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A Study on the Construction of Youth Sub-cultural Identity in Bilibili Danmaku Interaction (2015-2025)

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Abstract

This paper uses Randall Collins' Interactive Ritual Chain Theory to study how young people build sub-cultural identities through danmaku interactions on Bilibili between 2015 and 2025, danmaku interactions can be seen as virtual interactive rituals, young people who take part in these interactions are members of the ACG cultural community, they can get collective emotional solidarity and group cohesion by sending real-time anonymous text comments, this paper finds three ways of identity construction, people can form an imagined community around the same emotional focus, people can get sub-cultural capital through interesting language practices, people can also discuss their identity positions between sub-cultural expression and mainstream cultural participation, the Bilibili danmaku system is a special place for young people to build sub-cultural identities, it has fluid boundaries, multi-layered identities and continuous discussions between sub-cultural authenticity and wider cultural participation.

Keywords

danmaku, youth sub-culture, identity construction, interactive ritual chain, Bilibili

1. Introduction

The danmaku comment system has appeared and changed online video watching into a social interactive experience, this function comes from Japanese video-sharing platforms and develops well in China's digital environment, it lets users put real-time comments on video content directly, so watching videos becomes a collective activity, Bilibili is the most important platform for danmaku culture in China, it starts as a small community for ACG fans and grows into a comprehensive cultural platform for young people, it has more than 300 million monthly active users by 2025, this change makes people think about how young people build and discuss sub-cultural identities through danmaku interactions.

Bilibili and its danmaku culture develop gradually from 2015 to 2025, the platform changes from a small sub-cultural space into a big cultural power in this period, danmaku also changes from a new technical function into an important tool for young people to communicate and express their identities, more and more scholars pay attention to danmaku and use different theories to study its social and cultural meanings, Randall Collins' Interactive Ritual Chain Theory is very useful to analyze danmaku participation, this theory regards danmaku participation as a kind of virtual interaction, participants in different places can build collective emotional solidarity and group cohesion by focusing on the same content and keeping the same rhythm.

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However, most existing studies focus on the structural features of danmaku interactions or their effects on content reception, few studies pay attention to the dynamic process that young people build, maintain and change sub-cultural identities through continuous danmaku participation, this paper makes up for this shortage by studying Bilibili danmaku as a place for sub-cultural identity construction from 2015 to 2025, the core idea of this paper is that young people build sub-cultural identities through three related ways supported by danmaku, young people can build imagined communities through the same emotional focus, young people can get sub-cultural capital through interesting language practices, young people can also discuss their identity positions between sub-cultural expression and mainstream cultural participation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Danmaku as Interactive Ritual

Scholars often use Randall Collins' Interactive Ritual Chain Theory to study danmaku and explain its social rules, most scholars agree that watching videos with danmaku is a typical virtual interactive ritual, users are in different places but they can take part in the activity together through scrolling danmaku texts at the same time [1], empirical studies further explain the emotional change rules of danmaku rituals, continuous mutual attention and same rhythm change scattered individual feelings into collective excitement, it helps to build group solidarity and common emotional energy, this emotional energy can last even after people finish watching videos [2,3].

Some scholars apply this theory to the study of short videos, a study on short romance videos on Bilibili shows that users can stay together virtually through danmaku, they can feel the same emotions around the same theme and show collective feelings through danmaku texts, danmaku becomes a tool that connects individual feelings and group atmosphere [4], these studies all prove that successful danmaku interactive rituals can bring group solidarity, emotional energy, common symbols and group moral rules, danmaku spaces become important places for young people to find emotional resonance and a sense of group belonging.

2.2 Danmaku and Sub-cultural Expression

Young people's sub-culture research can use Bilibili's danmaku to study online group identity, ACG fans can use the functions of the platform, these functions include danmaku, hot comments and interactive videos, they can form special communication ways and symbol systems, these things can tell apart insiders of the sub-culture and common viewers [5,6], these special ways of expression are not planned resistance to the main culture, they are people's willing cultural activities, members of the community spend time and energy on spreading content and sharing feelings. Danmaku is not only a simple tool for leaving comments, it is also a way for people to show they belong to a certain group, people often use words, symbols and communication ways that only the group understands, these uses can make people feel more similar to each other, they can also make people feel they are real insiders of the group [7]. Studies from the Birmingham school tell us that young people's sub-culture built on danmaku is not totally separated from the main culture [8], danmaku culture is known by more people, the style of the sub-culture still exists, but it is also changed by the business of the platform and the spread of the main culture [9], business rules and the platform's focus on traffic make the sub-culture known by more people, but they may also make the culture become the same and lose the special features of the small sub-culture [10]. Hall's encoding and decoding theory can be used here, young viewers do not accept the story of the video without thinking, they understand the content again with the group's view, they write their own thoughts in danmaku, they form a set of words that only the group uses [11], so danmaku is an important tool for young people to spread sub-culture, show identity and communicate with the group, it also shows the cultural ideas and self-understanding of young users.

2.3 Sub-cultural Capital and Identity Performance

Recent studies do not only look at the surface features of interactions, they also study how people form identity and collect capital in danmaku spaces, group identity in danmaku groups does not only come from the same hobbies, the special words and interaction ways of the group also decide a person's position in the group. Special words and common topics of the group help users collect special sub-cultural capital, these capitals make the connection inside the group closer and strengthen the sense of group identity [12], online field research also shows that danmaku language is an important way to build group ties, people learn the expression

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rules of the group after long-time communication, they can tell insiders and outsiders apart and find their own place in the group [13], danmaku interaction is not only simple information exchange, it is also a main way for young people to take part in sub-culture and show their identity. Foreign studies treat taking part in danmaku as a kind of "deep play" that needs much investment, people not only spend time, they also put in feelings and symbolic cultural resources, they want to join the group and get a sense of belonging [14], domestic studies sort out the growth path of danmaku users, people start with separate personal comments, they slowly join interactive communication, they learn the rules of the group's words, they finally join the group deeply and form multi-level identity [15]. Danmaku words and symbols are mixed with moving pictures, they form special online visual expression, they add more ways for young people to build identity [16], users also create common meanings together by adding comments, passing on words and explaining content together, these actions strengthen group cohesion [17]. In addition, the relatively anonymous feature of danmaku platforms reduces the real-life identity limits on self-expression, many anonymous danmakus rolling on the screen make people feel a strong sense of "being together", people can feel others exist without knowing their real-life identity, they form virtual group solidarity [18], this kind of virtual interaction is separated from real-life social relations, it creates a loose space for young people to try different identities and get group belonging.

2.4 Expanding Perspectives: Danmaku and Mainstream Culture

Recent research widens the research scope, it does not only study the inner activities of the sub-culture group, it also studies the connection between danmaku, traditional culture and main cultural communication, studies on traditional culture and red culture videos on Bilibili show that young viewers do not accept cultural content passively, they express personal thoughts through danmaku and build positive cultural identity through group interaction [19-21]. The importance of danmaku is far more than a small ACG sub-culture, it is an important channel for young people to get close to traditional culture and main culture, it is also a channel for them to take part in public cultural discussions, the expression rules coming from small sub-culture circles are more and more used in main cultural communication, they build a bridge between young viewers and main cultural stories. From the view of interactive ritual spaces, young people use real-time danmaku technology to build interactive rituals, they create common meanings and beliefs in the virtual group carnival, they build emotional symbols and national identity, they arouse real-life national consciousness [22], studies on popular short videos on Bilibili find the emotional spread ways of young people's feelings in danmaku spaces, these ways include recalling memories, attractive beginnings, remembering people and emotional resonance [23], studies on digital traditional culture also find young viewers have positive attitudes, they also express critical thoughts in danmaku and comment areas [24]. All these research results show danmaku can make sub-culture belonging and contact with wider culture exist at the same time, from the view of post-sub-culture, danmaku and main culture have two features of "resistance and integration", danmaku groups keep cultural special features through special words on the one hand, they keep mixing with main culture and communicating with each other on the other hand, this has become a main trend [25], this conclusion breaks the opposite relation between sub-culture and main culture, it fits the real situation of young people's online culture today.

3. Conclusion

This paper studies the building of young people's sub-cultural identity in Bilibili's danmaku interaction from 2015 to 2025, the analysis shows danmaku participation becomes a special place for identity building through three connected processes, first, continuous common attention in danmaku interaction forms an imagined community, people who are in different places build group solidarity based on emotional unity and common excitement, second, funny language activities in the danmaku system help people collect sub-cultural capital, they also show personal creativity and group belonging, third, danmaku participation helps people negotiate identity all the time, young people see many kinds of content from small sub-culture materials to main cultural products, they have complex positions, they do not accept the simple opposite division between sub-culture and main culture. These results improve academic understanding of digital young people's culture in many aspects, in theory, they develop the Interactive Ritual Chain Theory, they show virtual, non-real-time and word-based interactions can produce feelings and symbol results similar to real-life rituals, in practice, evidence shows identity building through danmaku includes both sub-culture special features and contact with wider culture words, they challenge the theories that only treat young people's sub-culture as resistance or obedience, in application, the results show danmaku platforms are important places for cultural communication

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and identity building, they give suggestions for cultural policy and education. Different from earlier studies that talk about danmaku interaction or sub-culture features separately, this paper pays attention to the connection between the two, the literature review shows young people's sub-cultural identity is not formed in a single danmaku activity, it is formed slowly through watching videos, leaving comments, communicating and many cultural activities, danmaku provides space for people to express personal hobbies, it also helps young people find common emotions and values through communication with peers, however, this paper mainly uses existing published research, it does not use questionnaires, interviews or long-time danmaku word collection, so the understanding of users' real experience is still limited, in addition, this paper mainly pays attention to the good results of identity building, it does not pay enough attention to group exclusion, language attack and boundary problems inside sub-culture circles. Future research can start from the real participation process of users, for example, interviews or online field research can record the identity changes of long-time danmaku users, comparative analysis of different video types can find the differences of danmaku expression in different content situations, if conditions allow, cross-platform comparison can tell the special features of Bilibili from common features of digital young people's culture, platform algorithms and automatic censorship are changing all the time, the influences of platform rules on danmaku expression and group identity need more critical research.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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