# Mainstreaming of subcultures: The identification effect of e-sports culture among youth groups

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Abstract: During the epidemic, restrictions on outdoor activities have reduced the effect of condensing cultural identity of traditional sports competitions. The large-scale transfer of young people to the Internet has made us see the strong ability of e-sports to generate cultural identity effects in the new era. From the perspective of identity theory, this paper explores the formation process of e-sports cultural identity among youth groups. Through survey research and in-depth interviews, the deep motivation behind the change of young people's ideological, emotional characteristics and cultural identity is analyzed. The study found that in the process of transmitting symbols to the group through ritual communication, the group members completed the cognition and construction of the group identity, and generated and maintained the group identity.

Keywords: Youth groups, Identity theory, E-sports culture

## 1 Introdunction

In the post-pandemic era, gymnasiums sports games and other related projects have been impacted, and many traditional sports competitions have been forced to cancel. The epidemic has prompted more young people to move to the Internet. The changes in the living environment make the youth group lack the cognitive consistency of traditional sports, so the ability of generating resonance and identity in the youth group is less effective than that of the parents.

On the other hand, the e-sports subculture has sprung up, promoting its own concept change from online games to competitive events. Subculture practices such as regular professional leagues and Asian games have demonstrated the freshness vitality and growing influence of communication at the cultural dimension of young e-sports subculture groups in the new media era. Similarly, this is also an attempt by the e-sports youth group to seize the right to speak in the social system. It can be said that the e-sports youth subculture itself is also constantly trying to break through the limitations of the "subculture" circle and try to interact with the mainstream culture. The article will investigate how the youth e-sports subculture has mainstreamed and created a sense of identity among the youth group.

## 2 Research Review

### 2.1 The Review of Research on Identity Theory

The concept of "identity" originated in Latin--idem (meaning the same), including the similarity and homogeneity of objective existence, pointing to the consistency of psychological cognition and the resulting social relationship. Identity is constructed, fluid and multiple [1] The basis of constructing identity is the consistency of cognition to the object. Scholars such as Zhan Xiaomei believe that identity as a concept emphasizes the commonality of identity, that is, the subject's admission, acceptance and conversion [2] In this process, the inclusiveness of identity expands itself, turns "I" into "we", and establishes the identity of "who I am" and "who am I with"; the exclusion of identity sets exclusive limits, distinguishes "us" from "them" in order to achieve the group consideration of "who we are".

Due to the diversity of cultural contacts, young people in the network society are subjected to shocks from various cultures, which make them have an urgent need to be identified. Chen Shujie pointed out in "Cultural Identity and Meaning Production in Cyberspace" that due to the creativity and reshaping of communication space by the Internet, netizens are bound to seek new cultural identity in a new environment [3] Xin Ge "Identity of Network Social Groups" supposed that the weak control of the network is the environmental basis for netizens to generate a sense of identity [4] Internet users are separated from the real social and extend their real self in the cultural identity of the network society. Zhuge Dawei studied the emotional transmission mechanism of players' interaction rituals during the formation and construction of game communities. Players constructed subcultural communities through interactive communication, forming a special social and cultural phenomenon. "Interaction Ritual Chain" has played a driving role in promoting the emotional and cultural identity of players in the game community [5].

### 2.2 A Review of Research on Youth Subcultures

The research on subculture in foreign countries can be roughly divided into four research stages: the early study of immigrant subculture, the Chicago school, the Birmingham school, and the post-subculture study. The Birmingham School believes that youth resist the dominant discourse system through stylization and alternative symbols, while "dominant culture and interest groups relentlessly contain and incorporate it"[6] The "post-subculture theory" of subculture research takes the subculture of youth groups under the globalization of cultural economy and consumerism as the research object, focusing on the role of new media on youth subculture [7].

The domestic research on youth subculture is mainly in two aspects, one is the analysis of the classic theory of subculture, and the more prominent achievement in this aspect is the research on the theory of the Birmingham School. Among them, Hu Jiangfeng, a famous scholar, in "The Style of Subculture: Resistance and Incorporation - A Study of Youth Subculture of the Birmingham School", combed in detail the context and meaning of the "resistance" style emphasized in the Birmingham School, as well as the method and meaning of incorporation [8]. Another aspect is to explore the phenomenon of youth subculture in the new media era in combination with the discourse environment in our country. Based on the background context of globalization and new media, scholar Ma Zhonghong explores different types of network subcultures in the new media era in virtue of "post-subculture theory", and investigates the multiple turns of youth subcultures promoted by new media [9] In recent years, the number of scholars' research on e-sports culture

has also begun to increase. From the perspective of new media, Tang Yunzhi and other scholars discussed how to effectively spread the most valuable part of e-sports culture [10] Liao Xinyu studied the process of e-sports culture from resisting the mainstream culture to being incorporated by ideology and business into a member of the mainstream culture. E-sports culture has reduced "other alienation" and made it "normalized" [11].

To sum up, in recent years, e-sports subculture research has placed the identities of ifferent disciplines in the context of the network media, and is more inclined to the field of discipline integration. In CNKI, there are 12 literatures with e-sports culture as the key word. Therefore, there is still a lot of research space for research on the significance of e-sports subculture from the perspective of youth group identity.

### 2.3 Problem Posing

The research on the formation of youth's cultural identity of e-sports sports will help to understand the psychological mechanism and emotional factors of the youth group, help guide the youth group to form positive values, and increase the national cohesion and cultural identity. Therefore, starting from the identity theory, this paper studies why traditional sports competitions are difficult to resonate with youth groups, and how e-sports subcultures become mainstream and form a sense of youth group identity.

## 3 Research Method

### 3.1 Survey Research

#### 3.1.1 Research Hypothesis

Because traditional sports competitions are well known to their parents, young people are more willing to differentiate themselves from others. In addition, due to the increase of media events in the Internet age, the influence of media events in the current online world has been greatly weakened compared with the previous events, and the awareness of traditional sports events among the youth groups has decreased, so it is difficult to gain resonance among the youth groups. Based on the above, the following assumptions are made:

H1. The higher the awareness of e-sports events/traditional sports events, the stronger the cultural identity of e-sports/traditional sports events.

H2. The higher the degree of subculture exclusiveness/cognitive separation (the parent’s cognition and acceptance rate of e-sports culture during the study), the higher the youth group’s identification with the subculture.

#### 3.1.2 Sampling Method

The object of this research is the youth group. Since the youth group is mainly distributed in

the age group of college students, we mainly select the group of college students from different levels of colleges and universities as the main body of the investigation.

Firstly,we sample the population through systematic method. According to the ranking of Chinese universities compiled by the "2022 Alumni Association Chinese University Rankings" published by China Education Online, starting from the first place, a school is selected out of every 100 schools, and finally, five universities including Peking University, Tibet University, Chengdu University, Huanghuai University, and Henan Institute of Technology were selected as the research overall.

Second, we compiled an overall sampling frame based on the five colleges and universities.

Thirdly, under the 90% confidence interval and 5% sampling error, we conduct stratified multi-stage sampling on the sampling frame, and each university selects 2 departments with equal probability, for a total of 10 departments. A cluster sampling of equal proportions was conducted among the 10 selected departments, and a total of 1,000 students from 30 classes were selected as samples. If any sample refuses to be interviewed, the next class will be looked for as a substitute in sequence.

This survey completed the data collection, sorting and analysis process on June 30, 2022. The survey is mainly based on closed-ended questions, and the main contents are:

(1) Confirmation of basic information: including age, gender, education, etc. (2) The dimension reduction statement part of the independent variable X (3) The dimension reduction statement part of the dependent variable Y. This questionnaire contains 12 multiple choice questions. Using a combination of online and offline methods, through WeChat Moments, Qzone, Weibo community, questionnaire star sample database and offline distribution.

### 3.2 Questionnaire Collection

The questionnaires took 27 days from production to distribution and collection. A total of 223 valid questionnaires were finally collected.

### 3.3 Interview Method

#### 3.3.1 Interview Method Explanation

The interview method is an important source of data for qualitative research. The interview method can provide more in-depth and comprehensive information, further supplement and explain the audience survey, and provide information on the reasons and processes of the process of emotion formation. In addition, be careful to keep in touch with the interviewer, the outpouring of emotion may appear in fragments and change because some events change, if the opportunity is seized, it can be a source of new ideas.

#### 3.3.2 Interview Subject Selection

This article uses the official Weibo account of "League of Legends", the "League of Legends"

super topic, and the fan base of well-known e-sports clubs to find the "die- hard fans" of e-sports as the research object. After getting in touch with them by private message, simple communication was conducted to obtain identity confirmation, and on the basis of their consent, the other party was invited to conduct in-depth interviews. There are two ways to conduct interviews, one of which is to conduct interviews through network communication tools such as Weibo and WeChat, and the other is to conduct offline interviews. In the end, there are 21 valid interview subjects in this study, including 15 males and 6 females. Each player has been in contact with e-sports events for no less than 2 years, and the effective interview duration is 1 hour on average.

**Table 1 Basic information of interviewees**

| Serial number | Gender | Job | Duration of e-sports exposure | Interview time | Interview for-mat |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Male | Student | 2year | 2022.5.22 | On-line |
| 2 | Male | Worker | 4.5year | 2022.5.22 | On-line |
| 3 | Male | service staff | 9year | 2022.5.22 | On-line |
| 4 | Male | Student | 3year | 2022.5.22 | On-line |
| 5 | Male | Student | 7year | 2022.5.23 | On-line |
| 6 | Male | Freelance work | 5year | 2022.5.23 | On-line |
| 7 | Male | Student | 4.5year | 2022.5.28 | On-line |
| 8 | Male | Unemployment | 6year | 2022.5.28 | On-line |
| 9 | Male | Professional staff | 2year | 2022.5.28 | On-line |
| 10 | Male | Company employee | 5.5year | 2022.5.28 | On-line |
| 11 | Male | Student | 4year | 2022.5.29 | On-line |
| 12 | Male | Freelance work | 6year | 2022.5.29 | On-line |
| 13 | Male | Civil servants | 4year | 2022.6.4 | On-line |
| 14 | Male | Student | 6year | 2022.6.4 | On-line |
| 15 | Male | Student | 4year | 2022.6.4 | On-line |
| 16 | Female | Student | 3year | 2022.5.22 | On-line |
| 17 | Female | unemployment | 6year | 2022.5.22 | On-line |
| 18 | Female | Freelance work | 8year | 2022.5.28 | On-line |
| 19 | Female | Company em-ployee | 5year | 2022.5.28 | On-line |
| 20 | Female | Freelance work | 6year | 2022.6.4 | On-line |
| 21 | Female | Student | 5year | 2022.6.4 | On-line |

# 4 Research Findings and Discussion

## 4.1 Result of Survey Research

### 4.1.1 Sample Description

Among the valid samples of the survey, the samples aged 21-24 accounted for the highest proportion, reaching 68%. Female samples were more, accounting for 71%. In the survey of respondents' educational background, they were generally undergraduates, but all types of educational backgrounds were involved. In terms of majors, the survey shows that liberal arts majors account for more, followed by science majors.

The survey shows that the overall male sample pays less attention to the Olympic Games than the female sample. The proportion of male samples that have never paid attention to the Olympic Games is greater than that of female samples, and in the Olympic attention dimension, the proportion of females is greater than that of males. In contrast, the proportion of male samples rises with the increase of e-sports subculture attention, and the opposite is true for females.

In addition, it is worth exploring that the higher the educational level, the higher the level of attention to the Olympic Games. The data shows that among those who have never paid attention, 14.29% have a college degree, while among those who have paid close attention, 35.71% have a doctorate degree.

4.1.2 Survey Research Hypothesis Analysis

1. Analysis of the correlation between competition cultural identity and competition cognition

**Table 2: The degree of correlation between cultural identity and awareness in traditional competitive events.**

| | Q5. Are you concerned about the Olympic Games and Winter Olympic Games in recent years? |
|---|---|
| Q6: How do you feel about Olympic athletes winning medals? | 0.443** |
| Q7: Will you take the initiative to disseminate or produce sports event-related event information? | 0.527** |
| *p<0.05 **p<0.01 | |

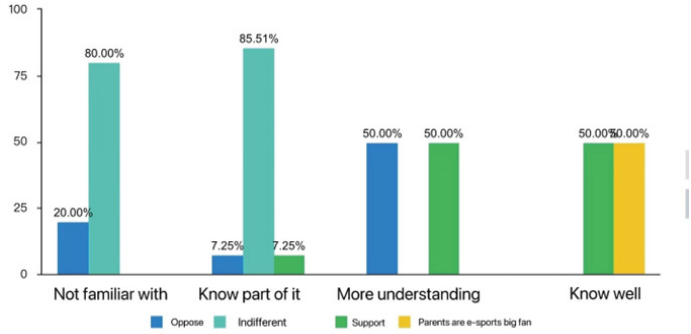
**Table 3: The degree of correlation between cultural identity and awareness of e-sports events**

| | Q8. Do you follow eSports events? |
|---|---|
| Q11: How do you feel about the Chinese e-sports team winning the World Series? | 0.405** |
| Q12: Do you proactively spread or produce es-ports related information? | 0.561** |
| *p<0.05 **p<0.01 | |

According to Table 2, in terms of cultural identity of traditional competitive events, the correlation coefficient values are 0.443 and 0.527 respectively, and show a significance level of 0.01, which indicates that the higher the cognition of traditional competitive events, the stronger the cultural identity of traditional sports culture. Table 3 shows that in terms of cultural identity of e-sports events, the relationship values are 0.405 and 0.561, respectively, and show a significant level of 0.01, which indicates that the higher the cognition of e-sports events, the stronger the cultural identity of e-sports events. Therefore, the higher the cognition of e-sports events/ traditional sports events, the stronger the cultural identity of e-sports sports/traditional sports events. Hypothesis 1 is established.

2. Correlation analysis between the degree of subcultural exclusiveness and cultural identity.

**Figure 1 Correlation between the degree of subcultural exclusiveness and cultural identity**




As shown in Figure 1, through the cross analysis of the two questions, "Do your parents or elders know about e-sports?" and "What's your parents' attitude towards you being an e-sports fan?", the results show that when parents do not understand e-sports at all, the probability of disapproval will be 20%, but when they begin to contact and understand a part of it, the probability drops significantly to 7.25%, and the probability of support also increases. It is worth noting that as parents continue to learn about esports culture, the situation changes. When parents have a thorough understanding of e-sports culture, they all show support, and even say that they are also fans of e-sports. Therefore, the hypothesis 2 that the higher the degree of subcultural rejection/cognitive separation is, the higher the degree of identification of the youth group with the subculture is, does not hold.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Breaking the Wall: The Journey of "Out of the Circle" of E-sports Subculture

5.1.1 Cyber-native identities are complex, and personal pleasure transcends non-ritual

resistance

Young people who have grown up with the rapid development of the Internet, as "Internet natives", have multiple and complex identities. They are not only members of a subcultural group, but also netizens. In the Internet context, people have motives for identity performance [12] In the virtual space of the Internet, young people pay more attention to the realization of their own values and personal pleasure, emphasizing the experience of cultural exchange rather than ritualized resistance.

5.1.2 Incorporation and independent integration are intertwined, multiple motivations behind the prosperity of e-sports

On the one hand, the prosperity of e-sports culture is inseparable from the advancement of capital and mainstream. In recent years, the famous e-sports themes TV dramas such as "Dear, Love", "You Are Beautiful When You Smile", and the planning and broadcasting of e-sports themes shows like "Battle to the Peak" are the result of mutual exchanges between mainstream consciousness and commercial capital. On the other hand, the indifference of real social relations and the "group loneliness" caused by long-term digitalization have made this generation form a different emotional structure, cultural experience and self-cognition. Catering to the mainstream discourse is a way for young people to realize their spiritual aspirations, aiming to gain the recognition of the mainstream society and grasp the point to connecting with the outside world, so as to achieve a high degree of emotional satisfaction and psychological belonging [13] "As long as I play games, my parents say that I am unlearned and be a playboy without ambition. This time EDG won the championship, which also gave me more confidence in front of my parents. Look, I am playing the Asian Games event. " (Respondent 11) It is also a way to get rid of stigma that the youth group actively promotes the process of mainstreaming e-sports subculture, gradually entering the mainstream vision from a marginal position in society, and finally being recognized by the public.

5.1.3 The discourse systems of the circles touch each other, and the memetic effect dissolves the barriers of circles

With the development of information technology, various independent circles have formally collided and linked under the influence of information technology. With the help of various communication technologies, the original circle culture has been surpassed, and the circle wall has been broken, and the rippling circle effect has gradually become an important component of the communication ecology [14] As the cultural barriers are no longer clear, the simplicity, entertainment, and visualization of the "inner circle slang" created by the group members of the circle, conform to the public's decompression needs. In addition, the language has a strong meme effect, which is easy to spread and imitate, so it is widely spread after being accepted by the public [15] For example, "Barbecue" and "opening" are internet buzzwords that are familiar to the public.

### 5.2 Emotional consolation: the formation path of e-sports cultural identity

5.2.1. The Internet environment promotes the free reconstruction of youth subcultural groups

Compared with the "edge" status of youth subculture in the pre-Internet era, the youth subculture in the new media era has realized the "generalization" conversion of cultural practice groups and communication objects. Youth subculture is no longer confined to the narrow circle of the minority outside the mainstream culture [16] The communication space under the transformation of science and technology allows young

people who are familiar with the use of various new media to freely reconstruct,and create and form various subcultural groups. As a separation mechanism, the subcultural

circle has a certain degree of internal closure and exclusivity. This kind of cultural ecology can easily lead to the narrowing of values and aesthetics, leading to the emergence of "social alienation". Therefore, it is necessary to actively look for the psychological mechanism and emotional factors of the youth group behind the rise of e-sports subculture, and through the breaking development of e-sports subculture, prevent the effects of "in-group preference" and "out-group prejudice", and help youth groups establish correct values.

5.2.2 Collective memory provides cognitive basis for subcultural identity

Collective memory was proposed by French sociologist Maurice Halbwach in "The Social Structure of Memory", which refers to the process and result of members of a specific social group sharing past events. The condition to ensure the inheritance of collective memory is the continuity of the retrieval of the memory guaranteed by social interaction and group consciousness [17] For most groups, collective memory means a shared sense of destiny, shared cultural ancestry, and shared values and beliefs based on "our" words and actions. "Internet cafes are a kind of memory of people of our time. To a certain extent, they carry my youth. At the beginning of the popularization of computers, all the news on TV were showing cases of being cheated by online dating or children who were addicted to playing games and abandoned their studies. Even if there is a computer at home, my parents won't let me play. Thus, our friends will go to Internet cafes to play games together. Even after I have my own computer, I still like the atmosphere of playing games together in Internet cafes." (Respondent 7) The reason why young people lack a sense of identity with traditional sports events is due to the lack of memory and cognition of traditional sports events. Social communication is the key process of forming collective memory [18], and the collective memory formed by youth groups in social interaction is the basic source of their subcultural group identity.

5.2.3 The unique sense of group separation provides a new channel for the sense of identity

Randall Collins perfected the framework of interactive ritual theory. He proposes that "setting boundaries to outsiders" is one of the four main components of interactive rituals [19] Members

of subcultural groups are distinguished from general social groups by internal consistency characteristics (unique styling, language style, or hobbies, etc.) [20] This uniqueness becomes clear when subcultural groups relate to other groups [21] Different groups have different cultural characteristics, and this difference in cultural characteristics makes individualization manifest. " The reason my parents pay so much attention to the Olympics was because they only had TV to watch when they were kids." (Respondent 16) The uniqueness of subcultures is an important factor in the formation of contemporary youth's cultural identity. The privacy and heterogeneity of this culture creates a new channel for youth groups to build identifiable cultural identities and group identities.

## 6 Conclusion

This study analyzed the phenomenon that the mainstreaming of e-sports subculture and the decline in the attention of young people in traditional sports competitions in recent years through survey research and interview methods. This study found that e-sports events transmit symbols to the group through ritual communication, and group members interpret the symbols through online and offline meaning communication, complete the cognition and construction of group identity, generate and maintain group identity, and make the group members share a common orientation towards certain values and a particular culture.

However, this study has the problem of time lag. With the development of the e-sports industry and social changes, there may still be other reasons for the identification of the e-sports subculture. In the future, researchers in the field of subculture research may need to pay more attention to the behavioral practice phenomenon caused by e-sports events, as well as the research and practice of expanding the influence of mainstreaming and commercial inclusion on youth identity.

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