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Postprint of a Study on “Cardboard Dog” Culture from the Perspective of Youth Subculture

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Abstract

Youth subculture has long constituted a non-negligible domain within sociological research; however, research on youth subculture has not yet developed a rigorous academic framework, the reason being that youth subculture remains in a constant state of evolution. This study examines the phenomenon of “cardboard dogs” and finds that the reasons for the emergence of this social phenomenon reside in integrated information system contexts, the spiritual needs of youth groups, the psychology of mimetic pet attachment, and the sense of resonance among fan communities. Simultaneously, this paper proposes new representations of contemporary youth subculture, which holds certain significance for research on youth subculture.

Full Text

A Study of “Cardboard Dog” Culture from the Perspective of Youth Subculture

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Abstract: Youth subculture has always been an indispensable category in sociological research, yet it has not formed a rigorous academic system precisely because it remains in constant flux. This paper examines the “cardboard dog” phenomenon, revealing that its rise stems from four key factors: the scene of convergent information systems, the spiritual needs of youth groups, the psychology of simulated pet attachment, and the sense of resonance within fan communities. Additionally, this study proposes new characteristics of contemporary youth subculture, offering significant insights for future research in this field.

Keywords: Youth subculture; Subculture; Fan community

Youth subculture theory has undergone paradigm shifts and theoretical transformations across the Chicago School, Birmingham School, post-Birmingham School, and “post-post-subculture” school [1]. The reason for such diverse research perspectives lies in the inherent complexity of youth subculture, which continuously generates new social phenomena that increasingly exhibit novel trends and features. This paper takes the emerging “cardboard dog” phenomenon as its research object, analyzing the origins of this youth subculture and examining its derivative characteristics to provide a reference for youth subculture studies.

1. Cardboard Dogs: A New Form of Youth Subculture

Domestic research on online youth subculture began in 1997, with research objects rapidly expanding from hacker subculture and internet language subculture to encompass all youth subculture phenomena, particularly fan culture and parody culture [2]. Driven by multiple factors, the scope and subjects of youth subculture have gradually broadened while simultaneously displaying new characteristics. The “cardboard dog” represents one such phenomenon within this landscape. Unlike real dogs, “cardboard dogs” are artificial “fake dogs” made from cardboard boxes and paper materials. While most people find these creations perplexing, they have gained remarkable popularity among university students. Videos and articles about cardboard dogs have gone viral across major online platforms, sparking a carnival-like phenomenon on university campuses nationwide. Initially appearing in cartoonish dog shapes, cardboard dogs later evolved to include spiders, cartoon cats, and other animal forms, with some “dogs” even designed to fly. This demonstrates that the object itself carries the imagination and creativity of youth groups. Against the backdrop of live streaming, youth subculture exhibits characteristics of simultaneous criticality and rationality, “fragmented” emotional release, value conflicts arising from internet technology, and tribalistic clustering [3]. The creation and dissemination of cardboard dogs do not constitute mainstream culture. Originating among youth groups and popular within a small segment of the population, it may appear as performance art, yet it enables young people to express their inner emotions, thereby possessing the essential features of youth subculture.

2. An Analysis of the Reasons for the Rise of Cardboard Dogs

2.1 The Scene of Convergent Information Systems

Meyrowitz’s media scene theory posits that human behavior is related to scene, which is reconstructed through new media. Internet technology and other new media forms have created external conditions for the dissemination of cardboard dogs. In the new media environment, online youth subculture constitutes a large information system—a collection of various youth subculture forms [4]. As a small component of youth subculture, cardboard dogs, like other phenom-

ena such as “emoticons” and “bullet comments,” represent merely a branch within this integrated information system. However, due to the homogeneous characteristics shared by all components of youth subculture, cardboard dogs can easily resonate with youth groups. Early Chicago and Birmingham Schools argued that youth subculture possessed strong resistance, but as social conditions have evolved, the style of contemporary youth subculture has gradually transformed. Contemporary youth subculture has undergone reconstruction through stylistic rewriting, spatial expansion, meaning ambiguity, and evolutionary transformation [1]. Consequently, resistance, political significance, and iconicity are no longer the sole criteria for joining youth subculture groups; instead, youth subculture has come to exhibit characteristics of stylistic diffusion. Since the cost of entering the youth subculture information system is low and does not require excessive emphasis on stylistic features, cardboard dogs can easily establish fan communities. One can become a member of this group by making cardboard dogs, posting related comments online, or even simply liking or sharing information about cardboard dogs.

2.2 The Spiritual Needs of Youth Groups

2.2.1 The Lonely Inner World Scholar Sherry Turkle proposed the concept of “alone together” in her book *Alone Together*. In contemporary society, youth groups face numerous psychological issues. Even in face-to-face situations, they browse fragmented information on their respective mobile phones—a state of physical and emotional isolation. While some young people consider this the optimal social condition, others seek to change and break this status quo. The illusion of online social interaction creates cognitive biases among youth, who hope to use digital social interaction as proof that they are not lonely [2]. This illusion often leads young people to believe that others will treat them according to their own self-evaluation. Youth groups disseminate cardboard dogs on the internet and “walk” them on campus playgrounds, all stemming from this psychological need—to gain recognition from others, to obtain support and understanding from online netizens and schoolmates, and to prove that they are not alone but rather kindred spirits sharing similar emotions. Cardboard dog creators derive satisfaction from likes on their videos and gain recognition from real-world compliments about their creations. The widespread dissemination of many cardboard dog videos and articles also reflects that these creators are not performing a solo act.

2.2.2 Real-World Carnival as Pressure Release Bakhtin’s carnival theory comprises three forms: first, performance forms, including carnival-type activities or performances; second, humorous language works; and third, various forms of plaza language. Li Yongmei argues that leisure constitutes a “second world” and “second life” constructed beyond the real world in which the subject resides, and that leisure itself is a form of carnival [3]. University students taking cardboard dogs for walks on playgrounds and arranging “dates” between cardboard dogs can be viewed as a kind of “performance,” through which they

vent their emotions in a leisurely manner, expressing their yearning for freedom and pursuit of spiritual life. University students exhibit relatively high rates of anxiety and depression, typically facing pressures related to academics, employment, and relationships. Prolonged campus lockdowns have also negatively impacted this demographic. The cute images of cardboard dogs and the novel behavior of “dog-walking” provide these young people with a certain degree of comfort, serving as a method for releasing pressure.

2.3 The Psychology of Simulated Pet Attachment

Pet attachment forms when people develop intimate attachment to pets. “Simulated pet attachment” refers to a new type of pet relationship formed between people and pets through social media, involving online intimacy fantasies and identification [4]. In recent years, youth groups have engaged in “cloud cat-petting” on platforms like Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo, satisfying their real-life regrets of being unable to own or touch pets. This behavior constitutes a form of simulated pet attachment. If “cloud cat-petting” aims to obtain satisfaction and happiness through viewing online cat images and videos, then raising “cardboard dogs” represents the projection of pet fantasies into reality. Most university students lack the economic means and living conditions to keep pets in dormitories, yet a considerable portion of them possess attachment psychology toward pets. Cardboard dogs serve as pets that university students can keep in school dormitories. Although they are pets only in a simulated sense, they still satisfy students’ need for pet ownership. University students treat cardboard dogs as real pets, tying them at dormitory entrances as guards, walking them on playgrounds, and endowing these cardboard creations with life. Youth groups take pride in owning a “cardboard dog,” proclaiming “I have a dog now,” thereby fulfilling their previous aspirations of “someday I’ll have a cat, someday I’ll have a dog.”

2.4 The Sense of Resonance Within Fan Communities

Online subculture possesses a unified cognitive framework among youth groups [1]. Whether in the virtual online world or the real world, cardboard dogs have established fan communities that share similar cognitions about them. These fan communities consist of three main types: first, the original initiators of cardboard dogs, who attempt to convey information about their inner world through these creations, seeking external recognition to achieve self-identity; second, the observers of cardboard dogs, who watch them through various channels, approve of and appreciate this behavior, finding shared appeals in others and generating a sense of resonance; and third, those who, after observing others’ cardboard dogs, feel envy and yearning, prompting them to join the ranks of cardboard dog creators, realizing their pet fantasies and investing their emotions into these cardboard pets. Although these three groups appear to pursue cardboard dogs for different purposes, their core revolves around a shared value system—they all view cardboard dogs as an emotional symbol that can both harbor feelings

of loneliness and pet attachment and provide an outlet for emotional expression through this “interesting” behavior.

3. New Characteristics of Youth Subculture

3.1 Diverse Stylistic Forms

Symbols represent an important perspective for understanding online youth subculture [2]. In early research, youth subculture exhibited significant material symbolism, and whether material style was prominent served as an important criterion for determining its status as youth subculture. During this period, youth subculture emphasized extracting symbolic meaning from physical objects. Subsequently, research on youth subculture in the internet age has primarily focused on the symbolism of images, examining the symbolic meanings of emoticons, bullet comments, and other phenomena, with image style becoming conventional thinking. The emergence of cardboard dogs has further enriched the youth subculture system, metaphorically expressing creators’ emotions through physical objects while simultaneously creating an impact on youth groups online. Both real-world symbols and virtual network symbols enable diverse stylistic possibilities for youth subculture, achieving multi-dimensional transformation in physical space.

3.2 Significant Reflection of Spiritual Needs

The needs reflected by youth subculture vary across different periods, yet contemporary university students’ pursuit of spiritual life is unprecedented. Impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the living and learning environment of university students has undergone tremendous changes. Prolonged campus lockdowns have limited their contact with the outside world, and cardboard dogs express this group’s longing for free life. Meanwhile, the intense social competition of “involution” leaves university students with no room for relaxation even after leaving high school—while condemning “involution,” they must simultaneously participate in it. Many students indicate that making cardboard dogs can relieve stress and relax the mind. Therefore, the underlying spiritual thoughts behind this seemingly bizarre behavior deserve attention, as they imply certain social problems.

3.3 Weakened Resistance

The cardboard dog phenomenon reveals that university students have spiritual-level needs. The Birmingham School argued that youth subculture would inevitably be co-opted by mainstream culture or transformed into commodities, thereby losing its resistant meaning. However, differing from the research focuses of the Chicago and Birmingham Schools, even when contemporary university students have needs, they do not engage in extremely intense resistant behaviors but rather express their appeals in a gentle manner. Of course, the absence of strong resistance does not signify a lack of criticality. While seeking

spiritual relief through the cute designs of cardboard dogs, university students also engage in self-mockery about the “bizarre” behavior of “dog-raising,” using humorous language like “which university student isn’t a little crazy?” to satirize current realities. Faced with the social environment of the new era, the political significance of resistance in youth subculture has gradually dissipated, and youth subculture will not be forcibly eliminated. Moreover, it should be recognized that youth subculture does not emerge from a vacuum—it operates within the framework of mainstream culture and reflects social realities and problems against this backdrop. Therefore, youth subculture holds referential significance for studying social issues.

Youth subculture originates from youth and spreads among youth groups, yet most people do not understand this culture and know little about it. Domestic research on youth subculture is currently in a developmental stage, with new youth subcultures like cardboard dogs continuously evolving. Consequently, we should face such subculture phenomena squarely and enrich the research vocabulary on subculture. All things have two sides, and youth subculture is no exception. It represents both a niche, marginal culture that may be fleeting, yet its existence indeed reflects certain social contradictions. We must not blindly condemn or eliminate youth subculture but rather analyze it with caution, integrating its merits to promote social development.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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