

Gen Z's "Partner Culture": Soft Emotional Bonds in the Wave of "Light Socializing"

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Abstract

With the rapid development of the Internet, the pressure of modern young people in real life is increasing, and a new lifestyle has been formed on the Internet, which is the "partner culture" of Generation Z. The "partner culture" refers to the manifestation of people satisfying their inner emotions and psychological needs through virtual means on the Internet. The "partner culture" refers to a kind of performance that people satisfy their inner emotions and psychological needs through virtual means on the Internet. Due to multiple uncertainties in the Internet environment, it is easy for young people to have psychological problems. Influenced by various factors in the online environment, an increasing number of young people seek emotional fulfillment through "partners", resulting in more and more Internet "partners" in Generation Z. Due to young people's pursuit of new things and socialization needs, the "partner culture" is becoming increasingly common. Accordingly, this paper studies the "partner culture" of Generation Z, analyzes its causes and effects, and discusses the social risks and countermeasures, aiming to provide a reference for the development of youth social culture.

Keywords

Generation Z, Partner Culture

Introduction

Background of the Study

Generation Z, the generation born between 1995 and 2009, is known as the "digital natives", who have been exposed to the Internet and portable digital technology since childhood, and are the first generation of the rise of Internet society and the development of digital information technology. This generation's attitudes and behaviors are deeply influenced by digital technology, exhibiting unique social patterns and lifestyles. By 2022, the number of Generation Z youth in China has reached 264 million, accounting for 19% of the country's population. As Generation Z gradually enters young adulthood and integrates into society, their social needs and behavioral patterns have become a key focus of research. The social patterns of Generation Z are diversified and personalized, with "partner culture" rapidly emerging as a new type of social pattern that has attracted widespread attention. The "partner culture" refers to social relationships based on common interests or needs, such as study partners, travel partners, meal partners, etc. This form of social interaction meets Gen Z's need for emotional support and instant connection while filling the gaps in traditional friendships. Through the "partner culture," Gen Z refines their social circles, using shared interests as a bond to establish short-term but highly efficient social networks.

Significance of the Study

As an emerging social form, "partner " reflects the urgent need for emotional help and companionship for Generation Z youth under the fast pace of life and work pressure. This form of socialization can not only satisfy people's social needs for high efficiency, high precision and immediacy, but also provide an emotional relief and outlet for their busy daily lives. The "partner culture" also enables young people to quickly find like-minded friends in a short period according to their respective interests, relieving their sense of loneliness and social pressure.

As a new social form, "partner culture" provides us with a new perspective to explore the behavioral evolution of contemporary society. In this paper, we take the "partner culture" of Generation Z as the research object. The "partner culture" is a cultural phenomenon that integrates multiple disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and communication, and it holds broad application prospects in China. The development of this topic will promote the intersection and collaboration of multiple disciplines and contribute to a better understanding of contemporary social behavior. From the perspective of communication science, "partner culture" is not only a result of the development of social media but also a reflection of the psychological needs and behavioral patterns of contemporary youth groups.

Literature Review

Review of Domestic Literature

Existing literature provides a more detailed description of the connotation of "partner culture" from different aspects. Zhang Lingjun (2024) categorizes "partner culture" into two main types: the first is "partner" based on common interests or needs, and the second is "partner" based on economic interests. He believes that these two types of "partners" together constitute a unique social phenomenon in modern society. Lu Cui (2024) agrees with Zhang Lingjun on the definition of "partner culture", and she believes that "partner" is a part of social relationships, and the so-called "partner" is a way to reduce social costs. The perspective of social cost is an effective way to reduce social cost. A similar view is expressed by Zhang (2024), who believes that "partner culture" reflects the pursuit of efficient and low-cost socialization in modern society.

The "partner" society has a series of psychological problems such as loneliness and anxiety in the process of meeting the social needs of young people. (Chor Jinzhe and Li Weiting, 2024), on the other hand, argued that although young people of the Generation Z generation can be "partners", they also need to pay attention to the issues of personal privacy leakage and personal property security. The second dimension is the social dimension. Du Yuxuan (2024) points out that the prevalence of "partner culture" will lead to social alienation and weakening of emotional concepts, which is detrimental to the healthy development of society. The third point is for safety. He Jiale (2024) suggests that "partner" social networks have certain security and privacy leakage risks, which need to be prevented and controlled. On the whole, the development of "partner culture" faces three problems: mental health, social shock, and safety.

It is recommended to focus more on case studies when discussing "partner culture." The enterprise case for the Red Note industry is one of the main research directions (Wang Mo, Lu Weidi, 2023). Strengthening the ecological governance of the digital environment and other

measures can effectively curb unhealthy phenomena and provide impetus for the development of the platform (Yu Yuhua, Zhou Huan, 2023); Yan Yuling (2023) also agrees with this conclusion and points out that improving the cognitive ability of the platform subject is the key; (Yu Yuhua and Zhou Huan, 2023) believe that only by guarding the mainstream ideological positions can the problem be truly solved.

Review of Foreign Literature

While the existing literature is less well-defined on what constitutes the "partner culture" of Generation Z, the existing studies provide more detailed descriptions of different aspects. (Ruben L. Tagare et al., 2025) categorize the characteristics of Generation Z into two main groups: the first one is competitiveness and pressure from external expectations, and the second one is adaptability and cooperation, organizational skills and perfectionism, body awareness, and a strong sense of community, openness, and risk-taking. He argues that these two categories form the basis of Gen Z's "partner culture". (Schapis Claudio et al., 2025), in their study on the use of mobile augmented reality (MAR) in apparel shopping for Gen Z, mention that Gen Z's habitual use of AR in social media influences their intention to use MAR in shopping, reflecting the fact that Gen Z's use of MAR in social media is a common practice for Gen Z. This is a common feature of Gen Z's shopping experience. In their study on the use of mobile augmented reality (MAR) in Gen Z apparel shopping, (Kholkina Valeriia et al., 2025) mentioned Gen Z's habitual use of AR in social media, which influences their intention to use MAR in shopping, reflecting the characteristics of Gen Z's "partner culture."

The research on this aspect in foreign literature mainly focuses on three dimensions. First, mental health dimension. (Ruben L. Tagare et al., 2025) study points out that Generation Z's competitive nature and high standards are often accompanied by great stress and self-imposed pressure, which has an impact on their mental health. Second, social dimension. (Kholkina Valeriia et al., 2025) noted that Generation Z has a less psychosocial distance to virtual influencers, which reflects some of their tendencies in socialization. Thirdly, career development dimension. (Zhou Xiaoman et al., 2025) showed that the retention of Gen Z employees in the hospitality industry is an important issue, and that there is a need for a reasonable "partner culture" to enhance employees' sense of belonging and loyalty. Overall, mental health, socialization and career development are still the main issues in the development of Generation Z's "partner culture".

Literature Review

Summarizing and analyzing the above research literature at home and abroad, it can be seen that domestic and foreign scholars' research on the "partner culture" of Generation Z has shown a diversified trend. Domestic scholars mainly focus on mental health, socialization and career development, and put forward a variety of coping strategies; foreign scholars study more from the perspectives of technology acceptance and pragmatism, and explore the application of mobile augmented reality in shopping for Gen Z. Although the research perspectives are different, in general, they are not the same. Although the research perspectives of domestic and foreign scholars are different, they are generally committed to promoting the healthy development of Generation Z's

"partner culture". However, the scope of the current research is relatively limited in terms of industry cases and research population, and this paper will conduct a more in-depth research on the "partner culture" of Generation Z as the research object, in order to expand and supplement the scope of the current research.

Conceptualization and Theoretical Foundations

Definition of Concepts

Generation Z, mainly born between 1995 and 2009, grew up in the era of digital technology, instant messengers and smartphones. Therefore, these people are called the "Net Generation", "Internet Generation", "Digital Media Natives", etc. Generation Z has its own unique cultural characteristics and values, which are mainly reflected in the pursuit of "individuality", the acceptance of multiculturalism, and the rejection of traditional culture. "Generation Z has its own unique cultural characteristics and values, which are mainly reflected in the pursuit of individuality, acceptance of multiculturalism and questioning of traditional values. They focus more on their personal achievements, interests, work and life, and have grown up in an environment of constant technological and social change, where their behaviors, consumption habits and socialization styles are very different from those of their predecessors. For example, they make greater use of social media for self-introduction and show a higher level of brand loyalty and attention to experience in their consumption. Although Generation Z is "digitally native" globally, in regions such as China, its cultural values are still characterized by local characteristics, such as a sense of collectivism and a sense of national identity, and it is a group of young people with distinctive characteristics and cultural values that have been nurtured by the Internet and digital technology, and that have been localized in the context of global integration. Gen Z is a youth group shaped by the internet and digital technology, with distinct characteristics and cultural values reflective of their era. In the context of global integration, they also possess localized features. The environment in which they grow up, as well as the technological landscape, has greatly influenced their behaviors and consumption habits.

The "partner culture" is a new social and cultural phenomenon emerging in recent years, which is a kind of precise and casual social relationship formed by people in a short period of time according to their common hobbies and needs. It originated from the Shanghai dialect, and was initially used to refer to people playing cards, and later evolved into a series of social communication activities such as "eating partner", "traveling partner", "fitness partner", etc. The term "partner" is also used to refer to people playing cards. The word "partner" has its earliest definition in the Shanghai Dictionary of the Shanghai Dialect Dictionary, published in 2007, which initially meant a person who shared a common hobby, and later developed into a co-partner. With the advent of the Internet age, the term "partner" has been endowed with a brand-new meaning, especially among Generation Z. It has developed into a new type of social relationship based on common interests and needs. In recent years, "partner" has become rapidly popular among young people, especially on social platforms such as Tiktok and Red Note, which make it easier for young people to find like-minded people and build short-term, accurate social networks. This phenomenon is closely

linked to the characteristics of the Generation Z crowd. "partner" is a new social form, reflecting the requirements of modern young people for social life. Network information is characterized by its temporary, voluntary and precise nature, which both adapts to the social needs of modern young people and faces new challenges and risks.

Theoretical Basis

Media dependency theory emphasizes the role of media in contemporary society, not only as a means of transmitting information, but also as a way of profoundly influencing people's social interactions and behaviors. Based on the cultural context of Generation Z as "partners", media dependency theory explains that digital platforms and social media are important ways for young people to build and maintain social relationships. With the rapid development of the Internet, Generation Z finds and builds "partners" on social media such as Red Note and Tiktok, and through the convenient and fast communication and precise matching of "partners", they have become an effective and flexible social model. However, over-reliance also has certain negative effects, such as weakening people's emotional ties and making their social circles tighter.

Social interaction theory focuses on how individuals derive emotional support and social recognition from social activities. The theory reveals the mental mechanisms of "partner" in the cultural context of "partner." Generation Z's emotional needs are greatly satisfied in short-term and flexible social interactions, but there is little emotional engagement in long-term relationships. Generation Z's emotional needs are greatly satisfied in short-term and flexible social interactions, but they are rarely emotionally invested in long-term relationships. This phenomenon reflects the fact that contemporary youth seek short-term and functional social relationships for immediate emotional fulfillment and social needs in order to adapt to the rapidly changing social environment. However, this shallow socialization can also result in emotional emptiness and loneliness, which is mainly caused by a lack of emotional connection.

Analysis of the causes and effects of the "partner culture" of Generation Z

Causes of the "Partner Culture" of Generation Z

In the face of information explosion, social change and other impacts of the times, Generation Z is under multiple pressures, such as study and employment, and the fast-paced life makes it difficult to maintain traditional in-depth friendships, which makes them more inclined to satisfy their short-term social needs through "partner culture". This form of relationship is flexible and low-cost, and can quickly respond to emotional needs while avoiding long hours of commitment and complex interpersonal relationships. In addition, as urbanization advances and mobility becomes a major feature of today's society, the number of migrant youths increases, social relationships gradually weaken, and people are more eager to alleviate loneliness and pressure through easy social interaction in their fast-paced lives.

The rise of e-commerce platforms has made it easier for Gen Z to find like-minded friends online, with algorithms enabling precise matching. This technology-driven social model improves

work efficiency and lowers the barrier to entry, giving rise to a "partner culture". Take Red Note as an example, its "partner culture" tailors recommendations based on different interests and demographics, allowing the younger generation to quickly find topics and activities they enjoy.

Generation Z pays more attention to personal independence and self-identity, and is relatively indifferent to traditional romantic relationships. They are more willing to seek emotional support and companionship through the "partner culture" to fill emotional gaps. This culture reflects the shift from collectivism to individualism among contemporary youth, and fulfills their need for instant emotional connection and functionality.

The economic pressure of modern life has prompted young people to pay more attention to cost-effectiveness, and they tend to participate in activities with friends (e.g., carpooling, dining together), which not only saves costs but also adds to the fun. This form of light socialization reduces the cost of socializing and makes it easier for young people to accept and participate in it.

Analysis of the Impact of the "Partner Culture" of Generation Z

"partner" provides a fast and convenient socialization platform for Generation Z, seeking mental comfort and support in their busy lives. This way to make up for the shortcomings of traditional friendship, so that people can get psychological satisfaction in a short period of time. Taking Red Note as an example, it uses "partner culture" as a medium to meet the needs of young people to find partners in terms of special interests and needs, such as "meal partners", "travel partners", etc., which can help them reduce their sense of isolation and social pressure.

The "partner culture" provides Generation Z with a flexible way of socializing, helps them reduce loneliness and social pressure, and improves their spiritual identity and sense of social responsibility. At the same time, "partner culture" also strengthens college students' sense of self-identity. For example, "partner culture" not only meets the low-cost and high-efficiency social needs of young people, but also reflects their tendency to challenge and integrate into traditional society. In addition, "partner culture" can also help young people find like-minded friends in the fast life, and strengthen their sense of belonging and identity.

The "partner culture" provides many conveniences for human beings, but it also has an emotionally shallow and unstable connections. Over-reliance on "partners" can lead to weak and vulnerable relationships, and even adversely affect long-term human interactions. Take "partner" as an example, although it can temporarily alleviate loneliness, it will also give rise to a sense of long-term anxiety, and over time, the relationship will also fade. In addition, "partner" relationships are mostly based on common interests and needs, and lack emotional ties, leading to emotional isolation and dependence.

Potential risks of "Partner Culture" Socialization among Generation Z youths

Emotional Dilemmas: Shallow Ties Under Partner Socialization

Although the "partner" method of socializing can quickly meet the social needs of Generation Z, its transient and superficial nature tends to weaken emotional ties. Such a fragile relationship is

difficult to transform into deep emotional support, and may instead lead to loneliness and emotional alienation. In a partner-based society, relationships are often built on shared interests and activities rather than deep emotional connections or long-term companionship. Moreover, excessive reliance on "partner" social interactions can leave individuals feeling helpless and lacking genuine emotional support when facing major life events.

Privacy and Security Crisis: Potential Risks of Online Dating

As "partner" socialization relies heavily on online platforms, it increases the risk of privacy breaches and property security. For example, when establishing contact with strangers, one may be exposed to fraud or theft of personal information. The anonymity and virtual nature of online platforms makes it easier for participants to fall into fraud traps and may even face property loss. In addition, as "partner" involves interactions with strangers, the risk of personal privacy leakage increases significantly.

Limitations of Social Patterns: Problems Arising from Partner Circles

The characteristics of partner-based circles tend to create fixed social groups, limiting the diversity of young people's social lives and making it difficult to break existing social boundaries. This kind of "circle culture" can narrow perspectives and lead to biased value orientations. When young people seek "partners," they often interact with those who share similar interests or backgrounds, which restricts their opportunities for broader communication and personal development.

Disruption of Trust System: Trust Deficit in Short-Term Interactions

Over-reliance on "partner" interpersonal interactions runs the risk of breaking down the traditional social integrity system. Interpersonal interactions based on short-term needs ignore trust based on long-term trust, and are potentially destabilizing. In a "partner" type of society, people focus only on immediate benefits and immediate interests, while ignoring the deeper connections between people and their responsibilities to society. The lack of integrity is an important cause of the lack of honesty and an important factor affecting social harmony and stability.

Countermeasures to Guide the Socialization of "Partner Culture" among Generation Z

Enhancing Media Literacy and Self-protection Awareness and Strengthening Emotional Ties

While young people of Generation Z can satisfy their need for fast, effective and precise socialization, they are prone to neglecting the trust, tacit understanding and moral codes of traditional society, making their emotional ties weakened. For this reason, it is important to educate Generation Z about media quality, to improve their ability to recognize online risks, raise their awareness of self-protection, and reduce the risk of personal privacy leakage and property damage.

Schools and clubs can provide them with targeted psychological counseling and develop their interpersonal skills.

Optimizing Algorithmic Mechanisms and Strengthening Regulation to Enhance Privacy Security

In order to reduce the spread of harmful information in the social network of "partners", this paper gives a method to optimize the algorithmic recommendation mechanism. For example, the use of big data analysis can accurately find the needs of users and can effectively inhibit the proliferation of false information and unhealthy information. Thirdly, platform supervision is strengthened to protect user privacy. The government and relevant departments should introduce a corresponding system to regulate the behavior of Internet platforms, to avoid some lawbreakers through the social network "partner" fraud or infringement of other people's privacy.

Fostering a Healthy Social Culture and Community Building to Expand Social Circles

We promote the active participation of Generation Z in various offline and community activities to build long-term and authentic relationships with them. Strengthening students' sense of belonging and responsibility is conducive to building a closer emotional bond. For example, schools and clubs can organize volunteer services and interest groups to expand their social circle and cultivate their collective consciousness and sense of responsibility.

Mainstream Cultural Leadership and Value Guidance to Enhance Social Trust

Utilizing mainstream media and cultural resources to educate Generation Z youth on correct values and to build a sense of social responsibility. In particular, the core values of "sincerity", "goodness" and "righteousness" advocated by mainstream culture are particularly important in the "partner" society. This is particularly important in a "partner" society. It is necessary to use the mainstream media to publicize and educate young people, make them aware of the potential risks of the Internet society, and guide them to participate in social interactions in a rational and cautious manner. At the same time, the mainstream media can use innovative forms of communication to attract the attention and acceptance of mainstream values among young people of the Z generation.

In short, the phenomenon of social "partners", such as Generation Z, reflects the trend of rapid development and digitization in today's society. This new type of social interaction is both convenient and refreshing, but it also carries certain risks and hidden troubles. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to effectively guide and deal with Generation Z at three levels: individual, platform and society, so as to promote the healthy growth of Generation Z and the harmonious development of society. For this reason, this paper guides Generation Z to make rational use of "partner" from the perspectives of improving media literacy, optimizing algorithmic mechanisms, fostering a healthy social culture, and guiding the mainstream culture, so as to promote the development of the individual and society.

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