

Fluid Modernity and Virtual Communities: An Analysis of the Popularity of MBTI on Social Media

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Abstract: This paper, rooted in Zygmunt Bauman's theory of modernity, examines the formation of virtual communities and the characteristics of liquid modernity as manifested in the widespread phenomenon of Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) on social media. As a psychological assessment tool, MBTI has pervaded social media platforms, engendering virtual communities characterized by high fluidity and consumerist tendencies. Through participatory observation and online ethnography, this study delves into the MBTI virtual communities on the "Xiaohongshu" platform, exploring their consumerism-driven formation mechanisms and cultural attributes. In modern society, virtual communities exhibit dynamic stability and structural elasticity, with identity constantly being reshaped and redefined within these virtual spaces. The popularity of MBTI underscores the anxieties surrounding identity in contemporary society and reflects the liquid nature of modern identity formation. Under the influence of technology and consumerism, virtual communities have emerged as a significant social form in modern society.

Keywords: Fluid Modernity, Virtual Communities, Liquid Modernity, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Social Media.

1. Introduction

Zygmunt Bauman, a sociologist at the University of Leeds in the UK and the University of Warsaw in Poland, in his work *Modernity and Ambivalence*, draws on the sociological theories of Georg Simmel and the philosophical ideas of Jacques Derrida to propose that interpersonal relationships in modern society exhibit fundamentally contrasting attitudes[1]. Although people may gather in one place, appearing to form a community, they remain strangers to each other.

Social media, as an indispensable part of modern life, has given rise to numerous virtual communities. Individuals tend to seek out virtual communities that suit their subjective preferences, while simultaneously contributing to the definition and construction of these communities through expressing opinions and engaging in social activities, thus forming virtual communities. Within these virtual spaces, identities and consciousness are in constant flux, characterized by uncertainty.

The MBTI, as a psychological assessment tool, has sparked a wave of enthusiasm on social networking sites. People are keen on testing which personality type they belong to and engage in widespread discussions and reflections, using this as a means to find jobs, partners, or friends that align with their personality. However, this enthusiasm often fails to establish strong relationships in real life.

Paper grounded in Bauman's theory of modernity, examines the phenomenon of MBTI's popularity on social media as a case study to explore the formation and cultural characteristics of virtual communities in contemporary society, as well as the value identification of virtual groups within cyberspace. Throughout this analysis, This study will investigate the social realities reflected by this phenomenon and the evolution of its underlying meanings. This paper endeavors to discern overarching traits by examining an emblematic case study and elucidating its societal implications. Notably, a novel aspect of this research lies in the application of Zygmunt Bauman's theory of modernity as an interpretive framework for understanding the widespread popularity of the MBTI.

2. Literature Review and Research Methodology

2.1. Overview of Modernity Thought

Modernity, as a social condition and cultural phenomenon, began to take root during the European Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, gradually evolving over time. In his work *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman introduces the concept of the "cloakroom community," positing a theatrical scenario in which individuals don prescribed attire and briefly gather due to a specific event, only to return to their original roles once the performance concludes[2]. He argues that communities formed around shared interests are inherently fragile, as they lack the essential conditions needed to establish "strong ties." The absence of a sense of belonging hinders the formation of stable and long-lasting cohesion. In his book *Community*, Bauman presents the concept of "home," idealizing community as a warm, safe space imbued with a strong sense of belonging, where individuals are familiar with one another, care for each other, and share common values[3]. Through interactions with others, individuals engage in self-identification and identity construction, thereby cultivating a sense of belonging that integrates them into the collective whole.

German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, in his seminal work *Community and Society: The Fundamental Concepts of Pure Sociology*, distinguishes between the concepts of society and community. He characterizes community as an organic, natural organization where individuals are connected by emotional bonds, resulting in close and stable relationships. In contrast, society is seen as a construct based on rational contracts, where relationships between individuals are instrumental, formed to achieve certain goals or benefits, and are typically temporary, detached, and difficult to sustain[4]. As information and modernization progress, interpersonal relationships exhibit both societal and communal characteristics, becoming increasingly rational and instrumental.

2.2. Research on MBTI's Popularity

Generally speaking, popular culture stands in contrast to elite culture. Currently, there is no consensus within academia on a definitive definition of popular culture, as scholars present a variety of interpretations. Scholar Xia Jianzhong reflects on and traces the thoughts and theories of his predecessors, suggesting that "popular culture is a widely liked and fervently followed culture, primarily functioning as entertainment[5]." In recent years, MBTI-related topics have gained widespread social dissemination and acceptance on Chinese social networks, becoming a tool for cultural and identity identification, and can thus be analyzed as a popular phenomenon.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), developed by Katharine Cook Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers based on the psychological type theory of Carl Jung, is a personality assessment tool. It categorizes personality into four dimensions, with each dimension offering two possible tendencies, resulting in 16 distinct personality types. In the article "I-People, E-People? An Analysis and Reflection on the Youth 'MBTI Fever'," scholars You Zhichun and Zhao Yueying analyze the MBTI phenomenon from the perspective of identity construction and self-identification. They argue

that this assessment method should not be solely relied upon as the ultimate standard for self-cognition and construction, emphasizing that the true self should return to the real world[6].

In the article "Behind the MBTI Personality Test Fever: Youth Mindset and Social Structure Adjustment," Wang Shuixiong asserts that the MBTI personality test craze reflects the social needs of contemporary youth for social interaction, as well as the importance placed on individual value amidst social structure changes and technological advancements. However, he also cautions that this phenomenon may contribute to issues of stratification, leading young people to form "information cocoons" in their personal personality analysis[7]. In their study "The MBTI Personality Type Inventory: Recent Developments and Applications," Gu Xueying and Hu Shi explore the application of MBTI tests in real-world settings, finding that while it offers some guidance for career planning and personal achievement, it is neither a direct nor the sole influencing factor[8]. Research on the popularity of MBTI in China remains limited, and no studies have analyzed it from the perspective of Bauman's modernity theory. Therefore, I believe this topic holds a degree of originality.

2.3. Research Methods

Participant Observation: Employing "MBTI" as a central keyword, this research conducted an in-depth exploration of the "Xiaohongshu" social platform. This involved strategically infiltrating relevant community groups, chats, and discussion threads, where paper systematically observed, recorded, and analyzed the behavioral patterns, interactive dynamics, and cultural nuances of the group members. Through this immersive approach, The research actively participated in discussions when appropriate, allowing for a deeper understanding of the underlying motivations, functions, and social dynamics driving the widespread popularity, dissemination, and evolution of the MBTI phenomenon within this virtual community.

Netnography: Complementing the participant observation, a comprehensive netnographic study was conducted to systematically investigate the discourse, user-generated content, and group chat activities within the MBTI online communities on "Xiaohongshu." This method provided a structured framework for analyzing the cultural practices, interaction patterns, and the broader social context in which these virtual communities operate. By focusing on the cultural characteristics and fluidity inherent in these digital spaces, this approach offered valuable insights into how identity, community, and cultural narratives are constructed, negotiated, and maintained in the context of contemporary social media platforms.

3. The Formation and Characteristics of MBTI Virtual Communities

When searching for "MBTI" on the Xiaohongshu platform, The study found over 1.69 million posts related to the keyword, and surprisingly, more than 20,000 products were also displayed. Additionally, I searched for users with "MBTI" in their usernames and analyzed the follower counts and post content of 100 selected influencers. The analysis revealed that their content predominantly focused on the introduction and promotion of MBTI tests. This phenomenon underscores the widespread dissemination of MBTI within virtual communities and highlights its commercial nature.

Further analysis indicates that users with MBTI-related keywords in their profiles are primarily influencers who promote MBTI tests. Their content mainly falls into three categories: commercial advertising and marketing, influencer-led promotion and interpretation, and user experience sharing. This observation offers new insights for the present study, prompting an exploration of the commercialization characteristics of MBTI virtual communities and the mechanisms behind their formation.

3.1. Virtual Communities Driven by Consumerism

When discussing the formation of virtual communities, Bauman's perspective offers a unique lens. He does not consider media or technology as the core driving forces behind social change, but rather focuses on their "conjunctive characteristics" in modern society[9]. In other words, these technologies play a significant role within broader social formations without actively promoting social change. Unlike traditional "solid" communities, "liquid" forms of virtual communities do not result in offline gatherings akin to a "cloakroom"; instead, media technology dissolves the limitations of time and space, allowing for reconsolidation in virtual spaces. For members of MBTI virtual communities, platforms like Xiaohongshu function as "conjunctive" tools, overcoming temporal and spatial constraints. From a technological standpoint, these platforms rely on algorithmic technology rooted in big data, analyzing user interests and behavior patterns to push relevant content to potential users, thereby continually expanding the community. The clever use of technology connects individuals, facilitating the self-expansion and reinforcement of the virtual community.

As Bauman suggests, technological reinforcement is not the primary factor; I argue that the infiltration of commercial forces plays a dominant role in virtual community formation. The proliferation of related product displays, marketing posts, and pop-up recommendations on social platforms reflects a mature product marketing model. In this context, MBTI is not merely a psychological tool but has also become a consumer product, undergoing a transformation from knowledge to commodity through continuous promotion and production. Bauman highlights the phenomenon of "consumerist commodification," where individuals construct self-value through consumption, leading to the commodification and alienation of identity[10]. Consumerist culture exacerbates individual confusion or dissatisfaction with their existing identity, prompting them to enhance self-perception and identity value through consumption. This not only drives market operations but also deepens individuals' dependency on consumption, trapping them in a cycle of incessant desire. In MBTI virtual communities, identities and interests are similarly commodified and simplified into psychological "labels." Individuals engage in consumption and community interaction in pursuit of self-knowledge and social evaluation. Although this labeled understanding of identity is, in fact, a reduction of complex personalities, it satisfies the need for self-comprehension in a fast-paced world, thereby stimulating consumption behavior.

Further observation reveals that MBTI virtual communities, driven by consumerism, exhibit a "transient" characteristic. As described by the "liquid modernity" theory, the relationships and interaction frequencies within online communities are highly susceptible to changes in trends and market demands. For example, in comment sections and group chats, I often observed users experiencing a conflict between their real-life experiences and the results of their personality tests, leading to doubts or even rejection of their self-perception. However, when these results were later confirmed in real-life situations, users would reevaluate and reassess themselves. This instability strengthens the psychological demand for fresh content and consumption experiences, resulting in a cycle of personality assessments and ongoing consumption. Individuals reinforce their self-perception and identity construction by purchasing MBTI-related products and assessment services, while simultaneously, perhaps unknowingly, becoming drivers of consumption. This, in turn, consolidates and expands the virtual community.

3.2. Communities in Flux: "Solid" vs. "Liquid"

Bauman posits that in the era of "liquid modernity," society exhibits a pronounced tendency toward "fluidity and disintegration," wherein the long-term goals and fixed standards of the past "solid" modernity have been dismantled, and the concept of time has shifted from being "linear" and "continuous" to "fragmented" and "instantaneous"[11]. Virtual communities are indeed products of

this "liquid modernity"; however, even within this context, certain "solid" characteristics persist. For instance, some dedicated MBTI influencers or core members within the community remain active for extended periods, acting as key drivers of the virtual community and leading content creation and production. Despite the overall high fluidity among members, these individuals play a crucial role in sustaining the community's operations by continuously disseminating information, guiding discussions, and maintaining the virtual community.

In this sense, the "solid" characteristics of the MBTI community manifest as a form of "dynamic stability." Beneath the surface of high fluidity, the community still retains a core, relatively stable structure. The high fluidity of members is evident in a cycle of "departure—joining—re-departure—rejoining," where individual participation in the virtual community is often intermittent, and identity within the community may shift frequently depending on different contexts, naturally enhancing the fluidity of internal relationships.

This high fluidity is not only reflected in the joining and leaving of members but is also inherent in the transient and unstable nature of popular culture itself. As new trends emerge and market demands fluctuate, the focus of the community shifts accordingly. For example, a particular type of personality test might gain widespread popularity for a time, but once the trend fades, these members may quickly dissipate and move on to other areas of interest. This fluidity makes it difficult for virtual communities to achieve the enduring and stable state that traditional communities once held.

3.3. Virtual Communities: Dynamic Stability and Structural Flexibility

As previously discussed, the interplay between "solid" and "liquid" elements gives rise to what can be termed "dynamic stability." Virtual communities leverage media technologies to free social relationships from traditional spatial and temporal constraints, allowing these relationships to be established rapidly in the short term while maintaining a certain degree of stability over extended periods. Anthony Giddens argues that in modernity, social relations are increasingly embedded in specific spatiotemporal contexts and are re-embedded into broader social networks through "symbolic tokens" and "expert systems." Although MBTI community members are dispersed across different spaces and times, they are reconnected and re-embedded through social platforms, which serve as symbolic tokens and algorithmic mechanisms, forming a network of enduring relationships that transcend time and space. This relational network relies not only on individuals' identification with the community but also on the accumulation and reproduction of cultural capital within the community, which reinforces its stability.

Moreover, the high fluidity characteristic of virtual communities endows them with "structural flexibility," enabling them to swiftly adapt to changes in the external environment and to sustain their vitality by continuously absorbing new members and topics. For instance, content creation and ideological dissemination by online influencers, along with fan engagement through comments and group chats, are manifestations of this adaptability. In sum, the rules, culture, and interaction patterns of virtual communities provide a stable framework and a systematic knowledge base that offer members a sense of belonging and identity. Simultaneously, the high fluidity and openness of these communities allow them to be continuously influenced and reshaped by external trends, using their "structural flexibility" to maintain their dynamism and appeal.

4. MBTI: The Transformation and Fragmentation of Identity

In modern society, individual identity is in a state of continuous flux and uncertainty. The emergence of the MBTI personality test caters to the audience's urgent desire for self-understanding, seemingly providing clear identity labels, but in reality, it hastily simplifies complex personalities into fixed

impressions. This phenomenon highlights the fragility and volatility inherent in a society characterized by liquid modernity.

The author observes that the MBTI tests promoted on platforms like Xiaohongshu are based on a relatively simplistic set of binary personality dimensions (e.g., extroversion-introversion, sensing-thinking). Many commentators have criticized these binary categorizations as absurd, arguing that such dichotomous classifications not only lead to individuals oscillating between different dimensions but also fail to accurately capture their psychological states and behavioral patterns. Within the context of liquid modernity, the identity formation of individuals in MBTI virtual communities is, in fact, a response to and continuation of this fluidity. Although community members attempt to clarify their personality traits through various tests, this identity is far from stable. For instance, the same individual might undertake multiple tests at different times and receive varying results, leading to frequent shifts in self-identity. This phenomenon reveals the anxiety surrounding self-identification in liquid modernity and the reality of its lack of enduring stability. The test fragments personality into isolated components without controlling for external environmental variables, inevitably resulting in fragmented and "inaccurate" self-perception.

However, this "inaccuracy" might, in a sense, be a form of "accuracy." Liquid modernity fundamentally dissolves the stability of traditional solid societal structures, transforming them into relational structures, where personal identity is increasingly defined by one's relationships with others. In the MBTI community, an individual's identity is not solely determined by the results of the MBTI test but is continually reshaped through interactions with other community members. By participating in discussions, sharing test results, and exchanging ideas, individuals construct a relational identity within the virtual community.

5. Conclusion and Reflections

This paper, using the MBTI phenomenon on Xiaohongshu as a case study, analyzes the characteristics and phenomena of virtual communities within the context of liquid modernity: First, virtual communities represent a highly fluid social form, allowing individuals to "enter" or "exit" rapidly, characterized by high levels of openness and inclusivity; Second, the popularity of the MBTI phenomenon reflects individuals' inner uncertainty and emotional needs in the face of a liquid society, as they seek psychological comfort and identity recognition through the relatively stable classification system of MBTI; Third, MBTI virtual communities create a unique social space through media technology, ensuring audience participation and freedom of expression in discussions. Meanwhile, the penetration of consumerism into MBTI virtual communities further reinforces this phenomenon.

In modern society, communities are no longer solid, enduring entities in the traditional sense but rather temporary assemblages that continuously evolve with technological, commercial, and cultural fluidity. Individuals in modern society are gradually moving away from traditional stable relationships, instead relying on technology and consumption to construct their identities. In the future, virtual communities will likely exhibit more diverse and personalized trends: personalized recommendations and refined management will become more pervasive, and the modes of interaction and content dissemination among members will grow increasingly sophisticated.

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