Research on the Spiritual Core and Underlying Logic of Youth "Abstract Culture"

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Abstract: As a unique subcultural phenomenon in the digital age, youth "abstract culture" profoundly influences the expression and spiritual world of contemporary youth through its decentralized, anti-logical, and highly context-dependent symbolic practices. At the level of symbolic production, abstract culture has formed a unique system of meaning expression through the gamification shift of linguistic symbols, the meme-based dissemination of visual symbols, and the construction of symbolic systems within specific circles. In terms of its spiritual core, abstract culture reflects the decentralized shift in youth cognitive patterns, the alienated state of emotional expression, and the existential predicament of "spiritual wandering." At the level of generative logic, the technological shaping of platform algorithms, the emotional projection of social anxiety, and the subjective responses of youth groups collectively constitute the underlying motivations for this phenomenon. To guide the development of youth culture, it is essential to critically evaluate the dual effects of abstract culture and take action from four dimensions: enhancing media literacy, guiding value reconstruction, fostering authentic expression, and expanding the space of meaning. This approach aims to stimulate youth cultural innovation, cultivate a positive mindset, clarify expression boundaries, and continuously enrich their spiritual worlds.

Keywords: abstract culture; youth subculture; spiritual core

1. Introduction

In recent years, "abstract culture" has emerged as a sudden and powerful force, rapidly spreading from niche jargon to a prevalent mode of expression among young people [1]. A plethora of internet memes such as "Shuan Q (Thanks in a humorous or ironic way)," "Tai Ku La (That's so cool)," and "I'm really grateful (often used sarcastically)" have continuously emerged, while abstract phrases like "absolutely amazing" and "those who understand, understand" flood daily conversations. On the surface, this appears to be merely a linguistic game where young people "don't speak properly"; however, this decentralized, anti-logical, and highly context-dependent mode of expression is profoundly influencing the cognitive patterns, emotional states, and value orientations of contemporary youth. When "everything can be deconstructed" becomes the norm and "nothing really matters" turns into a catchphrase, hidden beneath this symbolic carnival lies the spiritual code of contemporary youth. Their indulgence in "meaningless" expressions, this seemingly absurd cultural phenomenon, reflects the zeitgeist and existential dilemmas faced by young people.

2. The symbol production mechanism of youth "abstract culture"

2.1. From standardized expression to linguistic play in language symbols

The primary manifestation of abstract culture lies in the variation and reconstruction of language symbols. Under the transformation of abstract culture, language gradually shifts from standardized expression to free and casual "linguistic play"[2]. This shift is achieved through three main pathways: firstly, homophonic reconstruction, such as "Shuan Q" originating from the homophone of "thank you" but carrying multiple emotions like speechlessness and perfunctoriness, and "Tai Ku La" derived from "Tai Ku La" (too cool) but creating a sense of absurdity due to mispronunciation; secondly, substitution through homophones, such as "Ji Mei" replacing "sisters" and "Yu Nv Wu Gua" replacing "nothing to do with you," creating community identification codes through intentional misspellings; thirdly, semantic drift, with the most representative example being the transformation of the character "xiao" (filial piety) into "xiao xin bian zhi" (filial piety gone bad), shifting from a positive connotation to satire of unscrupulous admiration. The common feature of these linguistic manipulations is the disjunction between the "signifier" (word form) and the "signified" (word meaning). Form takes precedence over content, and expression itself becomes the purpose. When young people skillfully use these "abstract expressions," they are not only conveying information but also engaging in a linguistic game.

2.2. From static images to dynamic reconstruction in visual symbols

In the symbol system of abstract culture, the transformation of visual symbols is even more pronounced than at the linguistic level. Traditional images convey relatively fixed meanings in a static form, while visual symbols in abstract culture exhibit characteristics of dynamic reconstruction[3]. Static emoticons have taken the lead in this shift. Universal emoticon templates such as "panda head" and "mushroom head" achieve infinite appropriation of scenarios through text substitution—the same "facepalm" emoticon can express helplessness, embarrassment, amusement, or even sarcasm when paired with different texts, turning the image into a container for meaning that can be filled. The "secondary creation" of short videos involves cutting, rearranging, and dubbing original materials to impart new meanings. For example, official news clips are extracted into single frames to create emoticons, and film and television scenes are re-disseminated with abstract captions, completely dissolving the original meanings and leaving only a form shell available for parody. The essence of this visual reconstruction is to transform images from "carriers of meaning" into "raw materials for meaning." Every image and video can be disassembled, rearranged, and re-disseminated.

2.3. Circle construction of youth culture through symbol systems

The symbol production of abstract culture ultimately points to the circle construction of youth culture. This unique symbol system serves a dual function: confirming "insiders" internally and erecting barriers to understanding externally. The ability to skillfully use abstract expressions, catch the latest memes promptly, and create expressions that resonate within the community directly determines a member's position within the group. Those with a long "meme history" and strong meme-creating abilities often attain higher symbolic status; while "newbies" who fail to catch memes or use them incorrectly are often teased or even excluded. This identity distinction based on symbolic ability forms a spontaneous hierarchical order within the abstract community. Meanwhile, the symbol system builds high walls of understanding. Expressions like "filial piety gone bad," "absolutely amazing," and "those who understand, understand" are like hieroglyphics to outsiders, preventing them from decoding and participating. This encrypted communication not only protects the culture within the circle but also strengthens members' sense of belonging. When an abstract meme breaks out of the circle and becomes a popular phrase among the masses, insiders often quickly create new substitute terms to maintain the effectiveness of the boundary[4].

3. Analysis of the spiritual core of youth "abstract culture"

3.1. Abstract culture reflects changes in the way youth

Perceive the World Abstract culture first and foremost reflects a profound transformation in the cognitive landscape of

youth—from believing that "everything has a definitive answer" to accepting that "everything can be deconstructed"[5]. Previously, authoritative discourse, traditional values, and social norms constituted a relatively stable cognitive framework. Official news is turned into emoticons, serious topics are turned into memes, and traditional festivals are re-encoded as "shopping festivals" or "meme days." "I used to think there were things you couldn't joke about, but now I feel there's nothing you can't joke about." This attitude of "taking nothing seriously" brings about the collapse of certainty. Nothing is absolutely right, and nothing is beyond questioning; everything exists in relativity, and everything can be dissolved. As young people adeptly deconstruct everything around them, they also quietly lose the value coordinates they can rely on.

3.2. Using abstract language to avoid genuine communication and replacing sincere expression with memes

On the surface, abstract culture presents a scene of revelry: memes flood the comment sections, barrages of bullet-screen comments fly across the screen, and emoticons are exchanged back and forth. However, behind the excitement often lies an emotional "empty shell." Many people use abstract language to maintain distance and employ memes to avoid opening up their hearts. When a friend shares joy, a simple "awesome" can suffice for all scenarios; when someone expresses sadness, a "facepalm" emoticon is enough to replace comfort; when the need arises to express genuine thoughts, "those who understand, understand" becomes the safest retreat. Behind "hahaha" there may be no laughter, and beneath "tears in my eyes" there may be nothing at all. Abstract language has become a "substitute" for emotions—it fulfills the form of communication while avoiding the risk of investment. Over time, empathy becomes dull, and sincere expression is replaced by symbolic performances.

3.3. Abstract culture reflects the existential state of youth's "spiritual wandering"

On a deeper level, abstract culture reflects an existential state of youth: not lacking ideas, but unwilling to take things seriously; not lacking aspirations, but realizing that pursuing them may not be useful. This state is evident in everyday expressions: "whatever," "it's all good," and "I don't care" have become common phrases; "lying flat," "giving up," and "Buddhist mindset" have become life philosophies; "if you take it seriously, you lose" has become a talisman. On the surface, this appears to be carefree, but in reality, it is a choice made out of helplessness—when effort may not yield rewards, when sincerity may be betrayed, and when investment may lead to no results, it's better to first empty its meaning and let oneself float in mid-air, neither falling too hard nor having to exert oneself to climb. Thus, many choose to "hover": not believing in anything completely, nor denying everything entirely; not deeply investing, nor completely leaving. It's like floating in mid-air, unable to land or reach the sky.

4. The underlying logic behind the emergence of youth "abstract culture"

4.1. Technological shaping: the mechanism of platform algorithms in shaping expression styles

The prevalence of abstract culture is deeply influenced by the technological architecture of platforms. Firstly, the traffic preferences of algorithms directly guide the direction of content production. On platforms like Douyin and Bilibili, the core logic of algorithms revolves around "duration of stay" and "interaction rate." The more abnormal, nonsensical, and unpredictable the content, the more it can break user expectations and achieve higher completion rates and comment volumes. Memes like "Your background is too fake" and "I'm from Yunnan" initially sparked curiosity due to their absurdity, and algorithms, capturing high interaction data, quickly promoted them, triggering imitation across the internet. Over time, content creators have discovered that "normal speech" goes unnoticed, while "abstract expressions" tend to go viral— the logic of traffic silently completes the screening of expression styles. Secondly, fragmented dissemination reshapes the rhythm of expression. Short videos compress expression into 15-30 seconds, and comment sections limit communication to within 140 characters. This "short, sharp, and fast" media environment inherently rejects logically tightly structured

complete expressions and favors instant emotional and memorable points. The "catchphrases" and "explosive memes" in abstract culture precisely adapt to this rhythm—a single sentence, expression, or action instantly conveys information without context or explanation. Finally, the platform's circle design accelerates the iteration of styles. Bilibili's bullet-screen culture, Douyin's challenges, and the tradition of building posts in forums each form unique soils for expression. Memes flow, hybridize, and mutate across different platforms, maintaining a rapid pace of replacement.

4.2. Emotional projection: the pathways of social mentality presented in symbols

The seemingly nonsensical expressions of abstract culture are, in fact, "encrypted transmissions" of young people's true emotions. Employment pressure and class anxiety are among the first themes to emerge. Self-deprecating expressions like "985waste (985 feiwu)," "small-town test-taker," "lying flat," and "giving up" appear to be self-demeaning on the surface but are actually powerless acknowledgments of structural dilemmas. When the path to upward mobility becomes increasingly crowded and the myth that "hard work changes fate" gradually fades, these memes become concentrated capsules of collective emotions, quietly passed among peers. Fear of uncertainty is transformed into absurd strategies for dissolution. Memes like "Life is unpredictable, just like a sausage wrapped in a smaller sausage" and "This world is ultimately insane" use humor to dissolve unpredictability and ridicule to dilute fear. Fluctuating housing prices, intense workplace competition, marital pressure, and future uncertainty—these anxieties that are difficult to articulate are stuffed into memes and hidden within emoticons. The uncontainable desire for expression finds an outlet in "encrypted communication." Many things want to be said, but the space to truly say and dare to say them is limited. Thus, abstract culture becomes a safe form of expression—on the surface, playing with memes, but actually transmitting unspoken emotions. An emoticon, a "that's awesome," or a "those who understand, understand" may hide complaints about work, disappointment in relationships, or helplessness in life.

4.3. Subjective response: how youth groups use abstract culture to cope with anxiety

Faced with technological shaping and real-world anxieties, youth are not passively accepting but actively choosing abstract culture as a survival strategy. Firstly, using abstraction to maintain distance and avoid hurt. "Not taking everything seriously" is the core mindset of abstract culture. Posting sincerely on social media and receiving no likes can lead to disappointment; expressing genuine emotions and being let down can cause hurt; pursuing ideals seriously and failing can bring even greater pain. Abstract culture provides a safe distance: using self-deprecation instead of sincerity, playing with memes instead of opening up, and adopting an "it doesn't matter" attitude to prevent possible disappointments. This self-demeaning is, in fact, a form of self-protection. Secondly, using abstraction to find like-minded individuals and alleviate loneliness. With reduced offline social interactions among young people, loneliness intensifies. Abstract culture unexpectedly becomes a means of connection. When someone throws out a meme and someone else catches it, that moment completes confirmation. The barrage of "those who understand, understand" in comment sections and the unanimous "tears in my eyes" in bullet screens are essentially lonely individuals seeking resonance. Abstract culture may seem to create barriers to understanding, but it also builds emotional connections. Thirdly, using abstraction to confirm existence and prove "I'm here." Creating a meme and letting it spread online, catching a meme and leaving a mark in the comment section, sending an emoticon and swiping a wave of presence in chats—abstract culture becomes a production line for a sense of existence.

5. Guidance pathways for youth "abstract culture"

5.1. Enhancing media literacy: strengthening young people's critical cognitive abilities towards abstract culture

The primary task in guiding young people to correctly approach abstract culture is to enhance their media literacy, enabling them to evolve from passive cultural consumers into conscious cultural participants. Specifically, firstly, it is essential to

help young people understand the production mechanisms and dissemination logic of abstract culture. Many young individuals immerse themselves in playing with memes without realizing that their modes of expression are subtly shaped by platform algorithms. Only when they comprehend the traffic logic of "the more outrageous, the more likely to be promoted" and understand why they unconsciously pursue "viral memes" rather than sincere expressions can they maintain a necessary reflective distance from abstract culture. Secondly, it is crucial to cultivate young people's ability to identify and reflect on internet symbols. While abstract language can be entertaining, not all scenarios are suitable for "not speaking properly." Guiding young people to discern when to play with memes and when to express themselves seriously, enabling them to switch effortlessly between "in-group" and "out-group" contexts, prevents them from losing the ability to express themselves normatively due to excessive indulgence in abstraction. Finally, it is important to assist young people in developing a critical perspective on content. Not all abstract expressions are worthy of admiration, and not all "memes" are harmless. Young people need the ability and courage to say "no" to abstract culture that contains elements of discrimination, malice, or vulgarity.

5.2. From "demolition" to "construction": guiding young people to seek constructive directions beyond deconstruction

The core stance of abstract culture is deconstruction—deconstructing authority, tradition, and everything that appears sacred. But what comes after deconstruction? If only "believing in nothing" and "caring about nothing" remain, young people will fall into the abyss of value nihilism. Therefore, the second step in guidance is to help young people transition from "demolition" to "construction." Firstly, it is necessary to preserve the seeds of construction amidst deconstruction. Abstract culture is not entirely devoid of value; the creativity, humor, and community-building potential it contains are all positive factors that can be transformed. The key is to guide young people to use the same creativity to express positive values and construct meaningful content beyond merely "playing with memes." Secondly, guide young people from "critiquing everything" to "building themselves." When young people become adept at deconstructing the external world, it is worth asking them: What do you believe in? What kind of person do you want to become? What is truly important to you? These questions have no standard answers, but the act of asking them pushes young people from mere negation towards conscious construction. Finally, help young people find directions for "construction." Whether it is academic excellence, deep engagement in hobbies, or taking on responsibilities in social participation, all are worthwhile "construction" practices.

5.3. Cultivating authentic expression: assisting young people in establishing healthy emotional communication modes

Abstract culture has, to some extent, become a substitute for emotions—using memes to replace heartfelt conversations and abstract language to avoid genuine communication. Guiding young people out of this predicament requires helping them rebuild the ability to express themselves authentically. Firstly, attention should be paid to the real emotional needs concealed beneath abstract culture. Young people often choose to "hide" or "beat around the bush" in their expressions because they have experienced setbacks in authentic expression or fear being hurt after exposing their vulnerabilities. Understanding this is crucial for intervening with empathy rather than a preachy attitude. Secondly, it is necessary to create safe spaces where young people can express themselves sincerely. Whether in families, schools, or communities, when young people discover that "speaking properly" is also accepted, listened to, and seriously responded to, they will be willing to shed their abstract masks. This requires parents, teachers, and social workers to foster an inclusive and trusting communication atmosphere, making authentic expression no longer a risky endeavor. Finally, guide young people to switch effortlessly between abstract language and everyday speech. Abstract culture, as a mode of expression, is not inherently sinful; the problem lies in over-reliance leading to the degradation of emotional abilities. Help young people realize that playing with memes is fun, but heartfelt words also need to be spoken; emojis can convey emotions, but a real hug and a sincere confession remain irreplaceable.

5.4. Expanding the space of meaning: providing young people with diverse cultural participation channels

The deep-seated reason for young people's addiction to abstract culture is the poverty of their spiritual lives and the singularity of meaning acquisition channels. When real life fails to provide sufficient value and belonging, abstract revelry online becomes the easiest substitute. Firstly, it is essential to build dialogue platforms between mainstream culture and youth subculture. Mainstream culture should not simply "co-opt" or "suppress" youth culture but should seek understanding and integration through equal dialogue. For example, encouraging young people to express positive values in ways they excel at (short videos, emojis, creative copywriting) allows mainstream values to don the "clothing" favored by young people. Secondly, support young people in transitioning from cultural consumers to cultural creators. Many young individuals demonstrate astonishing creativity in abstract culture—creating memes, secondary creations, editing, and dubbing. If these abilities are positively guided and professionally supported, they can be transformed into more constructive cultural outputs. Schools, communities, and cultural institutions can provide creative spaces, technical training, and exhibition platforms to allow young people's creativity to flourish on a broader stage. Finally, enrich young people's spiritual and cultural lives to reduce excessive reliance on abstract culture. When young people find joy and meaning in reading, art, sports, and volunteer services, and when they have real social connections and value realizations in real life, abstract revelry in the virtual world will naturally take a back seat. The more diverse the channels for acquiring meaning, the less likely young people are to place all their spiritual hopes on a single cultural form.

6. Conclusion

Youth "abstract culture" represents a symbolic practice through which young people in the digital age respond to a complex reality. Understanding "abstraction" is akin to deciphering the spiritual code of this generation. They express their confusion through deconstruction because many questions lack answers; they mask their anxiety with self-deprecation because the pressures of reality have nowhere to be placed; they seek kindred spirits through memes because loneliness intensifies in the digital age. While abstract culture may appear absurd, it possesses its own underlying logic. When "everything can be deconstructed" slides into "believing in nothing," when "playing with memes" completely replaces heartfelt communication, and when the spirit remains in a perpetual state of "hanging in limbo," young people will pay an immeasurable price. Therefore, surpassing abstraction is a more urgent task than merely understanding it. Surpassing abstraction means helping young people learn to "build" after "demolishing," find a sense of belonging after revelry, and discern direction amidst drift. This requires reflection from technological platforms, understanding from all sectors of society, responses from the educational system, and, most crucially, the awakening of the youth themselves.

Disclosure statement

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