

# ***A Study of Subculture Based on Online Communication from the Perspective of Carnival Theory: Taking Hip-hop Culture as an Example***

**Cenyan Zhang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*School of Journalism and Communication, Anhui Normal University, Wuhu, 243001, China*

*a. Delphine@ahnu.edu.cn*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** As a kind of subculture that is relatively popular among young people, hip-hop culture has been developing well in the past few years with the power of internet communication. Hip-hop culture includes street dance, rap, DJ and graffiti, and has a very rebellious spirit that advocates a free and equal relationship. As for China, hip-hop culture, as an imported product, was once excluded from the mainstream system and had been growing wildly "underground" for a long time. However, in recent years, along with the broadcast of some variety shows, hip-hop culture has been presented in the discourse system of mass media based on online communication, which has attracted widespread attention. The essay includes four parts. The first part starts from the respective concepts of hip-hop culture, subculture, and rave concept, and explains their definition and the process of development respectively. The second part explains the connotation and development of hip-hop culture and subculture from the perspective of rave theory. The third part describes how the online medium has influenced cultural communication. The last part describes the process of localization and transformation of hip-hop culture in China and its current development.

**Keywords:** carnival theory, hip-hop culture, network communication.

## **1. Introduction**

From its birth in the black neighborhoods of the United States to its global sweep, hip-hop culture has become a kind of unique youth-subcultural phenomenon in contemporary society. Based on background, this essay analyzes the current situation and problems of hip-hop cultural communication through the interpretation of hip-hop cultural communication from the perspective of rave theory. Using hip-hop culture and Chinese hip-hop subcultural groups as the blueprint for research, this study attempts to interpret how they achieve the construction of self-identity and group identity so as to make a specific analysis of the development of subcultural communication.

The essay will explain how Western hip-hop culture has developed under the premise of online communication, and in the context of rave theory and the interaction between mainstream culture and hip-hop subculture, it will explain the formation, differentiation, and reconstruction of subcultural group identity in order to restore and clarify the process and motivation of its identity realization and changes.

## 2. Subculture and Hip-hop Culture

Subculture, also known as collective culture or subculture, refers to those non-mainstream, local cultural phenomena corresponding to the main culture. It relates to the concepts and lifestyles that are unique to a certain region or collective in the context of the main culture or integrated culture. One type of subculture not only contains values and concepts common to the main culture but also has its own unique values and concepts. One of the earliest studies of "subculture" was the Chicago School, which systematically studied groups such as immigrants and delinquent youth in the 1920s [1]. The definition of "subculture" is often found in sociology books. In the American social science classic *Sociology*, Popenoe defines subculture broadly, which is usually regarded as a subgroup of a broader culture. One of the more notable contributions to the study of subcultures was made by the Birmingham School in England, which was devoted to the study of the subcultural phenomenon formed by the post-war underclass youths' rebellion against social conflicts in terms of dress and behavior [2]. In his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige, a leading scholar of the Birmingham School, explains that subculture is a subversion of popular culture and is often seen as unfavorable because of its critique of mainstream social standards [3]. Subcultural groups bring together individuals who share similar values but are ostracized by the dominant culture to foster a sense of identity [4]. Subcultural studies in subsequent Western countries also tend to focus on "disadvantaged groups" such as minorities and ghettos. Each kind of subculture must be based on a group, and these groups are basically disadvantaged groups in relative terms [5].

Hip-hop culture first originated in the street culture of the United States in the 1970s, the main body of which was black Americans living in the ghetto. They represent the lower class of society, usually associated with the characteristics of frankness and wildness, and together with hippie culture and fan culture, hip-hop culture belongs to one of the current popular subcultures with unique spiritual aspirations. In recent years, hip-hop culture has continued to develop and come out of the ghetto, covering graffiti, street dance, rap, DJ and other cultural factions and absorbing many elements of fashion trends. Gradually, it has been embraced by youth groups worldwide.

## 3. Interpretation of Hip-hop Cultural Phenomenon from the Perspective of Carnival Theory

In two essays, "The Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics" and "Rabelais' Creation and Folk Culture in the Middle Ages and Renaissance," Bakhtin formally proposed Carnival Theory, which has been widely used in multiple fields such as sociology, anthropology, and communication studies. Carnival Theory is a general term for the concepts of carnival style and carnivalization derived from the carnival, which can be summarized as three keywords: carnival, carnival-style, and carnivalization. [6].

The most important values of the carnival are the subversion of hierarchy, the advocacy of equal dialogue for net victory, the insistence on openness, the emphasis on unfinishedness, changeability, duality, and the exaltation of the spirit of alternation and change, the spirit of destroying everything and changing everything. The carnival-style has two main external characteristics, namely, universality and ritualism. Bakhtin points out that "universality is the essential characteristic of carnival." People live in a carnival, a kind of universal performance in which there is no distinction between performers and spectators, only equality and subversiveness. Its equality lies in that carnival breaks down all sorts of barriers and hierarchical order, and people can be temporarily freed from genuine relationships. Moreover, its subversiveness lies in that life in the carnival is a "second life" out of the norm, in opposition to the rules and order of reality. The idea of carnivalization arises from

folk cultural forces. According to Bakhtin, carnivalization eliminates any closure and mutual contempt, which is precisely the outgrowth of the theoretical characteristics of hip-hop culture.

### **3.1. Hip-hop Culture Development Radiates Outward from the Center**

The United States, as the center of origin for hip-hop culture, has several factions of hip-hop. Due to the long history of hip-hop culture in the United States, Americans, with their own passion for singing and dancing and their free and spontaneous character, have continuously enriched the connotation of hip-hop culture, which has continued to develop and be loved by specific groups of people, forming a subcultural constituency of hip-hop culture, which subsequently radiated around the world, with the phenomenon that top-rated Korean television variety show "show me the money" and the popular Chinese online variety show "The rap of China" are precisely the products of the influence of American hip hop culture and have played a particular phenomenal influence in their respective regions, making hip hop culture develop rapidly. In this process, the development of hip-hop culture around the world after radiation from the United States can be seen as a small carnival of subcultural groups, while from a macroscopic perspective, the spread of hip-hop culture itself is a big carnival, and every individual involved in it to spread and help developing it is a constituent of the carnival.

### **3.2. The Carnival Spirit of Hip-hop Culture**

In addition, the development of hip-hop culture has been characterized by a carnival spirit, which is reflected in its focus on "overturning hierarchy" and "advocating equality." The origins of hip-hop culture came from the ghettos of the lower classes, where people burst out into the streets with a cry for life and a desire to re-establish social order. For example, the famous American rapper Eminem, who actually came from a black community in Detroit, USA, lived in a poor environment as a teenager and was often bullied and abused. However, his persistence and love for rap and hip-hop culture allowed Eminem to make the class leap and become a ghetto millionaire singer in general. Hip-hop culture has the qualities of freedom, shows the same significant value as the rave, precisely in the subversion of hierarchy, advocates equal dialogue net victory, insists on openness, and advocates the spirit of alternation and change, which means destroy everything and change everything.

### **3.3. Reconstruction and Redefinition of Hip-hop Culture**

According to Bakhtin, the existence of carnival is an emotional outlet for the people who are living in the heat of the day. The repression and caution that people have to show in their daily lives are not present on the day of carnival, they are all dissolved. Under the carnival ritual, people vent their discontent with daily life, release the pressure of existence, and enjoy equality and freedom in the carnival, even though they know that such equality and liberty are only temporary and false [7]. In this respect, hip-hop culture and carnival are similar.

In the new media era, people's lives are increasingly fast-paced, and the pressure of survival is increasing. In this context, some people choose to relieve stress through their hobbies. Hip-hop, as an activity with fashionable elements, is favored by a large number of young people at this time. According to their age group, some young people choose hip-hop culture as a breakthrough of young thoughts to export their negative emotions.

Comparatively speaking, the connotation of hip-hop culture transcends time and space, emanating from a certain individual and leading the group to shout in a common direction of thought so that people originally, in reality, are immersed in those moments in hip-hop art, which can be said to be briefly free from the shackles of real society and enter a carnivalized world [8]. Hip-hop culture is essentially a group activity in which the individuals involved are equal and unbound to each other,

and all have rebellious and defiant personalities. During the Balkinian period, people in real life followed a strict hierarchy and lived an extremely repressed life under the control of the church, while the arrival of raves led to spiritual liberation and a carnival-like life [8].

Therefore, in hip-hop culture, whether it is graffiti, street dance, rap, or DJ culture, their dissatisfaction and resentment towards life are quasi-transformed into spiritual focus and turned into artistic creation through bold, wild, and surging content, to express the individual's desire for reconstruction and renewal.

#### **4. Promotional Role of the Medium of Network Communication**

Internet communication is a crucial prerequisite for information exchange among subcultural audience groups in the new era. The effective dissemination and development of subcultures cannot be achieved without the media lending power of online communication. Several qualities of new media are closely related to the characteristics of subculture development.

##### **4.1. The Essence of Youth**

New media, using online communication, has built a relatively convenient and fast communication bridge among the main audience of the subculture, especially the youth group, and has a greater influence on them. Teenagers are willing to try new things and have a strong desire to share and communicate. This group prefers to express their inner world and show their existence through the Internet.

When young people communicate with young people, they will automatically form a communication stickiness, which brings another layer of communication code that only "insiders" understand the original subculture of niche circles and increases the sense of group identity.

##### **4.2. Propagation Property of Network Communication**

The first primary characteristic of network communication is virtuality. The virtual nature of online communication makes it inevitable for subculture groups to communicate and express their views more freely. The virtual nature of online communication provides anonymous expression, and people will be more likely to show their true thoughts when conveying their opinions. At the same time, the process of media communication generates online language and non-verbal symbols belonging to various subcultural circles, which provides the best place for youth subculture to spread. On the media platform, there are division of subcultural circles, and the audiences of each circle are "self-enclosed," which actually brings the freedom of the media to the extreme.

Another property of network propagation is cross-domain time and space. It is also one of the most important reasons for the development of subcultures. Such a mode of transmission allowing audiences to communicate and share on the media platform. For example, the early radiation of hip-hop culture from the United States to the rest of the world was made possible by media communication, including its continuous development now, which benefits from the intertemporality of the network field, allowing individuals who participate in hip-hop cultural revelry around the world to share information and revel together.

##### **4.3. Entertainment**

The most significant difference between youth subculture and mainstream culture is its entertaining nature [8]. It is a kind of marginal culture in that people try to challenge the authority and formality of mainstream culture by extracting it from daily life, and it attracts young people by creating entertainment, representing the openness of young people's life world. Internet communication is the

most entertaining form of communication among the mass media, and its coverage of entertainment events makes young people follow it all the time, and thus a youth subculture is born. Hip-hop culture possesses an entertaining core, which uses its own free and spirited forms of expression to convey the spirit of wildness, such as street dance and rap, which are very easy to get a sense of spiritual liberation. Meanwhile, they have become important forms of entertainment for young people to combat the negative aspects of life.

#### **4.4. Consumerism**

As the fastest and most advanced communication media in the present era, Internet communication has always embodied the characteristics of consumerism with its high technology, especially the rapid occupation of the commodity market by online e-commerce, which provides a constant material basis for the youth subculture. With its powerful penetration, the Internet media presents the youth subculture to young people and induces them to consume, so the consumption style and behavior have become part of the youth subculture [9].

With its powerful and unique creativity and imagination, hip-hop culture has been able to become one of the subcultures with endogenous purchasing power. Furthermore, people's support and love for hip-hop culture have led to the creation of many peripheral products, such as clothing and jewelry with hip-hop characteristics, and the birth of many hip-hop brands.

#### **4.5. Commodification of Media Culture**

Regardless of the form of culture, through the operation of media platforms, it is inevitably transformed into commercial culture with industrial nature, which is a means for capitalists to express their intimacy to civilians.

For example, it can be noticed that regardless of the country in which a variety show about hip-hop is broadcast, the platform on which the show is placed is often vital because people tend to feel familiar with the platform on which it is placed because of a certain show or film, thus promoting consumption. This is how capitalists' package hip-hop culture as a media commodity, thus reducing the distance and creating a sense of intimacy with the audience and using the "carnival" to promote the purpose of consumption.

Beyond that, more often than not, hip-hop culture is symbolized on screen by the viewer in a tangible way. Nowadays, we have unrestricted access to many videos about hip-hop culture on cell phones and television, well-produced variety shows, or shared works recorded among enthusiasts. Either way, it is a vivid "sound" and "form" that conveys the meaning of hip-hop culture to us. It is the medium that establishes communication and sharing quickly, links a circle, and builds a symbolic and restricted three-dimensional ecology.

### **5. The Current Situation of Hip-hop Culture Development in China**

#### **5.1. Characteristic Integration and National Identity**

As a kind of Western culture, when it was introduced to China, hip-hop culture chose to combine with traditional Chinese characteristics in order to increase the Chinese people's attention to hip-hop culture and support its subsequent development in order to develop more permanently.

As the 21st century progressed, a number of artists emerged in the Chinese music scene which combined foreign hip-hop culture with Chinese elements. An early representative of this is Jay Chou, who explicitly introduced the concept of "Chinese style" hip-hop in his music, incorporating traditional Chinese culture into his hip-hop songs. After 2017, there have been more and more adaptations of Western hip-hop culture, especially in the expression of hip-hop music. Rapper GAI

combines the chivalry of China with the honesty and candor of hip-hop, writing lyrics like "I'm walking between heaven and earth with grace and candor" with a Chinese cultural flavor. The rapper Guo Dan bases his songs on the culture of the Anhui region, making good use of ancient poetry as the main body of the lyrics and incorporating northern Anhui folk songs and ditties to present the spiritual world of hip-hop with Chinese ethnic characteristics.

In recent years, as hip-hop culture continues to spread and develop, its integration with traditional Chinese culture is becoming increasingly prevalent, which is reflected in numerous ways. For example, rap music lyrics are written using many ancient Chinese poems and songs, and the accompanying instruments are chosen to match the drumbeats of hip-hop music with traditional Chinese instruments, such as the Chinese Zither and bamboo flute. Furthermore, in the design of street dance, Chinese creators tend to add elements of traditional Chinese folk dances, giving the initially rough hip-hop culture own a lot more classical flavor from the East.

Thanks to the development of integration with traditional Chinese culture, hip-hop culture has become more vocal among Chinese subcultural audiences and has led a large number of Chinese to want to make a more thorough Chinese transformation of hip-hop culture to create Chinese hip-hop.

## 5.2. Cultural Contradiction and Balance

From the perspective of Bakhtin's theory, hip-hop culture originates from the ghetto, which is essentially a low-context culture, and there are certain contradictions and conflicts between its espoused spiritual core and Chinese mainstream culture. Hip-hop culture promotes individualism and hedonism, the pursuit of freedom and individuality, frankness and candor, truthfulness, and straightforwardness [10]. Chinese mainstream culture, on the other hand, is represented by Confucianism, which emphasizes collective subjects and selfless devotion and is characterized by euphemism and subtlety. Therefore, hip-hop culture will encounter resistance from the mainstream cultural impact in the process of development in China.

Due to different cultural backgrounds, many Chinese people only have a superficial understanding of hip-hop culture, viewing it simply as a collection of individualistic and hedonistic culture. Such misconceptions lead to the expression of hip-hop culture among Chinese youth groups mainly in the form of having fun, which is essentially a misunderstanding of hip-hop culture. Nevertheless, Hip-hop culture and Chinese mainstream culture are mutually exclusive. As an imported product, hip-hop culture is not respected and overexposed by mainstream forces in China and is rejected by some mainstream culture advocates in China. Some domestic supporters of national culture want absolute leadership of their cultural positions and therefore do not view the Chineseization of hip-hop culture favorably. The nature of hip-hop culture also dictates that it cannot be forcibly fused with Chinese culture. Otherwise, it would be counterproductive and would not allow people to experience the beauty of both cultures.

## 6. Conclusion

By interpreting the phenomenon of hip-hop subculture being embraced among young people groups from the perspectives of rave theory and internet-mediated communication, the essay learns that hip-hop culture originated in the United States, radiated worldwide through internet communication, and developed rapidly in a short period of time, which was loved by different groups around the world. In China, the development of hip-hop culture has been accompanied by the integration with traditional Chinese culture, and hip-hop culture with national characteristics is supported by Chinese people. However, its individualistic qualities and spiritual core have rejected the mainstream Chinese culture, so its development has been met with resistance. As an imported product from the West, hip-hop culture has a long adaptation period in Chinese cultural soil, and the spread of the Internet has given

such a culture a new direction of development. Nevertheless, from another perspective, hip-hop culture has not been truly understood and accepted by the Chinese public but has instead been subject to misunderstandings and aberrations in the connotations of hip-hop culture by some stubborn parties.

Therefore, in the process of hip-hop culture development, it is vital that hip-hop culture and local culture are correctly and reasonably integrated and developed. Making appropriate adjustments to the expression of hip-hop culture and the fusion with other cultural elements can help promote the regenerative development of hip-hop culture. Supporters of hip-hop culture need to explore the characteristics of traditional Chinese culture so that hip-hop culture can adapt to it and develop together.

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