

Original Paper

The Influence Mechanism of Internet Celebrity Phenomenon on Career Selection View of Generation Z in China--based on the Cultivation Theory

Minran Xia

Faculty of Humanities and Arts, Macau University of Science and Technology, Macao, China

Received: July 18, 2024

Accepted: August 17, 2024

Online Published: August 28, 2024

doi:10.22158/sssr.v5n3p215

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sssr.v5n3p215>

Abstract

With the continuous development of information technology, television, as a mainstream media is gradually being replaced by new media, and this new mainstream media is also subtly influencing the career views of 'Generation Z' in China. This paper uses the cultivation theory proposed by American scholar Gerbner to analyze how the 'symbolic reality' constructed by the Internet celebrity industry affects the construction of 'subjective reality' in individuals' minds, and provides a brief overview of the 'objective reality' of the Internet celebrity industry in China.

Keywords

Cultivation theory, Generation Z, Career selection view, Internet celebrity

1. Cultivation Theory

In the 1960s, frequent violent events occurred in the United States. Gerbner et al. were invited by the government to examine the relationship between television violence and social reality. The theory points out that the longer the audience is exposed to the mass media, the more likely it is to act according to its underlying behavioral logic. As a mainstream medium, TV has an educative function. It nurtures the audience's values, builds consensus, and makes the audience's ideological areas consistent. However, the 'symbolic reality' provided by the mainstream media will influence people's understanding of the real world, thus creating a realistic deviation. In addition, Gerberner pointed out that when people find their daily life consistent with the situation described on TV, they will produce 'resonance', that is, a resonance between the 'symbolic reality' conveyed by the mass media and their own reality. In this case, the cultivation effect tends to significantly expand (Gerbner, 1970).

2. Research on the Internet Celebrity

With the development of information and communication technology, new media has replaced the traditional media represented by TV and has become a new core cultural pillar of society.

Internet celebrities are considered to have emerged from the Internet. At present, internet celebrities in China are mainly active on the platforms like TikTok, Kuaishou, The Red, and Weibo. Internet celebrities have unique advantages in some aspects and rely on these new media platforms to promote themselves. They have a certain influence and a certain number of followers (Li, 2022). Nowadays, more and more people rely on online platforms to display content in order to gain attention, and they have successfully turned the attention into commercial value to make a living or even earn big money. Nowadays, internet celebrities are not just a concept, they have become more of an emerging social phenomenon.

The classification of internet celebrity is various. "According to their individual attributes, they can be divided into grassroots internet celebrities and star internet celebrities. According to the operation team, they can be divided into individual internet celebrities, and team-planned internet celebrities" (Li, 2022). "According to the output content, they can be classified as professional content production internet celebrity, web writer-type internet celebrity, appearance-based internet celebrities, event-based internet celebrities, and celebrity-type internet celebrities, etc." (Chen & Jin, 2017).

According to the research report of AppGrowing, as of December 2023, with those under 25 as one group and those aged 26-35 as another group, the age distribution of users on TikTok is 27.5% and 29.3% respectively; for Kuaishou, it is 26.9% and 28.32%; for The Red, it is 33.1% and 31.8%. It can be seen that the main audience of new media platforms relied upon by internet celebrities are mostly young people, who are undoubtedly subject to the cultivation effect.

3. The Cultivation Effect of the Internet Celebrity Phenomenon on Career Selection of 'Generation Z'

There is currently no precise definition of 'Generation Z' in academia, but generally it refers to those born between 1995 and 2009, who are now between the ages of 14 and 29 in 2024. They are the generation that grew up alongside the Internet, making them significantly different from other generations (Wang, 2021).

Career selection is the process in which people choose one of them from various occupations in society according to their career ideals and abilities. This group of 'Generation Z' individuals are currently in the age range of forming career views or seeking employment.

According to Gerbner's cultivation theory, individuals who have long been exposed to the same TV messages have more similar ideas, that is, a common worldviews, values, and role identity. According to the cultivation theory, heavy users are more likely to be affected by media content than light users (Gerbner, 1970). Therefore, the author believes that Generation Z, as the native inhabitants of the Internet, has more familiarity and more contact opportunities with new media than other generations.

‘Generation Z’, which has long been immersed in the new media environment, is influenced and even reshaped by the new media and its derived internet celebrity phenomenon.

In a post-1995 employment outlook survey released by Xinhua Net in China, 54% of the ‘post-95’ stated that the most appealing emerging occupation is Internet celebrity. There is a sharp contrast between Generation Z and other generation.

3.1 The ‘Symbolic Reality’ Constructed by the Internet Celebrity Industry

Modern society heavily relies on information spread by mass media. People's understanding of the objective reality presented largely depends on the ‘symbolic reality’ disseminated by mass media, which serves as a cognitive intermediary after being selected and processed by mass media (Gerbner, 1970).

Driven by the new technology, the threshold to become an internet celebrity has been significantly lowered. Today, individuals do not need special qualifications, or experience, but with basic new media operation skills, everyone might become an internet celebrity. This convenience and low threshold of entry in this industry provide people with an opportunity to show themselves.

The development of the Internet celebrities has also gained considerable attention. Internet celebrity are always reported to have extremely high incomes. Apart from these well-known top internet celebrities, a recent hot topic was a post-2000 internet celebrity Wang Zhixin in Hubei province in China got a 700,000 RMB Bank statement per month. In her sophomore year of college, she achieved a huge monthly revenue through short videos, achieving economic independence during her student days. As shown in the account of ‘Seven Gorilla’ (Wang Zhixin's account), the internet celebrities seem to have a high degree of freedom in planning work content based on their own interests and are able to produce interesting content. Additionally, most internet celebrities in front of the camera have distinct characteristics, strong personalities, and lucrative incomes.

The phenomenon of internet celebrities constructs a ‘symbolic reality’ for the audience where making money as an internet celebrity is seen as easy and liberating with extremely lucrative income. This has led many young people from Generation Z to exhibit unprecedented optimism and confidence towards pursuing a career as an internet celebrity.

3.2 How the ‘Symbolic Reality’ Influences the ‘Subjective Reality’

Nowadays, the booming development new media covers a wide range of industries. This convenient, low-entry mode of working provides everyone with the opportunity to show themselves, making overnight wealth and economic freedom seem possible.

Gebner's research confirms that the ‘symbolic reality’ constructed by the mass media has a great impact on the subjective reality in the minds of the audiences. Due to factors such as information asymmetry and bounded rationality, individuals have inherent limitations in their perception of objective reality, requiring several intermediary steps in their cognitive process. In addition to family education, school education, self-knowledge, and other factors, the ‘subjective reality’ formed in individual minds is largely influenced by the ‘symbolic reality’ suggested by the media. When this ‘symbolic reality’

overlaps with real life, the audience will have a ‘resonance’, that is, the influence of the cultivation has a trend to expand (Xiang & Qiao, 2017).

For the majority of ‘Generation Z’, most of them belong to the age of school and have relatively little social experience. They often rely on the ‘frame’ of the world outlook, values, and moral norms provided by the mass media to understand and explain the social reality, and gradually internalize it into their own world outlook, values, and moral qualities. In addition, as the ‘aborigines of the Internet era’, the post-1995 generation has been greatly influenced by the Internet, especially the new media. Their habitual use of new media makes them often subconsciously accept the ‘symbolic reality’ provided by it; thus, their career views are also influenced.

They identify with online anchors who are passionate, full of personality, and lead high-paying work lives. In addition, many ‘Generation Z’ have already devoted themselves to the internet celebrity industry. When ‘Generation Z’ sees their peers or people around them gain fame and fortune for this career, they experience the aforementioned ‘resonance’ towards this industry and their positive impression of internet celebrities is reinforced. This influence imperceptibly promotes the construction of ‘Generation Z’ for the subjective reality in their minds, and even affects their cognition of the objective world.

Technological empowerment makes the internet platform more open and inclusive. People find their own space in the virtual world. Diversified choice, distinctive personal characters, and relatively flexible working hours adapt to the living and working style of the new generation. In this case, more and more young people hold a positive attitude towards the Internet celebrity industry, and take it into professional consideration. The symbolic reality provided by the internet celebrity industry affects the construction of ‘subjective reality’ in audience’s mind, that is, cultivation effects are taking place and influencing audience behavior.

3.3 Objective Reality of the Internet Celebrity Industry

The ‘symbolic reality’ constructed by internet celebrity greatly influences the ‘subjective reality’ of Generation Z’s career selection, but the objective reality of this industry is not as ideal and easy as imagined. In terms of income, a large part of mid to lower-tier worker can hardly even support themselves through the job.

With the deepening development of the Internet, the Matthew effect is becoming increasingly apparent. (The Matthew Effect refers to the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer). The number of media practitioners is increasing, leading to intensified competition. With the maturation and systematization of the internet celebrity industry, MCN institutions and capital intervention, talented influencers might be supported with professional operations and refined packaging. Conversely, grassroots internet celebrities without a team or background find it challenging to stand out in this competitive environment.

Additionally, the actual income and working conditions of most internet celebrities are not as ideal as portrayed. High-intensity work has become the norm. Internet celebrity work, especially live

broadcasting work, needs to be exposed to the lens for a long time under strong light (fill light), leading to occupational eye diseases among practitioners. Regular late -night overtime live streaming may also result in pharyngitis, cervical spondylosis, emotional anxiety, and other illnesses, bringing about new occupational hazards in this industry.

In recent years, the threshold of internet celebrities has been raised, according to 2018 China Internet Celebrity Economic Development Research Report, the overall degree of Internet celebrity hosts is also improving, with 77.6 percent having a bachelor's degree or above and 13 percent having a master's degree or above.

4. Conclusion

As the 'Internet aborigines', 'Generation Z' has been subtly influenced in career choice.

The 'symbolic reality' constructed by the Internet celebrity industry for the audience has affected their subjective reality, thereby impacting their objective world activities.

However, for "Generation Z", it is crucial to recognize that while new media offers a more diverse range of career options, there is also a need to be aware of the existence of information cocoon. In the digital age where algorithms dictate content delivery, it is easy to form a relatively closed information environment, leading individuals to have a more one- sided view of the real world. As the 'Internet generation', individuals should try to jump out of the limitations of the information cocoon, improve their media literacy, and realize the impact of the internet environment on their cognition in career selection. It is advisable to cultivate new critical thinking, broaden information source, and carefully choose the most suitable path for their career development.

References

- Chen Anfan & Jin Jibin. (2017). "Net red" and China's Internet 20 years of change symphony. *Educational Media Research*, (01), 33-37.
- George Gerbner. Cultural Indicators: The Case of Violence in Television Drama, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol.388, Political Intelligence for America's Future (Mar., 1970), pp. 69-81.
- <https://max.book118.com/html/2024/0221/8125123004006037.shtm>
- IRResearch (2023). *White Paper on Mobile Advertising Traffic in 2023*.
https://www.baidu.com/index.php?tn=15007414_11_dg
- IRResearch Consulting (2023). 2023 China Internet celebrity Economic Development Research Report.
- Li Haishun. (2022). *The influence of the phenomenon of "Internet celebrities" on college students' career selection and master* (dissertation, Central China Normal University). Hubei.
- Wang Shuixiong. (2021). China's "Generation Z" youth group observation. *The People's Forum*, (25), 24-27.

- Wu Yanli. (2023). *The influence of web celebrity phenomenon on college students' values and countermeasures master research* (dissertation, Shandong University). Shandong.
- Xiang Zhongmin & Qiao Zhenzhen. (2017). Using new media to spread socialist core values — Based on the theory of inclusion. *Journal of Southwest Jiaotong University (Social Science Edition)*, (02), 18-21 + 43.
- Xinhuanet (2017). *Do you understand the mystery of the employment concept after 195*. http://m.news.cn/2017-05/22/c_1121013214.htm