



Research on the Media Usage, Political Predispositions, and Social Participation of Generation Z

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Abstract. This article investigates the relationship between media usage, political predispositions, and social participation among Generation Z in China. Grounded in Paul Lazarsfeld's hypothesis of political predispositions, it analyzes the political attitudes and behaviors of this generation within the context of mass media and the internet. By exploring resistance culture in subcultures and the entertainment-driven media environment, the study examines the characteristics of patriotic youth, such as the "Little pink," and rebellious groups within rock culture. Furthermore, it assesses the influence of social events, including the COVID-19 pandemic, on the political predispositions of Generation Z, while also considering how factors like family background and professionalism in occupational fields contribute to shifts in attitudes. Ultimately, the article concludes that the patterns of media usage and the sources of information significantly impact the maintenance and transformation of Generation Z's political predispositions.

Keywords: political predispositions, subculture, consensus, dissent

1 Introduction

1.1 Political Predispositions and Generations

The study of the impact of mass media on political attitudes highlights one of its most prominent examples: Paul Lazarsfeld's Erie Survey. Lazarsfeld posited that the most

significant factor influencing how mass media shapes people's attitudes is their political predispositions. He employed variables such as socioeconomic status, religion, beliefs, and residential area to create a comprehensive index that reflects the prior political predispositions of survey participants, known as the Index of Political Pre-dispositions (IPP). The analysis revealed that individuals' voting behavior is predominantly influenced by their previously held political attitudes. Audiences are inclined to engage with media or content that aligns with their political predispositions, views, and attitudes, while they tend to avoid media or content that contradicts these predispositions. This conclusion is referred to as the "Hypothesis of Existing Political Disposition," with researchers asserting that this tendency is closely linked to individuals' social groups and backgrounds. Joseph LaPalombara and Jerry B. Waters, in their study titled "Values, Expectations, and Political Predispositions of Italian Youth," examined the values, expectations, and political predispositions of Italian youth, confirming a significant correlation between political interest and factors such as social class, education level, gender, and geographical location. Their findings indicated that those most engaged in politics at that time were predominantly upper-class males who had received a university education and held higher occupational positions.

Robert D. Putnam argues that, in the late 20th century, social capital and civic engagement in the United States experienced a continuous decline, with mass media being a critical factor accelerating the erosion of social capital. In China, the emergence of "Generation Z" coincides with the rapid ascent of the internet. This generation has matured in a patriotic environment shaped by compulsory education. In contrast to the more open and innovative media landscape that existed prior to 2010, today's mass media predominantly functions within a heavily entertainment-driven context, lacking a critical intellectual climate. Youth represents the most active and vibrant force within society. However, a portion of today's young population has been labeled with social tags like 'lying flat' and 'letting things go,' characterized by behaviors such as avoiding marriage and childbirth, refusing social interactions, shunning competition, adopting a laid-back attitude, and being addicted to the internet [1]. Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has instigated significant social changes in China's economy. These changes prompt the question: will they lead to a deviation or alteration in the freedom tendencies of this particular generation?

1.2 Resistance Culture within Subcultures

Every teenager is influenced by popular culture, leading them to seek out various online circles in search of subcultures that provide a sense of identity. These subcultures can be categorized in multiple ways from a political spectrum perspective. For example, individuals who identify with genres such as heavy metal and rock often embody a rebellious connotation within a diverse society. Recent research on youth subcultures has identified fan culture as a significant instance, evolving from opposition to the state into a state of integration with it. In this context, Liu Hailong notes in his article "Loving the Country Like One Loves Their Idol: The Birth of New Media and 'Fan Nationalism'" that during periods when pragmatism and cynicism dominate, and liberalism and individualism become mainstream, traditional notions of patriotism and collectivism take on a rebellious nature, prompting youth to conform to state authority in their pursuit of independence [2].

According to Dick Hebdige, youth subcultures exemplify forms of resistance culture[3]. As a mode of group organization, these subcultures influence media usage among their members, fostering convergence and certain forms of group communication. Through mutual interaction, they generate a semblance of a political spectrum that impacts political predispositions. Many subcultures embody resistance cultures, including rock and punk. Under the influence of such resistance culture, various trends may emerge, particularly concerning the implications for media consumption and political predispositions. This paper examines whether, in the context of a distinct generation, subcultural groups can develop different coping strategies and trends of change following specific events.

2 Current State of the Entertainment-Oriented Media Generation

Since Generation Z is well-versed in various social media platforms and their ecosystems and actively engages with them, they are often the dominant users of social media, serving as both the producers and consumers of content[4]. Generation Z exhibits a greater depth of thought and individuality than commonly perceived. In reality, most members of this generation possess distinct political predispositions within their cognitive frameworks. Interviews reveal that a substantial proportion of individuals can be categorized into two predominant types of inclinations: consensus

and dissent. While consensus predominates, there remains a significant number of individuals who uphold dissenting perspectives.

2.1 Political Predispositions Are Clear: The Intellectual Vanguards of Generation Z

Patriotic Youth Represented by the "Little pink" Group[5]. The majority of Generation Z individuals examined in this paper remain within their "ivory towers," influenced by extended compulsory education, ideological instruction in higher education, and their developmental stage. These factors lead most to adopt simplistic and unrefined values, which hinder their ability to develop complex and nuanced critical awareness. The campus environment, pressure for further education and research opportunities, mainstream societal consciousness, and peer competition fundamentally shape the political consensus characteristics of this demographic: viewing Party membership as a competitive advantage and an unquestionable virtue, while ideological discourse frames patriotism as the foundational principle for all discussions.

Notably, one specific group deserving attention is the "Little pink," a term describing nationalist internet users in China. The emergence of new media technologies, particularly social media, has engendered a unique phenomenon termed "fandom nationalism," where patriotic sentiments are expressed similarly to the devotion fans exhibit towards their idols. The wave of online nationalism ignited by the "Facebook Incident involving the Emperor Bar" in early 2016 continues to reverberate in public discourse today. In interviews, respondents, who are fans of the South Korean boy band Super Junior, articulated that "every action—be it voting or purchasing albums—serves primarily as a label for others to recognize their nationality, thereby reinforcing identity recognition; the greater the conflict and divergence from other groups, the stronger their collective identity becomes." In this somewhat inequitable distribution of entertainment resources, Chinese K-pop fans have neither succumbed to what is termed "narrow nationalism" nor developed a "complete national inferiority," but have instead cultivated a more mature, proactive, and multifaceted approach to participation.

Subcultural groups immersed in a commercial media environment often develop their media literacy and political awareness primarily through the political mediation, globalization, and commercialization of news in the new media landscape[6]. The

interplay between entertainment and politics relates, on one hand, to identity-related political conflicts that inevitably arise from transnational fandom behavior, and on the other hand, to the pervasive trends of mediation and spectacularization evident in contemporary global politics, particularly in the United States.

Every generation is the product of a particular time and space, in other words, every generation has its own space-time characteristics[7]. Therefore, when examining the characteristics of Generation Z's political consensus, it is essential to consider not only the influences of education, ideological guidance, and mainstream societal thought but also the impact of mass media and internet media during this period. First, the technological features of mass and internet media during this time determined the structure of social communication. For example, after 2000, mass media rapidly expanded, particularly entertainment programs represented by Hunan Television, which entered households through television broadcasts and talent shows. The following decade witnessed significant advancements in internet and mobile internet access, with rapid proliferation in China since 2010. The development of these media technologies shaped the forms, interactions, and content possibilities on these platforms. Additionally, different generational cohorts experience diverse possibilities for integrating specific media technologies and producing distinct generational media cultures, influenced by their birth years. For instance, Putnam has argued that the decline of social capital and civic engagement in American society over the past three to four decades correlates with increased television viewing, as the popularity of television diminishes the younger generation's interest in civic participation.

Returning to the focus of this paper, Generation Z, during their childhood, primarily engaged with domestic animated series and entertainment variety shows, resulting in reduced exposure to critical and political mass media. This decline further includes a decreased model for importing and dubbing foreign animated films while incorporating patriotic elements into domestic animations. For example, "That Year, That Rabbit, Those Things" uses various animals to symbolize different countries, narrating major historical events through interactions among these character-driven protagonists, thereby promoting patriotic education[8].

Moreover, prolonged engagement with entertainment content fosters immersion in fandom, consumerism, and comparison, leaving these individuals uneducated in critical thinking and careful consideration of social and political issues. In both school

and family education, there has been consistent advocacy for obedience and non-resistance, instilling the belief that only conformity can yield better opportunities.

Given the centralized control and production of social consciousness, alongside the stringent design and regulation of school ideological and patriotic education, the media use that once conferred significant autonomy has diminished. As internet usage has been tamed into a collaborative process within the realm of entertainment, society as a whole coalesces into a collective consciousness and patriotic subconscious characteristic of this generation.

Divergence from the Mainstream. Rock music is a cultural carrier for young people to carry out ritual resistance. In addition to unconventional dress, young people can engage in social behaviors that may not be allowed in normal social environment at the music festival[9]. Rock culture serves not only as a genre of music but also as a challenge to traditional concepts and authority. In addition to emotional catharsis and physical collisions, youth also show a considerable degree of reflexivity and strive to establish empathy with others[10]. This rebellion against authority is evident in their music and fashion, as well as in their dissent from media narratives and political attitudes. In social reality, while they avoid crossing clear legal boundaries, they engage in actions deemed inappropriate within certain controlled limits. Influenced by information silos, rock music inherently embodies a spirit of rebellion and critique, emphasizing their political predispositions in contrast to the "narcotic" content prevalent on platforms like TikTok. They express a desire for more rock music, leading them, through peer recommendations, to use VPNs to access a vast array of foreign information. By utilizing overseas social media, they further reinforce this inclination and become more aware of the limitations of their own information environment.

VPNs have seemingly become a symbol of freedom, despite contradicting legal and internet regulations. The emergence of "anti-censorship" software functions as a youthful and intuitive metaphor, linking this software to the concept of "freedom." Beneath this association lies a dissatisfaction with the current internet environment and a longing for "internet freedom." For these individuals, the confinement of cyberspace subtly deprives them of their rights to access information and freedom of speech.

The act of "bypassing the Great Firewall" is largely driven by the proactive advocacy of individuals or groups who are, in essence, "innovators with a spirit of

adventure.” Passionate and exploratory teenagers, upon discovering the “paradise” of overseas networks, eagerly share this “wonderland” with others, transforming this knowledge into a form of social currency[11].

Whether in punk, heavy metal, or other subcultural groups—including fan culture and AO3 (Archive of Our Own)—all share a rebellious spirit and are often overlooked by mainstream culture. Born into middle-class families in large cities, they possess inherent technological skills due to their superior education in foreign languages. Once they choose to venture out, they realize that the lack of recognition from mainstream culture does not equate to being incorrect. Engaging with diverse news frameworks from abroad and interacting with various subcultural groups allows them to recognize their own information environment, solidifying their choices and prompting them to reflect on the validity of the mainstream culture supported domestically and the educational paradigms to which they have been subjected. This reflection may potentially foster a stronger awakening among dissenting voices.

2.2 The Sleepy Majority

The broader middle ground within the political spectrum is, in fact, rather ambiguous. In this generation, the subtle communication occurring at home, when contrasted with the intensive education in schools, significantly influences the emergence and transformation of political predispositions. Casual conversations over tea or before bedtime highlight the school’s occasional avoidance of certain topics, which stands in stark contrast to more open discussions at home that encourage children to engage in critical thinking. Schools can sometimes create an invisible conflict with parents regarding ideological viewpoints, leaving individuals raised in this dichotomous environment unable to firmly align with either side. Nevertheless, the absence of a definitive stance can be viewed as a form of attitude—a seemingly ambivalent yet fundamentally resolute position.

The reason I, as a representative of this group, have not become a rebel is partly due to my compliant nature, which leads me to want to believe in the narratives promoted by schools, even while I internally resist overly “heroic and righteous” rhetoric. Throughout our education, we are taught that there are no absolute rights or wrongs; yet when it comes to propaganda, what we see, hear, and even articulate is overwhelmingly positive and laudatory. This ongoing education fosters increasing skepticism among this group and lays the groundwork for future developments.

3 Reasons for Changes in Political Predispositions

China has undergone significant social transformation; however, over the more than ten years that Generation Z has transitioned from adolescence to a readiness for societal engagement, various groups exhibit differing political predispositions. In the context of rapid societal change, will their political spectrum shift? Based on interviews conducted with several university students who experienced China's COVID-19 pandemic response and dynamic zero-COVID policy between 2020 and 2022, the author posits that changes in the political spectrum are indeed possible, particularly among those with ambiguous political predispositions. Additionally, specific adverse events may trigger a more pronounced shift in established political orientations. Furthermore, factors such as family economic status, parents' social standing, and the influence of professionalism within occupational fields may also contribute to changing attitudes among Generation Z.

3.1 Adverse Events

Ambiguous groups may become skeptical due to some inconsistent policies enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, while those sharing a common consensus may encounter specific events that lead to a complete shift in attitude. The impact of adverse events can be significant, serving as critical evidence for some individuals when making subsequent decisions. For instance, during the lockdown periods of the pandemic, scenarios such as family members missing optimal treatment times due to policy requirements, resulting in death, or pets being illegally killed or euthanized by workers in public, illustrate this phenomenon.

3.2 Inherited Factors

The heterogeneity of college students is reflected not only in the differences between various groups but also within the internal differentiation of the same group. The distribution and construction of “inherited” and “acquired” cultural capital contribute to this differentiation[12]. Numerous studies have shown that disparities among urban and rural college students arise from differences in resource allocation in their hometowns, family financial status, educational background, parental knowledge, social resources, and subsequent living conditions, leading to variations in

self-management, overall quality, and personal development. This gap also contributes to differences in political predispositions.

3.3 Informal Dissemination of Professionalism

The influence of informal dissemination of journalistic professionalism within the workplace is noteworthy. In the news industry, reporters, as the voice of the Party and the state, undergo rigorous professional journalism education, honing their logical reasoning skills. In practice, they embody a spirit of rebellion, and this critical perspective is conveyed through daily interactions.

Every industry upholds a set of professional standards; however, many forms of professionalism remain unpracticed. Education, for instance, incorporates elements of professionalism that can be illuminated through specific methodologies.

4 Conclusions

4.1 How Does Change Occur?

For the younger generation, political predispositions have not yet faced the harsh realities of society, as they remain in an extended phase of their educational careers. Despite encountering similar social events and media usage patterns, individuals continue to exhibit diverse political predispositions.

From a micro perspective, individuals possess subjective agency, organizing their lives around cultural identities and taking actions that imbue those actions with meaning. Consequently, different individuals naturally display varying response patterns when confronted with different social events. From a macro perspective, unbalanced economic development in China has resulted in inequalities across education, ideology, lifestyle, values, and other dimensions. Immutable inherited factors—such as social class, urban hierarchy, educational institutions attended, and parental education levels—significantly influence changes in individuals' political predispositions. This aligns conceptually with the IPP index proposed by Lazarsfeld.

4.2 To Maintain or Change?

The use and selection of media also influence whether these changes can be sustained. For internet users navigating the online space, the concept of a “wall” is self-evident.

In the early 21st century, China established the Great Firewall to ensure internet security and enhance its regulatory capabilities, implementing IP blocking and restrictions on access to overseas servers. Although the Great Firewall currently serves as a “safety valve” for the internet—filtering harmful information and inappropriate speech—such confinement of online space deprives some adolescents of their rights to information freedom and freedom of speech in a non-visible manner.

While significant changes have occurred among groups with ambiguous political predispositions or those facing severe setbacks, the author remains pessimistic regarding the sustainability of these changes. Nevertheless, there is a belief in the power of media; as long as stable usage and a cautious attitude are maintained in exchanging diverse information sources, and as long as this attitude itself serves as a form of representation, it implies that individuals uphold such an attitude. Thus, the sustained use of multiple media forms is regarded as indicative of maintaining these principles.

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