The Main Types and Causes of Online Youth Subculture

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Abstract: *Currently, there is a stronger tension between online youth subculture and mainstream culture. On one hand, its independence has significantly increased, while on the other hand, it appears more moderate compared to previous youth subcultures. Consumer culture, fan culture, and "lying flat" culture are not only hot topics online but also represent the main types of online youth subculture. The continuous changes in social contradictions, the growing prominence of youth's self-identity issues, and the virtual mode of existence have all contributed to the rapid development of online youth subculture.*

Keywords: *online youth subculture, social contradictions, self-identity*

Introduction

Subculture, relative to mainstream culture, is a cultural form that reflects the real responses of social groups to various contradictions in social development. It is through this process that new identities are constructed within these social groups. The formation of contemporary Chinese youth subculture is closely related to the use of internet technology. The internet provides an open platform that allows youth from different backgrounds and with different interests to freely express themselves and share their opinions. This significantly promotes the formation and dissemination of youth subculture. The decentralized nature of the internet has made traditional authoritative voices no longer the sole source of information. Young people now have access to a more diverse range of thoughts and ideas, which sparks a rethinking of their own cultural identities. This subculture not only maintains a healthy interaction with mainstream culture but also shows a relatively independent, resistant development. Therefore, online youth subculture has become an important window through which to observe social changes, cultural diversity, and the future development of youth. To understand the ideological characteristics and psychological status of contemporary Chinese youth, research on online youth subculture is an indispensable topic.

1. The Basic Differences Between Online Subcultures and Subcultures

As early as the beginning of the 20th century, the Chicago School began its research on subcultures. This research emerged as a response to the series of issues brought about by the rapid development of capitalism. The focus was on sociological studies of immigration problems and juvenile delinquency in Chicago, which directly contributed to the formation of the concept of "youth subculture." The Birmingham School, building on the Chicago School's work, introduced a class dimension into the study of youth subcultures. To some extent, youth subcultures marked a form of resistance to the ruling class and mainstream culture. In the late 20th century, post-subculture studies gradually emerged. Post-subculture theory, from a postmodernist perspective, critiques the class-based subculture theory of the Birmingham School from multiple angles and reinterprets the group characteristics and styles of youth subcultures. This theory introduced new concepts such as new tribes, lifestyles, and scenes. Currently, research on youth subcultures mainly focuses on analyzing various aspects of youth phenomena, identity, and interpersonal relationships in modern society, thus further enhancing the depth and accuracy of the research[1].

The concept of culture is complex and varied, encompassing hundreds of different interpretations. Similarly, the definition of subculture is no exception, as it can be understood from various perspectives, leading to completely different, even opposite, interpretations. However, at the very least, subculture should include two basic meanings. First, it refers to values and behaviors shared by a group that is distinct from, but embedded within, the dominant culture, and that seeks to differentiate itself

from the mainstream. Second, it refers to the group or community that shares this subculture, which can be translated as "subcultural group" in this context. Therefore, within a specific group, if its cultural traits are shared by the group and distinctly different from the mainstream culture, this cultural phenomenon can be called a subculture. This phenomenon not only showcases a diversified social and cultural ecology but also reflects the complex relationship between individuals and groups in cultural identity[2].

Some scholars argue that online youth subculture is simply an extension of youth subculture into the online domain. While this is not entirely incorrect, it remains somewhat one-sided. In terms of its essential characteristics, there are at least three differences between online youth subculture and youth subculture. First, the internet provides a brand new space for the practice of youth subculture. Advances in digital technology have radically transformed social practices, fundamentally changing aspects such as time and space, form, cognition, and characteristics. The online space is a new arena for individuals to engage in social activities, marking the evolution of youth subculture from being physically constrained to becoming a virtual practice of culture. Second, online youth subculture constructs a new form of identity recognition[3]. Identity recognition has two meanings: one is self-positioning and clear self-awareness, and the other is recognition of things with similar attributes to oneself. In contemporary youth online subcultures, whether it is labels such as "Buddha-like" or "lying flat," or circles such as "fandoms" and "second-dimensional," they not only give participants an identity but also serve as a link that connects more participants. Finally, online youth subculture demonstrates a stronger tension in its interaction with mainstream culture. Since the Chicago School began studying subcultures, youth subculture has often been seen as contrary to mainstream culture, fundamentally resisting the ruling class and mainstream society. However, the relationship between online youth subculture and mainstream culture is significantly different from before. Part of this difference is due to the decentralized and fragmented nature of the internet, which reduces the influence of mainstream voices. At the same time, online youth subculture has not completely broken free from the influence of mainstream culture. Compared to the original youth subculture, online youth subculture has become less confrontational, thus appearing more moderate.

2. Main Types of Online Youth Subculture

The types of youth subculture have constantly evolved with the passage of time, each rooted in the social contradictions of specific periods. As the Chicago School focused on issues like immigration and juvenile delinquency, subcultures such as "deviant culture" and "gang culture" emerged. Similarly, in the late 20th century, the "street culture" and "rock culture" arose as a result of the unique social position of youth. Today, the internet has prompted new changes in youth subculture, and unlike before, youth subculture is deeply integrated with the online platform, with its influence far surpassing previous forms. Among the various online youth subcultures today, consumer culture, "lying flat" culture, and fandom culture have the greatest influence, the widest dissemination, and a profound impact on the thoughts and behaviors of contemporary youth.

2.1 Consumer Culture

Karl Marx once said, "The productive forces created by the bourgeoisie in its less than a hundred years of class rule are greater and more significant than all the productive forces created by all previous generations." The rapid development of productive forces has fundamentally changed the world. People no longer need to work tirelessly for basic necessities, and the greatly improved material life has reshaped people's lifestyles and modes of interaction. As a result, people's pursuit of material goods has extended beyond basic needs to encompass factors such as symbols, experiences, aesthetics, and representations, because these attributes satisfy symbolic needs such as social status and identity.

The symbolic nature of consumption is a prominent feature of consumerism. It emphasizes the symbolic meaning of consumption and strongly promotes and pursues fashion. From the perspective of consumerism, consumption is not only about enjoying the use value of goods but also about experiencing their symbolic meaning, symbolic value, and exchange value. For example, there is a significant price difference between an ordinary backpack and a luxury brand backpack. While the materials and labor costs in their production may not differ substantially, the presence of a luxury brand label drives the price to multiply.

Consumerism highlights the symbolic significance of goods, making them codes of meaning and turning the symbolic nature of consumption into a widespread phenomenon in daily life. Under the

dominance of consumerism, consumers express their inner desires through purchasing and consumption, striving for social recognition[4].

2.2 Fandom Culture

Fandom culture is not unique to the internet age; it has long been rooted in various historical corners and social domains. From ancient literary gatherings to modern interest groups, fandom culture has always existed in different forms. With the advent of the internet, this culture has been greatly accelerated and expanded, becoming a social phenomenon and cultural form with distinct characteristics of the times. The internet, as both a catalyst and a driving force, has not only expanded the influence of fandoms but also made them more diverse and complex.

In today's youth groups, the phenomenon of "fandoms" presents new trends and directions, exhibiting both diversification and solidification. On the one hand, members within a fandom can find their own sense of value, belonging, and identity. Through shared interests and values, they resonate in areas such as aesthetics, art, and emotions, thus promoting the prosperity and diversification of internet culture. This phenomenon not only enriches individuals' spiritual lives but also opens new paths for cultural creation and dissemination. On the other hand, fandom culture also faces challenges and problems. Its closed and exclusive nature may lead to extremism and aesthetic rigidity. This inwardly focused development model can cause a fragmentation of values and a collision with mainstream culture. Such influences can weaken social unity and even provoke misunderstandings and conflicts between different groups. Therefore, how to balance diversity and inclusivity becomes a key issue that contemporary society must address.

Among the various forms of fandom culture, "fandom" culture stands out. This cultural phenomenon is not only characterized by the intense admiration fans have for their idols but also by the complex social psychology and organizational structure behind it. With the development of the internet, fans are no longer limited by space, time, or geography. They gather together through social media, fan forums, video platforms, and other channels, forming close-knit connections that transcend traditional social interactions. Fans can more freely follow their idols, finding a sense of belonging and self-worth in the process. This well-organized, clearly divided, and highly effective organization formed in the online space is known as a "fandom." Typically, it has a clear hierarchical structure and distribution of power, with core members planning and organizing activities while peripheral members participate more loosely, creating a powerful collective action capacity. In their long-term interaction with idols, fans not only support and follow but actively participate in the idols' careers by buying albums, voting, and other means, forming a kind of "symbiosis." This relationship deepens fans' emotional investment in their idols and creates a strong sense of belonging, leading to irrational and even fanatical emotional states. If fans encounter negative comments about their idols in online spaces, they often unite to attack those making the remarks, resorting to insults, threats, and intimidation. In recent years, fandoms have become the source of many online disputes[5].

2.3 Lying Flat Culture

The term "lying flat" became popular online in 2020, sparked by an article titled "Lying Flat is Justice," which generated a strong response. In the article, the author describes how, over the past two years without stable employment, they achieved a kind of freedom through reducing consumption and working irregular jobs. Although mainstream media quickly criticized this phenomenon, the term "lying flat" rapidly gained popularity and became a buzzword. In fact, even before "lying flat" became popular, terms like "Buddha-like youth" and "lost" had already become hot topics online, reflecting the inner emotional states of contemporary youth.

The term "Buddha-like" originally came from Japanese magazines to describe a state of Japanese men living alone, centered on their own interests, and unwilling to socialize. In Chinese, it expresses a lifestyle attitude of detachment—neither seeking nor desiring, neither sad nor happy, a calm and laid-back approach to life. "Lost" culture, on the other hand, refers to a pessimistic, despairing, and decadent emotional expression that is currently popular among young people. Unlike "Buddha-like" culture, "lost" culture conveys more resistance, as it is a form of emotional release by youth dissatisfied with reality. "Buddha-like" is more about passive acceptance, a state of living without desires, while "lost" culture is filled with silent resistance to reality and confusion about the future. It is a heavy expression by young people facing fierce competition, societal pressure, and an uncertain future[6].

The term "lying flat" seems similar to "Buddha-like" as it suggests a state of lying down and being

indifferent to the world. However, it is actually a form of silent resistance. It is not merely about passively slacking off, but about deeply questioning and reflecting on the existing social structure and values. When "lying flat" became a popular cultural phenomenon, it represented a rejection of internal strife, a rebellion against societal expectations, and a reassessment of individual value. Even before "lying flat" became a popular term, the idea of "involution" had already entered public awareness. Involution refers to a situation where people put in more effort with little reward, and this was widely resisted by young people, becoming a source of their anxiety and dissatisfaction. In an environment of involution, where resources are limited but competition is intensifying, many people find that no matter how hard they try, they cannot achieve their ideal lifestyle. The "lying flat" mentality is an acknowledgment of the inability to change reality and a redefinition of personal lifestyle and values.

3. The Deep Causes of Online Youth Subcultures

3.1 Social Real Contradictions

The rapid rise of online youth subcultures reflects the true face of social problems. In just four decades, China has undergone a development process that took Western societies several centuries to complete. This rapid social transformation has created both opportunities and challenges. Under the compressed timeline and development space, the fast-paced lifestyle has gradually brought social structural contradictions and problems into sharper focus. For example, the mobility of social classes has slowed, resource distribution has become more unequal, and these factors have intensified internal competition and exacerbated the phenomenon of "involution," all of which have deeply influenced the social mindset of young people.

Amid the collision of diverse values, the younger generation has gradually come to appreciate the appeal of postmodernism, with its features of rebellion, de-elitization, and decentralization. These aspects resonate strongly with the marginal values and rebellious sentiments of youth. With the rapid growth of the internet, this postmodern youth subculture has quickly spread and permeated young people's lives, becoming an important channel for them to express emotions and release feelings, allowing them to challenge traditional views and explore their own identities. However, the influence of this culture is not entirely positive. While it enriches the ways in which young people express themselves, it also has a significant negative impact on their cognitive development. Since postmodernism emphasizes diversity and relativism, it leads some young people to develop overly skeptical attitudes toward authority and traditional values, potentially resulting in a crisis of values. This culture not only changes how they view the world, but also affects their behavior and interpersonal relationships within society[7].

3.2 The Issue of Youth Self-Identity

The rapid development of the economy and society is profoundly changing traditional lifestyles, as we move from a society of acquaintances to a society of strangers. Small-scale social frameworks are gradually disappearing in the current society. While the vast and rational organizational structure of modern society provides unprecedented convenience and efficiency, it often cannot replace the psychological support and sense of security offered by traditional social settings. With the accelerated pace of urbanization, the development of large cities has brought abundant resources and broad employment opportunities, attracting an increasing number of young people to leave their hometowns in pursuit of personal value. However, youth is a crucial period for forming self-identity, and this stage directly influences the confirmation of personal identity and the establishment of a sense of belonging. In this context, many young people face severe challenges: they are prone to experiencing a crisis of self-identity, feeling that life lacks meaning, being at a loss in the face of the present, and feeling uncertainty and confusion about the future.

Moreover, the rapid changes in modern society and the acceleration of globalization have heightened this sense of crisis. Young people must not only adapt to a fast-paced life but also cope with competition and pressure from various sources. The widespread use of social media also subtly increases their anxiety, as they are constantly exposed to comparisons with others' successes and judgments. In such an environment, finding one's own positioning and establishing a solid inner world has become an urgent issue for contemporary youth. While online youth subcultures have, to some extent, reinforced young people's sense of identity and provided a spiritual sense of belonging, ultimately, these subcultures cannot resolve the problem of self-identity for the youth. Rather, they

serve as a channel to alleviate the issue.

3.3 Virtual Existence of Humans

Virtual existence not only creates a virtual living environment and virtual subjects but also introduces a completely new way of life and thinking. This lifestyle changes the basic way we interact with the world, allowing people to connect across physical space boundaries. In a virtual living environment, people can communicate, share, and create with others globally, forming a vast, intangible social network. This network is not just about the exchange of information but also about the collision and fusion of emotions and values.

As virtual practices have become widespread, new cultural forms have emerged. These cultural forms break the boundaries of traditional culture, bringing more diversified expressions and creations. For example, online youth subculture is such an emerging cultural form that quickly spreads through internet platforms, becoming an important means for young people to express themselves and seek recognition. The perfect integration of online youth subcultures with virtual existence lies in their shared pursuit of individuality, diversity, and immediacy. In online youth subcultures, various forms of artistic creation, language expression, and behaviors can be freely displayed and developed. Whether through video, images, text, or music, young people can explore their interests and passions in this virtual space and find like-minded individuals. This cultural form encourages innovation and individuality, providing each participant with a sense of belonging and recognition.

Conclusion

Online youth subcultures are a cultural form generated by the combination of youth subculture and the internet. Compared to traditional youth subcultures, online youth subcultures, while still in conflict with mainstream culture, do not break the bottom line of mainstream culture and appear milder. The reason for this lies in the series of problems brought about by the modernization transformation of society. Issues in work, life, and social settings have prompted young people to seek a way to release their personal emotions, using it as a bond to enhance self-identity. It is foreseeable that against the backdrop of a global economic downturn, with increasingly prominent social contradictions, online youth subcultures will present more diverse forms and have a wider influence.

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