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Misuse and Rectification of Cultural Rights Among "Circle-Based" Youth

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Abstract:

As a legal right equivalent in status to political and economic rights, cultural rights deserve social attention and emphasis. However, in the context of online "circle-based" fragmentation, young people exhibit misinterpretations of cultural rights, leading to misuse and abuse. This manifests in three ways: a "self-imposed cocoon" in online cultural participation, "identity-shielded" online opinion expression, and "blind conformity" in online cultural production. To regulate the exercise of cultural rights among "circle-based" youth, it is essential to safeguard participation rights by shifting from closed engagement to open dialogue, standardize expression rights by transitioning from anonymous venting to responsible discourse, and encourage creative rights by moving from traffic-driven replication to value-driven production.

Keywords:

online circle-based fragmentation; cultural rights; information cocooning; youth

With the popularization of the Internet and the development of social media, the network society has rapidly emerged. Under the influence of the typical characteristics of "decentralization" and "flattening," community relationships have been comprehensively reconstructed. Due to the "heterogeneity" and "interest-based affinity" of online subcultures, coupled with the technical empowerment of Internet precision algorithms, the "circlization" of youth online social interaction has become increasingly evident, with the consensus forming in the Internet era that "people live in circles." However, the closure of online circles easily forms an "information cocoon," leading to the reinforced identification of youth groups with the culture and values of their own circles, the neglect and exclusion of "out-of-circle" information, and even the extremization of thinking patterns, giving rise to the alienation of circle culture.

In recent years, cultural rights have been repeatedly mentioned. As statutory rights equivalent in status to political and economic rights, cultural rights should receive due importance and attention. However, against the backdrop of online "circlization," youth groups demonstrate deviations in their understanding of cultural rights, even giving rise to situations of misuse and abuse, which undermine the sound development of the online political ecology and the effectiveness of youth ideological and political education. Therefore, within the context of constructing a cultural powerhouse, clarifying the implications of cultural rights for "circle" youth, analyzing the misuses of cultural rights among "circle" youth, and proposing rectification strategies carry

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practical significance for regulating youth online behavior and governing online space order.

1.Interpretations of the Connotations and Limits of Freedom of Cultural Rights for 'Circle' Youth

When discussing cultural rights, their origins can be traced back to the dawn of human civilization. However, the concept of "cultural rights" as a category of legal fundamental rights is a product of modern society. Generally considered an internationally recognized human rights concept, cultural rights first appeared in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which stipulated the right to education and the freedom to participate in cultural life. In 1966, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, explicitly defining "cultural rights" as: "participation in cultural life," "enjoyment of the benefits of scientific progress and its applications," and "the right to benefit from the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author." Current research shows that the concept of "cultural rights" remains relatively vague, primarily due to the plurality of academic interpretations of "cultural rights" and even "culture" itself, with many scholars using cultural rights as a taken-for-granted concept. Nevertheless, existing laws, regulations, and academic circles generally agree on the content of cultural rights, which include: "the right of citizens to enjoy cultural achievements, the right to participate in cultural activities, the right to engage in cultural creation, and the right to protection of the moral and material interests arising from individual cultural and artistic creations."[1] Thus, this study adopts the interpretation by Fu Caiwu et al. (2015), defining the connotation of cultural rights as "the rights and freedoms of individual citizens or collectives to participate in cultural activities, enjoy cultural resources and achievements, share cultural benefits, and promote cultural inheritance and development."[2]

The cultural rights of "Circle" youth refer to the study of youth cultural rights within the online context, analyzing youth participation behaviors and characteristics in network society to discuss the freedom and limits of youth online cultural rights. Therefore, it is necessary to first clarify two issues.

Concept and structure of cultural rights for 'Circle' Youth. Based on the understanding of online "circlization," "Circle" youth primarily refers to various youth groups formed in network society based on diverse interest-based affinities. Accordingly, the cultural rights of "Circle" youth denote the cultural discourse and behavioral freedoms that youth groups in different circles are entitled to by law in their participation in online life. Precisely because online "circlization" is characterized by closed information acquisition, hierarchical interaction relationships, fixed cognitive levels, and extreme thinking patterns[3], it gives rise to issues such as behavioral disorders and misuse of cultural rights among "Circle" youth in their online participation—issues that form the core of this study. From the perspective of the structure of "Circle" youth's cultural rights, it first embodies a hierarchical structure. As articulated in cultural rights discourse, cultural participation rights, cultural enjoyment rights, cultural sharing rights, and cultural inheritance and development rights inherently imply a progressive relationship of cultural needs or behaviors from lower to higher levels. Second, it manifests as a typological structure, primarily reflected in the positive (forward-looking) and negative (backward-looking) functions of cultural rights. The positive (forward-looking) functions refer to discourses or behaviors expressed by "Circle" youth in their online social participation that align with national cultural guidelines and

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mainstream social culture, playing a guiding and promoting role in advancing mainstream public opinion and positive social and cultural development. The negative (backward-looking) functions, by contrast, mainly manifest as online participation behaviors that undermine mainstream culture, ideology, and discourse systems.

Freedom and Limits of Cultural Rights for 'Circle' Youth. Culturally rights, in their original sense of "rights," inherently point to inner freedom—a form of personal spiritual rights. Shen Shouwen (2014) argues that "cultural rights without 'political rights' such as freedom of thought and expression become a fountain without a source."[4] In this sense, cultural rights and freedom of expression share a coupled relationship, where cultural rights are subordinate to freedom of expression and realized through its exercise. Among "Circle" youth, this manifests as their extensive, bold creation, use, and dissemination of various online cultures to express themselves, propagate value orientations, and demonstrate free individuality. Simultaneously, cultural rights are statutory rights embodying freedom within defined limits. As Tu Kai (2020) notes, as a statutory right, cultural rights require a clear demarcation from freedom of expression in the Marxist context. Taking the Constitution as an example, he highlights the distinction between the legal provisions governing cultural rights and freedom of expression[5], indirectly affirming that cultural rights have established regulatory and limiting requirements. Cui Haiying (2016), through the perspectives of "absolute rights" and "cultural power," analyzes the rise of youth students' online discourse of "absolute rights" and explores the construction of "relative rights" based on self-awareness, self-discipline, and self-reflection[6], providing a theoretical exploration of the freedom limits of cultural rights. While "Circle" youth express themselves and assert individuality in online society, they must also comply with national laws and regulations and follow correct cultural guidelines—even within online "circles," relevant legal norms and cultural rules must be observed. Therefore, in the exercise of rights, misinterpreting cultural rights as unlimited freedom of expression naturally falls into the fallacy of misusing cultural rights.

2.Real-World Manifestations of the Misuse of Cultural Rights by 'Circle' Youth

In the internet age, the free and unordered dissemination of information has become the norm. Influenced by online subcultures and various social trends, youth exhibit diverse forms of behavior in their internet lives. The misuse of cultural rights by "Circle" youth thus imposes greater demands and higher challenges on ideological and political work.

2.1'Self-Enclosed' Online Cultural Participation Patterns

The development of the Internet has catalyzed the diverse and rapid growth of online cultural forms, giving rise to distinct online cultural circles of varying scales and characteristics. In terms of circle classification, there are emotional connections based on interests, such as Guofeng (Chinese traditional style) circles, esports circles, and ACGN (anime, comics, games, novels) circles; circles rooted in consumption behaviors like online shopping, such as blind box circles and street fashion circles; and celebrity-dominated "fan circles" or "celebrity fan circles." For instance, the Bilibili website, highly popular among youth, hosts over 7,000 such circles, catering to the content consumption needs of pan-entertainment users across diverse niches and

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evolving into a comprehensive online cultural community. The circlization of online culture is characterized by intra-group consistency in meaning-making and cultural estrangement or even conflict between circles. Guided by algorithmic bias, circle youth become deeply entrenched in "information cocoons," further solidifying the rigidity of online circles.

In their participation in online culture, "Circle" youth select content based on personal preferences, indulging in and becoming intoxicated by "information islands." A survey conducted by the Social Survey Center of China Youth Daily in collaboration with Wenjuan.com among 1,557 respondents shows that 87.7% of respondents enjoy browsing short videos, with younger age groups exhibiting higher interest. Among them, 58.8% spend over one hour daily on short videos, and 11.3% spend over three hours.[7]

Particularly for adolescents, during this critical period of physical and mental development, excessive reliance on short videos can gradually lead to an "immersive" state of self-paralysis and intoxication, causing them to fall into "information islands" without awareness. Influenced by online subcultures or related non-mainstream circles, this easily has a negative impact on the formation of adolescents' outlook on life, world, and values, resulting in the long-term absence and displacement of mainstream values dissemination. While this may appear as freedom of information and speech, it essentially represents "the weakening and loss of young people’s cognitive abilities, holistic vision, and critical spirit".[8]

From a deeper perspective, in the digital age, driven by the development of self-media and the two-way interactive characteristics of online media, youth groups exercise autonomous agency, demonstrating greater autonomy and creative drive in their participation in online culture. They actively engage in the interactive dissemination and expanded reproduction of online culture, giving rise to participatory online cultural forms—such as the secondary creation and dissemination of real-world or online works, which can even generate better communication effects than original works. However, against the backdrop of circlization, online information is marked by fragmented dissemination, homogenized production, and exclusive interaction, making it difficult for people to filter comprehensive, objective, and valuable information. Different online circles exist in relative isolation, with insular cohesion forming within circles that suppresses the expression of dissenting views and even gives rise to phenomena such as group polarization.

2.2 Online Opinion Expression with "Anonymous Persona Shield"

With the rapid development of internet technology, the intelligent media era of human-machine interconnection is reshaping new models of social interaction, and cyberspace has become a shared spiritual home for hundreds of millions of people. Due to the universality and anonymity of the internet, the public can relatively freely express their views on events in cyberspace. As "digital natives," the younger generation constitutes a vital force in cyberspace. Amidst the overwhelming influx of online information, the truth of some content is deconstructed, with genuine and false information interpenetrating. Moreover, information dissemination is often intertwined with personal emotional preferences. Given the varying media literacy of communicators, intentional or unintentional dissemination of such information—especially when extremist views within the same circle converge to form a "community of prejudice"—can trigger various public opinion crises and even lead to the formation of group polarization.[9]

In terms of specific manifestations, due to the strong anonymity of the internet, the public tends to hide

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their identities when engaging in online social interactions and opinion expression, while also being more prone to ignoring the moral responsibilities of their online behaviors toward others. Such behaviors not only harm the harmony of the online environment but may also cause psychological harm to others. Especially in public opinion incidents, influenced by homogenized and circle-specific information, "Circle" youth often express emotional and extreme remarks driven by herd mentality, triggering public opinion carnivals within specific circles or opinion clusters.

According to the theory of weak communication, the public opinion world is a communicative realm where emotion prevails over reason. In this world, emotion holds a dominant position, serving as both a medium and energy. In the contest between reason and emotion, emotion triumphs. [10] Therefore, during the online fermentation and dissemination of public opinion incidents, "public opinion" risks being manipulated by traffic. The diverse media literacy of netizens and the anonymity of online participation can to some extent exacerbate and fuel the formation of group polarization.

2.3'Blind Following' in Online Cultural Production

In the era of information explosion, the diversification and homogenization of online cultural production coexist. In particular, the phenomenon of "blind following" has become a social and cultural landscape that cannot be ignored. Without in-depth thinking or understanding, netizens follow trends, imitate others' behaviors or content for imitative creation or secondary dissemination, ranging from popular phrases, viral images, and short videos to more complex art forms and opinion expressions. From a social psychology perspective, blind following stems from people's deindividuation, which in turn exacerbates the trend and behavior of following the crowd. Especially within circles, groups with shared interests engage in follow-the-trend creation around related topics or content, presenting a "viral" communication effect. The root causes of this online cultural production model lie in the rise of fast-consuming culture, the promotion of social media, and individuals' needs to seek a sense of belonging and identity. Online, a hot event, a trending internet phrase, or a fashion trend can often spread rapidly in a very short time, attracting large numbers of netizens to imitate and participate, forming the so-called "internet celebrity effect."

Blindly following trends in online cultural production has given rise to issues of cultural alienation, vulgarization, and superficialization. Take the rampant spread of online "bad memes" as an example: the wanton and perverse interpretation of language and characters not only impairs adolescents' ability to use language accurately and standardly but also seriously undermines their understanding of the solemnity of normative texts. During the process of imitation and adaptation, an "entertainment-first" mindset takes shape, eroding their judgment and critical thinking capabilities.Furthermore, the homogenization of cultural products has become more pronounced. In fields such as television programs, films, and books, as well as in the "vertical-screen era," the trend-chasing phenomenon is particularly evident in short videos and content operation of online accounts. Once a work or self-media account achieves success, it is swiftly followed by a multitude of imitators. This trend-following behavior leads to "excessive competition" and resource waste across industries. In the currently booming micro-short drama and online literature sectors, problems such as "viral incubation," "mechanized production," and "fast-food consumption" have severely hindered the healthy and sustainable development of related industries.

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Blindly following trends undermines the diversity and innovation of online culture. A flood of similar content in cyberspace drowns out truly valuable cultural products, reducing the diversity and richness of online culture while causing a lack of innovative capacity and leading to the contraction of the cultural market. Additionally, its negative effects include exacerbating social restlessness and influencing public value judgments and behavioral choices. For example, false information or extreme views can be amplified through trend-chasing dissemination, potentially misleading the public and causing social panic or misunderstanding. Meanwhile, long-term immersion in trend-following culture makes individuals prone to losing the ability to think independently, forming mental inertia, which is detrimental to personal growth and social progress.

3.Corrective Strategies for the Fulfillment of Cultural Rights of 'Circle' Youth

In October 2023, the official proposal of Xi Jinping Thought on Culture established the cultural component of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, providing fundamental guidance for the entire Party and people of all ethnic groups to courageously undertake new cultural missions. As digital natives, youth are a vital force in promoting the creative transformation and innovative development of fine traditional Chinese culture. The key challenge lies in how to guide young people to correctly fulfill their cultural rights within the internet context and diverse "circles," while exercising "free expression," participating in social and cultural construction through practical actions, and infusing culture with contemporary vitality.

3.1Ensuring the Right to Participation: From Closed Participation to Open Dialogue

The right to participation is a fundamental right in the fulfillment of cultural rights. However, due to factors such as algorithmic recommendation and in-group cohesion within circles, youth are trapped in information cocoons, with the scope and form of cultural participation largely confined to homogeneous groups. This phenomenon weakens the social empathy of circle youth. Therefore, it is necessary to break down circle barriers through diverse channels to achieve a transition from closed participation to open dialogue.

Enhancing media literacy among youth through educational guidance.In the Smart Media Era, strengthening the cultivation of online media literacy among young students is not only an effective channel to ensure their standardized cultural participation but also a necessary measure to enhance the effectiveness of online ideological and political education. Media literacy education can be carried out in various forms, such as offering Digital Citizenship Courses to guide youth to properly exercise their online cultural rights, enhance their ability to identify algorithmic biases, and continuously improve their media literacy.Promoting diverse cultural activities integrating online and offline spaces.Organizing rich and diverse cultural activities that integrate online and offline environments can transform online subcultures into offline experiences. For example, combining popular online Cosplay with exhibitions of traditional Chinese culture can break down the virtual boundaries of the internet, thereby promoting communication between "insiders" and "outsiders" of cultural circles and fostering interaction between online and offline spaces.

Achieving 'Mechanism-Driven Circle-Breaking' through platform intervention and algorithmic optimi-

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zation. In November 2024, the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission Office and four other departments issued the Notice on Carrying Out the "Clear Network · Governance of Typical Algorithmic Issues in Online Platforms" Special Campaign, which emphasizes in-depth rectification of "information cocoons" and induced addiction, and enhancing the diversity and richness of recommended content. This objectively requires relevant platform enterprises to adjust algorithmic logic, safeguard netizens' rights to diverse participation and information, and ensure algorithmic optimization encourages the coexistence of multiple perspectives and cross-circle discussion. For example, platforms should further improve the "random recommendation" setting buttons on self-media platforms, standardize "not interested" negative feedback functions, and promote transparency in algorithmic and platform governance. These measures aim to protect the cultural rights of youth groups and foster the healthy and orderly development of the internet.

3.2 Standardizing the Right to Expression: From Anonymous Venting to Responsible Expression

As "digital natives," contemporary youth have grown up in an era of cultural and value pluralism, characterized by active thinking and independent personalities, which often translates into a strong sense of participation and desire for expression online. However, due to the complexity of online information and the ongoing process of improving internet order management, many young people rely on "anonymous accounts" to engage in extreme and irrational expression, evading social responsibility and exacerbating online hostility. Therefore, safeguarding and standardizing netizens' right to expression, and guiding them from anonymous venting to responsible expression, have become critical measures.

Establish the cognitive framework of equal rights and responsibilities. Online expression is a form of public participation, and within cultural circles, it can generate amplifying effects due to group resonance. "Circle" youth must first understand the legal boundaries of online speech, clarify their rights and obligations, and regulate their words and actions by legal norms and moral standards. Although anonymity serves as a protective mechanism for online expression, it does not equate to immunity from responsibility—any form of expression may have substantial impacts on others or society. Understanding the social nature of expression and defining the boundary between rights and responsibilities in communication constitute the primary task of standardizing the right to expression.

Building a self-discipline mechanism from individuals to groups. Cultivate critical thinking to enhance the rational analysis and discrimination of online opinions, avoiding blind following and being influenced by online emotions. Encourage youth from different circles to achieve empathic expression through role-playing, reasonably guide and voluntarily resist stereotypes against niche circles. Strengthen the sense of group rules within circles, establish circle self-governance norms, and clarify expression red lines through community conventions to prevent online violence and other incidents. Further improve the identification and reporting of harmful online speech by online rumor-refuting platforms, set up models of rational discourse within circles, and timely counter emotional remarks. Implement circle "self-governance conventions," select senior members for internal mediation, actively leverage the positive guiding role of circle opinion leaders, and impose sanctions on malicious attacks.

Strengthening the guiding role of mainstream culture. Encourage "Circle" youth to actively engage with

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and learn from mainstream culture, drawing on its excellent ideas and values to leverage the important role of culture in shaping individuals. Innovate media propaganda forms and channels, actively create new expressions, and use languages and formats popular among youth to disseminate mainstream voices. Guide youth to establish correct concepts of online expression, ensuring that the right to online cultural expression develops on a healthy and orderly track.

3.3 Encouraging the Right to Creation: From Traffic Replication to Value Production

As previously mentioned, cultural production among "circle" youth often follows the logic of "traffic supremacy," giving rise to homogenized and fast-food-style content replication. In particular, the relative closure of circles may lead to value narrowing or even extremism. How to guide youth to shift from "traffic-driven" to "value-driven" has become a key issue in regulating the online cultural ecosystem and guiding youth to properly exercise their right to cultural creation.

Emphasizing the shift in value logic. Guide youth to establish the awareness that creation entails responsibility, and uphold the development of cultural cores by tapping into humanistic values and highlighting cultural strength within circle-themed content. In recent years, the explosive popularity of domestic online games like Black Myth: Wukong and domestic animations such as Ne Zha: The Devil Child Makes Havoc in the Sea has demonstrated the modern reconstruction of cultural IP rooted in tradition, supported by technology, and driven by youth creativity. This has further strengthened the cultural confidence of contemporary youth. In online cultural creation, an increasing number of youth groups are focusing on traditional culture and other content for secondary creation and dissemination, igniting a "national trend" fever. Meanwhile, it is essential to reject "hotspot-chasing" creation and "nonsensical" innovation, strengthen copyright awareness, respect creative ethics, and standardize the online cultural creation behaviors of youth.

Building a cultural creation value community. Break down the barriers of circles' culture and promote cross-circle collaboration. In the process of cultural creation, shift the measurement criteria and value definition from focusing on traffic to focusing on social impact, and transform creative practices from intra-circle circulation to cross-circle symbiosis, facilitating cross-circle dialogue and encouraging joint creation. Meanwhile, in platform construction and social guidance, optimize incentive mechanisms, establish "value anchors," and guide creative trends through exemplary models to support and encourage high-quality cultural works. With policy guidance, foster cultural masterpiece creation across broader fields and perspectives.

The exercise of cultural rights by "circle" youth is not merely about "free expression" in cyberspace but also a demonstration of proactive participation in social and cultural construction. Only by breaking through the "information cocoon," standardizing cultural participation, expression, and creation within a framework of openness, responsibility, and innovation, and achieving value reconstruction can we rejuvenate cultural vitality and contribute to the construction of a cultural power.

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