From Website to Platform: The Nationalism Transformation of Chinese Young Netizens

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With the transformation from websites to Internet platforms, Chinese young netizens (born in 1990-2005) have become key subjects in the evolution of cyber-nationalism. Based on survey data, this study classifies their nationalism into four types and explores its transformation alongside globalization cognition. The result shows that moderate nationalism is the mainstream. This has raised their attention to globalization, with greater focus on relations between China and developing countries, and nations along the Belt and Road Initiative. Their personal experiences and cultural exposure foster a more inclusive global vision, shaping the evolution of nationalism and global dialogue.

Keywords: Internet platform, nationalism, young netizens, social mentality, globalization

Research Background

As one of the key opinion groups in contemporary China's Internet sphere, the younger generation constitutes the new digital natives who are driving the intergenerational transformation of values in cyberspace, emerging as a uniquely critical group in the parallel and mutually constitutive process between offline society and online society (Zheng, Yue, & Gui, 2022). The Internet encapsulates the voices, mentalities, and reflections of a large number of young people, serving as an important research object for understanding the ideological and value orientations of Chinese young netizens.

At present, nationalism has become a major social discourse in China, demonstrating distinctive evolutionary trends in cyberspace and forming online social phenomena distinct from other social ideologies. The Internet has functioned as the communication hub, organizational platform, and operational channel for the global projection of Chinese nationalist discourse (Fu, Gui, & Huang, 2018). The advancement of Internet technology has endowed nationalism with complex manifestations. Social media platforms represented by Weibo have emerged as new arenas for the rise and evolution of cyber-nationalism, providing young netizens with new spaces to express opinions, refute viewpoints, forward and comment on domestic and international events.

In recent years, the occurrence of numerous major domestic and international events has furnished young netizens with thematic sources for expressing nationalist attitudes in online spaces. The opinion expression and value output of young netizens on social media platforms constitute an important dimension of their worldviews and values, as well as an endogenous motivational mechanism for their political expression and social participation.

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Literature Review

Nationalism refers to an ideological movement that emphasizes the interests of one's own nation and takes safeguarding national dignity as its starting point, whose basic connotations include national autonomy, national unification and national identity (Lin, 2013). Communication technology expands people's understanding of unfamiliar groups, shapes their imagination of concepts such as country and nation, and forms an *imagined community* (Anderson, 1991, pp. 1-40). In contemporary China, the Internet has become the main field for the expression and practice of nationalism, presenting it in a complex form (Zheng, 2017).

Looking back on the past three decades, cyber-nationalism has been in a dynamic evolution. The Internet has reshaped netizens' imagination of the national community, promoted the new form of cyber-nationalism, and become an important media form for constructing national imagination under the background of China's social transformation (Zhang, 2017). In cyberspace, nationalism as a social ideology has also penetrated into netizens' daily cognitive patterns (Goode, Stroup, & Gaufman, 2022), becoming a major background of China's Internet public opinion field. In the process of dynamic change and evolution, cyber-nationalism is not only rooted in China's traditional history and culture, but also influenced by more modern life concepts, more complex social reality and faster globalization, fully reflecting netizens' views on domestic and international political issues, the country and the nation.

Contemporary Chinese cyber-nationalism has also changed with the transformation of Internet platforms. Since the birth of platforms such as Weibo and WeChat, platforms have become an indispensable infrastructure in the current digital society, an important part of users' opinion expression and social actions, and a new trend of social development (Helmond, 2015). The highly mediatized society has begun to be dominated and connected by platforms (Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018). Internet social platforms represented by Weibo, with stronger social attributes, interactivity, mobility and blurred boundaries between communication and reception, have become new fields for the rise and evolution of cyber-nationalism and new positions for expressing national consciousness (Zheng, 2017).

In the nearly three decades of cyber-nationalism evolution, young people have evolved from the initial post-70s to the later post-80s, and now mainly the post-90s and post-00s. Young groups of different generations participate in the discussion and dissemination of cyber-nationalism with their own media habits, cultural preferences and interaction methods. Some scholars have focused on young students and found that nationalism among contemporary college students is on the rise. And there are different types and orientations of nationalism in the evolution process (Fu et al., 2018).

Methodology

The data are derived from *the Survey on the Social Mentality of Chinese Young Netizens* released in both 2022 and 2024, by the Center for Communication and State Governance Research, Development Institute, Fudan University. In the survey, young netizens refer to active users in the online society born between 1990 and 2005 (inclusive). In 2022, 5,492 active young netizens from different regions, age groups and educational levels were selected through stratified sampling on Weibo as research samples, and a hybrid big data analysis study based on Support Vector Machine (SVM) was conducted. In 2024, based on data from platforms such as Bilibili, Douban, Zhihu, Weibo, RedNote and Soul, a mixed research method combining multimodal big data analysis, large-scale questionnaire survey and qualitative research was adopted. A total of 8.246 million

discussion texts from 6.071 million young netizens were collected from a database of 600 million random posts on Weibo from 2014 to 2024, aiming to show the changing trend of young netizens' values.

Research Findings

A typological analytical framework can provide new insights and more scientific guidance for research on youth nationalism (Fu et al., 2018). Consistent with this view, this study classifies the nationalism of young netizens into four types: strong nationalism, moderate nationalism, reverse nationalism, and non-nationalism. Results show that young netizens holding moderate nationalism account for the largest proportion, at 12.44%. Rational and moderate voices constitute the mainstream discourse among Chinese young netizens. This proportion dropped by more than 20% in 2021-2022 and then gradually rebounded. The share of strong nationalists slightly decreased. Overall, moderate nationalism has become the mainstream among the younger generation.

The study of nationalism cannot be separated from the overall framework of globalization. Perceptions of China-world relations, economic integration, and multicultural communication together form an analytical framework for interpreting the global outlook of the younger generation (Zheng, Ding, & Ji, 2025). This integrated cognitive structure serves as the foundation for value judgments and behavioral logic when young netizens engage with globalization issues.

Chinese young netizens pay high attention to globalization and global interaction, with rising discussion intensity. The volume of Weibo posts related to international topics in 2024 increased by 26.8% compared with that on various websites a decade earlier, reflecting their growing sensitivity and willingness to participate in global affairs. Young netizens increasingly focus on relations between China and Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and countries along the Belt and Road Initiative, rather than only on major-power bilateral relations. Countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Serbia have become key focuses of attention.

The high level of attention to globalization among young netizens is partly driven by the expansion of global cultural exchange, with a significant rise in cultural focus. Exposure to diverse cultures on social platforms constitutes an important source of awareness about national differences. Meanwhile, firsthand experiences such as travel, studying abroad, overseas internships, self-media on social platforms have deepened their concrete understanding of globalization and strengthened their recognition of seeking common ground while reserving differences.

Conclusions

At present, moderate nationalism remains the mainstream among Chinese young netizens and accounts for the largest proportion. This continuous rise is accompanied by the expanding scope of their attention to China's relations with the world. They have begun to focus on China's relations with relevant developing countries and re-understand China's role in international affairs from a global perspective.

Young netizens who grew up under the background of global great changes and development, are gradually becoming a new force and key subject of global cultural exchanges. The nationalist attitudes of Chinese young netizens and their underlying global orientation are fostering a more inclusive and open worldview. This is conducive to promoting global dialogue and exchanges, thereby influencing the current and future process of globalization.

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