's manipulation of adolescents' cognitive deficit, enhance media surveillance and strengthen the public welfare orientation of mass media, such as by reporting more about the exemplary deeds of outstanding characters from the field of science, business, charity etc.

8. Conclusion

By justifying the influence that peers have on the teenagers' celebrity worship and idolization's impact on the individual's well-being, it can be concluded that the eagerness to be accepted by the peer group and keep consistent with peers, as well as observational learning from peers motivate teenagers to engage in celebrity worship, meantime the Internet and mass media serve as a catalyst to this phenomenon. By understanding the relationship between peer influence and teenagers' celebrity worship, parents and educators can better explore effective educational methods and offer instructive guidance, and make celebrity worship play its positive role in teenagers' personality development, as true idols should be role models for youngsters to learn from, and to help them become a better person. To quote Zhong Nanshan's saying in the 3rd World Laureates Forum on October 30th, 2020 in Shanghai, "We scientists, our goal in becoming idols is to eliminate young people's blind adherence to idols". Zhong is an academician of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, he won the Medal of the Republic, which is the highest medal of honor of the PRC, because of his great contributions to fight against the epidemic of COVID-19.

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