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Digital Platforms and Youth Subculture: Communication and Cultural Integration

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Abstract. The main places for young people to participate in cultural activities nowadays are online. Youth subcultures are no longer confined to small groups for entertainment in private. By distributing the content of these subcultures, the platforms have reduced the distance between different groups and fostered a sense of community. Based on real-life cases from online media, this paper explores the reasons for the communication and integration of youth subcultures in the digital age. At the same time, it can also vividly present the objective problems in the practice of these processes and provide an important reference for understanding contemporary online youth culture in depth. This paper argues that digital platforms breathe new life into youth subcultures. They break down the barriers of geography and real-world identity, using their shared interests as a starting point to create diverse online spaces for conversation among young people. Studying this phenomenon could aid society in understanding how today's youth communicate and form various types of social ties. It also offers insight into the actual trends that shape cultural exchange and development in the internet era. This study also promotes youth integration into broader social communication and cultural activities, both domestically and internationally.

Keywords: Digital platforms, youth subculture, cross-circle dissemination, interest-based communities, group integration

1. Introduction

Nowadays, many young people's social lives are no longer confined to the classmates and colleagues with whom they interact face-to-face. Many people have small social circles offline, but on digital platforms, such as Bilibili, Xiaohongshu, and TikTok, they can quickly and easily find strangers who share the same hobbies with them. Subculture is one of the reasons these young people have come together and organized cultural activities [1]. Subculture is a type of culture that a particular group has created in its own way, style, and symbols, and is thus different from mainstream culture. Youth subculture refers to the secondary cultural forms that young people create based on their own interests and aesthetic tastes and is different from the dominant culture of society at large [2]. This subculture has become more and more influential among young people today, especially as various social media platforms have removed physical barriers to instant communication and exchange.

Early research from the Birmingham School mostly regarded youth subculture as a form of ritualized opposition to mainstream society [3]. After these ideas were introduced to China, Hu

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Jiangfeng systematically reviewed and evaluated the theoretical framework of the Birmingham School, laying the groundwork for youth subculture studies in China [4]. However, these early theories emerged from offline social contexts and were not directly applicable to the mobile Internet environment today.

With the development of online media, Chinese scholars of communication have gradually begun to study subcultural phenomena on the Internet. Cai Qi was one of the first scholars to study how interest-based cultures build communities in virtual spaces [5]. Yu Guoming and his colleagues have suggested that people connect through shared interests in the Internet era in a new way, and algorithms have given rise to many hidden interest-based communities [6]. Ma Jun has studied how youth subcultures are migrating to mobile platforms as part of the broader media migration [7]. Wang Yufan and his co-author studied the risk of alienation among young people in online subcultures using the phenomenon of "koi fish" online [8]. Peng Lan, on the other hand, used the lens of connection and disconnection to discuss the push-and-pull between openness and closure in online communities [9].

Zeng Yiguo also contributed by exploring fan culture and examining the conditions in the real world that enable it to transcend self-contained entertainment and attract more people [10]. Ma Zhonghong has also indicated that the youth subculture has changed significantly in the era of new media and is no longer centered on resistance [11]. In short, the existing studies show that digital platforms have changed the youth subculture. However, the whole process of how subcultures gradually promote communication and integration among different groups of young people is not well-documented yet.

Therefore, the two problems in this paper are as follows. First, what specific mechanisms do youth subcultures use in the digital space to promote communication and integration among groups? Second, what are the actual deficiencies of these integration processes? Based on existing academic research and mainstream media reports as secondary source material, along with real online cultural phenomena from platforms such as Bilibili, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu, this paper explores the reasons behind these trends and presents an all-weather view of the contradictions in online youth subcultures, providing a better understanding of current youth culture in China.

2. Digital platforms build the community foundation for subcultural exchange

Before digital platforms came along, youth subcultures tended to be quite isolated. Different circles had drawn a clear boundary, making it hard for outsiders to get involved. Digital platforms changed the picture. Through algorithm-driven content distribution, user-generated derivative works, bullet comments, and comment-section interactions, young people from all social backgrounds have an opportunity to communicate with each other.

Based on the above, the first step is for digital platforms to gather people with similar interests and create a platform for interaction. Cultural practices such as ancient-style clothing, anime and gaming culture, street dance, and niche clothing styles are all centered on personal interests. Tags, sections, and topic pages have been added to the platforms to organize the content uploaded by people all over the world. Young people do not need to meet up in person. If they are interested in some cultural symbols, they can join in on the talk. Actual identity and place of residence are not required for entry. Participants can discuss creative works, memes, and aesthetics at the same time. Many young users are no longer content with watching; they create and share their own modified videos online. These tendencies enable more and more young people to join other groups and participate in cross-cultural activities and exchanges.

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Such participatory content creation will further spread the influence of subcultures and carry culture out of their circles. Ordinary people are no longer spectators. Everyone can present their own interpretations and create new works; this will also provide a basis for future cross-circle cooperation. Peng Lan believes that, although the Internet connects people, it may also lead to loneliness. Interest-based communities can bring people together, but they are also likely to be isolated from the outside [9].

3. The core paths through which subcultures drive cultural integration

Cross-circle dissemination refers to the spread of cultural symbols, systems of discourse, and aesthetic tastes that were originally confined to a small group in a certain community, outside that community, spread across the entire online public sphere, and became visible, understandable, and even accepted by people outside that group. This is the main path for the subculture to promote group integration. When the platform's algorithm distributes subcultural content, symbols, memes, and aesthetics that were once restricted to that circle are revealed to the outside world. Initially, many people outside the group may not understand the group's in-group language. However, through bullet comments and explanatory replies in the discussion thread, the different parties gradually learn about each other [12]. These practices enable them to frequently engage with individuals from other cultural backgrounds more easily than in earlier times.

For example, some subcultural content of anime and games has been remixed and recreated by users, and then popular accounts have started to use it. Cultural elements that were once the property of a few are now accessible to all. The sense of opposition between the main group and the subculture has decreased, and a form of two-way cultural acceptance has begun to appear [13]. All integrations do not have to be the same for everyone. Instead, it will create a respectful environment for conversation where young people of different generations and opinions can live together and communicate. As subcultures spread, their basic symbols have been placed in the public cyberspace, and young people from all walks of life have had a chance to meet and communicate. These new paths provide them with visibility and are more accessible to other cultural groups.

Taken together, the paths for subcultures to drive further social and cultural integration require forces across society. The platform should become more inclusive and open to all kinds of ideas and exchanges, but at the same time, provide an institutionalized and regulated space for individuals who can communicate and develop various forms of cultural activities.

4. Practical limitations of youth sub-cultural integration on digital platforms

However, there are also some problems with the positive effects of subcultures. First of all, there are certain deficiencies in the integration process on the platforms. Algorithmic Recommendations tend to create information cocoons. An information cocoon is a situation where algorithms continuously present the same type of content to users, limit their access to all sources of information, and prevent them from learning about other ideas. Some subculture groups are isolated and defensive. When there are any dissenting opinions, arguments are likely to occur. Therefore, there are frequent cases of group conflict and online fighting [14].

Some content creators have been attracting attention by magnifying or distorting the more sensational and exotic elements of subcultures to gain popularity. This thus increases the prejudice of outsiders towards subcultures. In other words, although the digital platforms offer communication tools, the cultural conflicts have not gone away automatically. In practice, the younger generation needs to think reasonably and deliberately, and the platforms should also establish reasonable

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content management. Algorithms cannot resolve the conflict of values. Prejudice among the members and stereotypes from the outside continue to hinder the sincere communication of these groups. To solve these constraints of digital platforms, further actions need to be carried out by various groups, including the government, legal professionals, schools, community groups, as well as parents at home.

To sum up, youth from different social and cultural backgrounds face multiple practical limitations in integrating and communicating on existing digital platforms.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined how digital platforms have built various community foundations for subcultural exchange and communication. It further explores the essential paths through which subcultures could drive cultural integration and dialogue online and points out potential and existing problems of these paths. In particular, some content creators amplify or distort the more sensational and exotic elements of subcultures to gain popularity, regardless of their authenticity or whether they abuse digital power.

To consider existing positive and negative impacts collectively, digital platforms have significantly given new life and communication channels to youth subcultures. They are free of geographical barriers and real-world identities; instead, using common interests as a starting point, various spaces for young people to communicate have been created and developed. Niche cultural content gains more attention and is thus more easily known by all sectors of society. However, technology is only one of many necessary conditions. Authentic Integration should not be limited to algorithm-driven distribution. Communities need to be open and inclusive themselves and work to reduce internal discrimination. This goal requires multiple social forces and groups to engage with large-scale regulations and standardization.

Interest-based online socializing may seem lively and colorful, but it cannot avoid the various problems caused by algorithmic systems. Technology can bring people together in a particular area for study, but understanding among them is still the result of their own thoughts and careful guidance by the platform. This research on the above phenomenon not only reveals that young people express themselves and build social relationships but also provides an understanding of the actual trends in cultural development in contemporary China's internet era.

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