Temporary Utopia: An Interview-Based Sociological Analysis of Youth's Psychological Experiences of Shanghai Halloween Carnival

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Abstract:

In a meritocratic society, the societal issue of young people's alienation crisis has received widespread attention, but there is still insufficient analysis of young people's psychological adjustment mechanisms in the face of pressure. This article conducts interviews that investigate how young people perceive and participate in the Shanghai Halloween Carnival to analyze their psychological needs and social problems they face. Research has found that carnival creates a free and inclusive environment for young people, promotes equal dialogue and genuine emotional expression, and strengthens emotional connections between individuals. Faced with social structural repression such as workplace involution, young people choose to use Halloween carnival as a metonymic expression of their needs, such as identity recognition. Based on this, it is recommended that the government and enterprises improve their support systems and pay attention to unemployment and labor rights. Young people should be guided to dialectically view online culture and avoid over-reliance on sarcastic expressions.

Keywords: Shanghai Halloween Carnival; alienation crisis; meritocratic society

1. Introduction

Today's society is filled with irreconcilable competition and excessive desires, constantly shaping the cultural context of a meritocratic society [1]. The deepening integration of capital and technology has further intensified the survival pressures faced by young people as meritocratic subjects. To achieve better performances, they constantly exhaust themselves to strive for excellence and avoid elimination. The endless involution in workplaces and schools has increasingly led to burnout [2]. Frequent competitions also create subtle alienation between individuals [3]. Various crises of alienation engulf young people, resulting in anxiety, fatigue, and apathy. However, it is precisely in this situation that a vibrant

and seemingly out-of-place mass carnival emerges. Gotten rid of traditional elements such as ghosts and pumpkin lanterns, Halloween has been given new colors in Shanghai in the past two years. Countless young people flood the streets to perform a cosplay carnival that combines Chinese classical culture and internet pop elements: Some vividly imitated the iconic quotes of singer Na Ying; Some transformed into the TV drama character An Lingrong and performed the classical song "Picking Lotus" with passersby to recreate the famous scene in the drama. In terms of its representation, Bi believes that this carnival has localized and symbolic characteristics, which are an expression of personalized demands and diversified self-identifications [4]. Zhu further emphasizes its egalitarian nature and subversive power in breaking conventional norms [5]. Xie and others note its nationwide participation and ironic side [6].

In short, this phenomenal carnival that erupts in this meritocratic society carries deeper social meanings and is worth exploring. This paper aims to investigate the emotional experiences of young people and the impact of the Halloween carnival on their daily lives at a micro level. This study examines the motivations behind young people's participation and their specific feelings through qualitative interviews. Furthermore, by analyzing participants' psychological reflections after the event, the study explores the lasting impact mechanisms of the carnival and sheds light on broader psychological challenges young people face in contemporary society. By engaging with these issues, this research can not only deepen the understanding of the generative mechanism and cultural significance of the Shanghai Halloween Carnival but also reveal the survival landscape and hidden aspirations of young people.

2. Findings

This study adopts a semi-structured interview approach, conducting online or offline interviews on participants' motivation, in-the-moment experiences, and post-event reflections to better understand the emotional experiences of young people and the specific impact of the carnival on their lives. The interviewees are aged 18 to 35 and have personally participated in the Halloween street celebrations in Shanghai in either 2023 or 2024. Given the spontaneous, open-ended, and non-replicable nature of the Halloween carnival, with an innumerable scale and high mobility of participants, a sample of 8 people was selected through the "snowball rolling" method, and the interviewees were coded as A-H. To reflect general patterns, the sample includes individuals of different ages and occupations. Each interview lasts about half an hour, and

after obtaining consent, the entire process is recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Through the interviews, insights were gained into the reasons behind young people's participation, their immediate experiences, and the lingering impact of the event on their daily lives. This chapter presents the key findings accordingly.

2.1 Motivations and Immediate Experiences of Carnival Participation

2.1.1 Longing for freedom and inclusiveness

Contemporary youth are constrained by meritocratic expectations, and their daily behavior is also regulated by countless intangible forces. "I enjoy participating in various activities myself, but I don't have the time for it after I started working. I don't even share related content on my social media because I'm afraid my boss might think I'm not putting enough effort into my work. So, I feel very restricted sometimes." (A) The interview results reveal the contradiction between social and individual needs that young people face. In order to meet the expectations of the external world, young people choose to actively suppress their subjective desires and submit to social norms [7].

Halloween carnival, however, is a place of freedom and inclusiveness. The tradition of costume play has made madness the new norm. In this setting, people are not afraid of oddity but instead admire it. There are no limitations, but full tolerance. "You can dress up as anyone, even as a non-human. Only on this day, oddity is allowed, and the fact is the more odd you are, the more you will be appreciated." (B)

During the carnival, young people are able to put aside the pressure in real life and enjoy the spiritual relief brought by the carnival through exaggerated makeup and playful performances. "I think the most direct feeling is that it's fun and lively, I was so happy." (F) This kind of joy is not only an outlet for daily repression but also a tangible experience of freedom and inclusiveness for young people. In order to briefly escape from daily discipline, they choose to join the carnival and embrace the unrestrained joy. In turn, the growing scale of the carnival provides a more stable and all-encompassing platform for them.

2.1.2 Longing for equality and authenticity

In real life, people's speech and gestures are shaped by hierarchical structures and role expectations, often resulting in restrained and rationalized behavior. Young people yearn to break free from rigid interpersonal relationships. "Sometimes I feel those polite but distant social interactions are so meaningless. I just want to go crazy with ev-

eryone." (C)

Shanghai Halloween Carnival can break the solemnness of conventions and promote equal and free dialogues. "Whether you are poor or rich, everyone is partying together. Props are not expensive; it is all about your creativity." (D) What draws attention is not wealth or status, but people themselves, their funny behaviors, and creativity. People who chose to dress up as migrant workers and other marginalized figures in society ironically received more compliments for being interesting and then became the new center of all participants, which subverted the traditional hierarchy

Young people crave to express their most natural, unfiltered, raw emotions and form a new type of equal interpersonal relationship. The carnival enables exactly such authentic connections. "When I saw people cosplaying as exhausted agency workers, I felt deeply seen. That's exactly what my job feels like. Finally, people get to understand how difficult working life is. I was so touched that I almost cried haha." (B) This empathy makes young people feel unprecedented warmth and support. Through satire and self-mockery, young people are able to release negative emotions, find comfort, and heal themselves.

Meanwhile, the carnival also provides an opportunity for young people to resist structural repression. The dual suppression of Confucian social order and modern bureaucratic system means that young people are often at the bottom of both economic and institutional hierarchies. In Shanghai, a consumerist city, the feeling of being marginalized is extremely intense. "I always feel that the glitz of Shanghai can only be admired from afar, not possessed. As someone who's from the working class, I don't think I belong here." (G) Halloween is a popular carnival that everyone can participate in. Young people tear apart the identity labels within this subversive time and space and get to experience social mobility in a symbolic sense. "I'm usually someone with low presence, but that night many people came to take photos with me. I felt flattered, like I was finally being seen and valued." (E) During the carnival, young people gain a sense of participation and use the gratification of being surrounded to reaffirm their self-worth and resist structural repression.

2.1.3 Longing for intimacy and connection

The frequent competitions in a meritocratic society have created a subtle, even occasionally tense atmosphere between individuals. "In everyday life, people are usually very cautious and rational, so getting along with each other sometimes feels so tiring for me." (D) Young people often feel both physically and mentally drained due to the constant tension and interpersonal distance.

In contrast, during the Shanghai Halloween Carnival, such rules and competitions are suspended, replaced by casual and intimate interactions. Traditionally, Halloween promotes interaction among children and families within the neighborhood through the trick-or-treat custom. In Shanghai, individuals are able to further open up not only verbally but also emotionally and physically to the external world. "In this occasion, you can freely praise strangers without appearing abrupt or intrusive." (B) "For me, this is a great opportunity to take photos with cosplayers and exchange cosplay tips and experiences." (E)

In order to break away from the conventional rational social distance, to experience unrestrained intimacy between one another, and to establish deeper connections with the external world, young people flood the streets to participate in the carnival. During the carnival, young people strengthen their emotional connections with each other through shared emotions and interactive participation, satisfying their desires for intimacy and connection. "Back then, I had just gone through a breakup and felt depressed every day. However, under the influence of the carnival's positive vibe, I completely forgot about the sadness. The feeling of being accepted and understood helped me get through the pain." (B) This emotional resonance enables young people to repair their emotional wounds, to gain the courage to face real-life challenges, and to embark on self-redemption.

2.2 The Continuing Impacts of the Carnival and Emerging Issues

When the carnival comes to an end, most participants choose to return to their normal routines. "On my way back, all I thought about was my work the next day." (A) This rapid shift from the abnormal to normal reflects the survival strategy young people nowadays adopt under the pressure of social discipline. However, the end of the carnival does not mean the end of its impact. For most young people, the carnival experience has become a sustainable emotional resource. "This is a different flash of color in my originally dull life, and every time I recall it, I still feel excited. I feel that there is still hope in life, and no matter how tough things get, I'll keep going until the next Halloween." (C) The essence of this emotional transformation mechanism is young people's internalizing the experience of subjectivity during the carnival as a form of psychological capital that can be used to resist daily alienation.

As such, young people's lives after carnival present a kind of "spiral progression": young people do not simply return to the original state, but improve their psychological resilience through the reproduction of emotional resources. The memories of the carnival serve as a spiritual anchor to help young people alleviate structural stress. Through

the cyclic interplay between carnival and daily life, young people have completed creative adjustments to oppressive environments.

It is worth noting that the emotional aftermath generated by the end of the brief freedom among young people is quite complex. The lingering joy of the carnival collides with the pressure of reality, which creates a tension between pleasure and anxiety. "Yesterday we were still partying and today everything is back to normal. There is a weird sense of emptiness, I guess." (H) This psychological state contains both a nostalgic yearning for the extraordinary moment of the carnival and a clear awareness of the persistent difficulties in real life.

3. Discussion

The findings suggest that the longing for freedom and inclusiveness, equality and authenticity, intimacy and connection continuously draws young people toward the Shanghai Halloween Carnival. The carnival provides young people with a temporary space of liberation, where they feel joy, gain empathy, and soothe themselves. They reclaim their right to participate, resist structural repression, and release their instinctual sensibilities to reconnect with the authentic self. After the carnival, they return to their daily lives with the emotional energy they have gained.

Based on the above research findings, this section explores the broader societal issues and underlying psychological needs of contemporary youth, as well as the tension between them, and brings up recommendations accordingly.

3.1 Manifestation of Social Issues and Youth's Psychological Mechanism

At a macro level, with the rapid development of China's economy and urbanization, the speed of social mobility and stratification has accelerated. Besides, interpersonal relationships have become increasingly fragmented and atomized [8]. Young people have to conceal their true selves in daily social interactions and adhere to unified social norms only to maintain connections at a superficial level. In the burnout society, young people are overwhelmed by peer pressure, class stratification, "996" work culture, and many other forms of social involution, which makes the society overflow with anxiety and insecurity [5]. From the perspective of young people who step into society for the very first time, they face an uncertain future, which inevitably causes tremendous anxiety and confusion. Therefore, they urgently desire to position themselves and confirm their social value through obtaining identity recognition and a sense of belonging. This psychological need also reinforces the desire for self-ex-

pression. As digital natives, young people nowadays are deeply affected by the diversified Internet culture, which fosters open-mindedness. Their education level is also higher than previous generation, which increases their attention to spiritual fulfillment and public engagement. They aspire to speak out to the world to achieve their ideals.

However, both the traditional Confucian hierarchy and the modern bureaucratic system marginalize young people in cultural discourse, causing young people's lack of discursive power. When young people find that their viewpoints and demands are constantly overlooked, they choose to create sub-cultural symbols to attract attention. In doing so, they manage to create a free space for emotional expression and adopt a metonymic way to address more profound social concerns [4,9].

3.2 Suggestions

Through the above analysis, it can be well recognized that Shanghai Halloween Carnival boasts significant value, but attention should also be paid to the feeling of emptiness some participants experience after the carnival. It indicates that the pressure on young people cannot be completely dissipated solely by various carnivals; more proactive measures should be taken by all sorts of parties.

The government and enterprises need to further pay attention to the humanistic needs of young people, establish positive corporate culture and social culture. A social support system should also be built to offer young people effective channels to release stress. Relevant authorities should address practical issues that hinder the development of disadvantaged youth, such as unemployment and long working hours, to uphold social fairness and justice. Improving the labor system and social distribution system is also essential to ensuring that young people receive fair pay for their work and, correspondingly, feel a sense of efficacy and empowerment [10]. Only by doing so can society dissolve the sense of relative deprivation felt by many young people with fairness and justice, thus enhancing their confidence and identification with mainstream values.

Meanwhile, as the scale of the carnival continues to expand, it is crucial to remain alert to the risk of group polarization, which refers to moral misconduct of individuals within crowds due to diminished accountability [11]. Some key opinion leaders online may intentionally spread negative emotions to gain attention. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen young people's awareness of digital responsibility and information filtering ability, guiding them to dialectically view popular culture on the Internet, and avoid over-reliance on ironic expression while neglecting

the resolution of deeper structural problems.

4. Conclusion

Overall, this article conducts in-depth interviews to study the psychological experience of young people during the Shanghai Halloween carnival, offering a lens into their living conditions. From a theoretical perspective, this study deepens the understanding of both the formation and function of the carnival. It is not just an entertainment activity, but a psychological mechanism through which young people respond to challenges in a specific social context. From a practical perspective, understanding the emotional experiences and needs of young people participating in such events is of great significance for social development. While paying attention to the phenomena of youth culture, it is equally necessary to address the underlying social issues and consider how to provide support for young people through various channels to help them relieve stress and cope with challenges in life calmly. Future research may benefit from expanding the sample size and adopting more innovative research methods, such as analyzing data in a more detailed way by using coding frameworks.

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