A Study of Online Subcultural Groups' Emotional Climate under the Interaction Ritual Chains Theory

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Abstract: With the popularity of the internet, more and more social events and issues can be widely disseminated and discussed by people online. In a certain social background, a specific emotional climate will be naturally formed among internet users who share the same views or interests or cultural backgrounds, especially among online subcultural groups. Through the literature review, there is a large amount of research on online subcultural groups and research on emotional climate; however, there is very little study of online subcultural groups' emotional climate. Therefore, this study will adopt the Interaction Ritual Chains theory to explore the online subcultural groups' emotional climate. The research question is how the online subcultural groups' emotional climate is generated. By taking online subcultural groups in two types of websites - the Bilibili website and pro-anorexia websites- as cases, the process of generating the online subcultural groups' emotional climate can be summarised. This paper finds that multiple and multi-level emotion sharing triggered by a specific event among group members is the process of forming interaction ritual chains, and the reason why members' emotion sharing triggered by a specific event enables the group to generate an emotional climate is that the emotional energy and symbols produced by the interaction ritual created in emotion sharing are successfully shared by the group members, which can influence the emotional energy of groups that on a social dimension can be seen as emotional climate.

Keywords: online subcultural groups, emotional climate, interaction ritual chains theory

1.   Introduction

With the popularity of the internet, more and more social events and issues can be widely disseminated and discussed by people online. In a certain social background, a specific emotional climate will be naturally formed among internet users who share the same views or interests or cultural backgrounds, especially among online subcultural groups. Unlike previous cultural communities, online subcultural groups are virtual communities that are based on the internet and emphasize the presence of users rather than the presence of bodies. Using the internet as a base and individuality as a bond, they spread alternative forms of culture and create common group symbols and emotional ties, becoming a considerable force to be reckoned with on the internet [1]. Emotional climate is constructed and perceived by group members and is what individuals of a society believe most others will feel in a certain situation [2]. And a hostile emotional climate has a negative effect on society [3]. Therefore, it is important to research online subcultural groups' emotional climate.

Through the literature review, there is a large amount of research on online subcultural groups and one on emotional climate; however, there is very little study of online subcultural groups' emotional climate. Therefore, this study will adopt the Interaction Ritual Chains theory to explore the online subcultural groups' emotional climate. This research question is about how the online subcultural groups' emotional climate is generated. By analyzing the interaction rituals and interaction ritual chains of the online subcultural groups in the two types of websites Billibili website and pro-anorexia, combined with the findings of social psychology about social sharing of emotion, the process of generating the online subcultural groups' emotional climate can be summarised. This paper deepens the theory about how group members generate an emotional climate by emotion sharing.

2.   Emotional Climate and Interaction Ritual Chains Theory

2.1.   Emotional Climate

The emotional climate discussed in this research is a concept in social psychology, and it is a component of social emotions. Therefore, this article first defines the concepts of social emotions and emotional climate.

Social emotions are emotional experiences shared by a certain group or groups of people or the majority of people in a given social context [4]. Social emotions are not simply the addition or mixture of individual emotions, rather, they result from interactions between individuals, between individuals and groups, and between groups. From a developmental perspective, social emotions are the emotional reactions of individuals and groups under certain social and cultural backgrounds. Social emotions consist of three parts: basic emotions, secondary emotions at the individual level, and emotional climate at the social level [4].

Emotional climate is constructed and perceived by group members and is what individuals of a society believe most others will feel in a certain situation [2]. Emotional climate is not only a collective feeling and behaviour but also an emotional relationship that social members care about each other. Emotional climate is a preparatory state for social emotion generation and is also the most important and main part of social emotion composition [4]. Moreover, de Rivera believed that emotional climate is the result of objective facts, institutional arrangements, and the influence of political policies; conversely, a hostile emotional climate has a negative effect on society [3].

2.2.   Interaction Ritual Chains Theory

The Interaction Ritual Chains theory was proposed by Collins as a micro-sociological theory that can explain the problem of collective emotions arising from group interactions. Collins believes that any interaction is a ritual [5]. He starts from micro-sociology and proposes that society is composed of the interaction of individuals in situations; people are always in various interactive environments, generating emotional resonance similar to rituals, constantly expanding, and forming various chains of interaction rituals, thus constituting society.

Interaction rituals have four components: bodily co-presence, the barrier to outsiders, the mutual focus of attention, and shared mood. The main argument of the Interaction Ritual Chains theory is that if an interaction ritual is based on these four elements, it is likely to become a successful interaction ritual. A successful interaction ritual will produce four effects: group solidarity, emotional energy in individuals, symbols of social relationship (sacred objects), and standards of morality.

3.   Analysis of Online Subcultural Groups' Emotional Climate under the Interaction Ritual Chains Theory

3.1.   Online Subcultural Groups

Unlike previous cultural communities, online subcultural groups are virtual communities that are based on the internet and emphasize the presence of users rather than the presence of bodies. Through their active search, group members dig out information outside the mainstream media and express their opinions to form their unique perspectives and expressions, thus constructing a new identity and social location [1].

3.2.   Online Subcultural Groups' Interaction Rituals and Interaction Ritual Chains

Obviously, if the emotional climate of online subcultural groups needs to be analyzed under the interaction ritual chains theory, then first we need to consider their group's interaction ritual and interaction ritual chains. Therefore, this paper will use online subcultural groups on two types of websites - the Bilibili website and pro-anorexia websites - as cases to do some analysis mentioned above.

3.2.1. Bilibili Website

Bilibili is one of the largest bullet screen (danmu) websites in China, with resources on ACG (Action, Comic, and Game) videos being the mainstay. Bullet screen is an on-screen commenting feature that allows users to publish comments in real-time while watching a video. Compared with the comments on other websites, the characteristic of bullet comments is synchronicity [6]. It is because of the synchronicity of bullet comments that they allow for the expression of emotions and opinions of subcultural groups on the website. This paper will examine the interaction ritual and interaction ritual chains of online subcultural groups in Bilibili.

3.2.1.1.   Interaction Ritual of Online Subcultural Groups in Bilibili Website

First of all, this article will examine the element of bodily co-presence in interaction ritual chains. However, it seems that there is a problem at the outset: members of online subcultural groups are not often physically present in the same space, which seems to contradict Collin's concept of bodily co-presence. Admittedly, during the era of traditional media, due to the limitation of one-way media information transmission, the interaction emphasized by Collins had tactile participation, and the physical co-presence of group members is a prerequisite for the occurrence of interaction ritual chains. Therefore, Collins believes that sufficient physical contact can provide participants with shared attention and emotional resonance, which can lead to group aspirations, member consciousness, and a sense of respect. However, the internet of the new media era has made group interactions instantaneous and continuous, providing the sense of being in the same space for the group, which is more realistic than during the traditional media era [1]. Moreover, physical bodily co-presence encounters limitations in time and space, which hinders the continuity of group interaction to a certain extent, and also makes sense of recognition and emotional energy generated by the ritual always face the threat of decline [1]. In contrast, interaction rituals under the intervention of the internet in the new media era rarely encounter such problems. Therefore, the element of bodily co-presence also exists in the online interactions of subcultural groups. Obviously, on the Bilibili website, if a certain number of users are simultaneously viewing a certain video and a certain number of bullet comments are sent out by some users, then an encounter, that is, a specific context of video viewing, is formed, and the ritual begins.

Secondly, the barriers to outsiders will also gradually form in the group with the progression of the narrative. At first, participants do not particularly care about or consciously pay attention to others outside of themselves (with little or no bullet comments exchanges). As the video progresses, individuals gradually have mutual influence by feeling the presence of others (increasing bullet comments about their own opinion and bullet comments in response to others' ones), and the interaction ritual moves forward. Due to the strong exclusivity within online subcultural groups, limiting outsiders is key to ensuring the purity of group beliefs and enhancing collective cohesion. Participants must know who is participating and who is excluded from the group. Therefore, this reinforces the sense of responsibility of participants to maintain the clarity of intergroup boundaries and indirectly increases the purity of ACG culture in the bullet comments. In each video viewing activity, group members show a respectful attitude and pay great attention to the video content and the accompanying bullet comments information [7]. In addition to posting their own bullet comments, they also respond to exciting bullet comments and criticize the bullet comments of outsiders. Therefore, barriers to outsiders are also formed.

Finally, the mutual focus of attention and shared mood are becoming stronger, and they are reinforced by each other through rhythmic association. With the evolution of video and an increase in the number of bullet comments, people are paying closer attention to this common viewing action and are better able to understand each other's views and feelings. Members will experience a strong sense of shared emotion and, when they reach an emotional critical point, they may even become emotionally overwhelmed. As McClelland and Kent pointed out, the strongest human pleasures come from being fully and bodily absorbed in deeply synchronized social interaction [8]. The high-frequency exchange of ideas and emotional fluctuations among each other reshuffles and integrates the audience group that originally gathered together due to random encounters, and further derives a collective unity that is stronger than the intensity before entering the viewing context. In the interaction ritual, people concentrate their attention on a common object or activity, and convey their attention to each other, so that they know what the focus of attention is. When the videos or bullet comments resonate with everyone, almost all people will respond with bullet comments. The originally empty and lonely private viewing space overlaps into a lively social place, allowing countless lonely network subcultural groups hiding behind their computers to achieve unprecedented emotional resonance [7].

A successful interaction ritual will result in group solidarity, emotional energy in individuals, symbols of social relationship (sacred objects), and standards of morality. Therefore, after a video ends, users who participated in it will feel a sense of solidarity and generate emotional energy related to the video (intending to participate in the next interaction ritual) and symbols that represent the group (memes, buzzwords, witticism, jokes, etc.). If someone violates the group's symbols, the group will generate corresponding anger, which is usually caused by the group's moral standards brought about by the interaction ritual.

3.2.1.2. Interaction Ritual Chains of Online Subcultural Groups in Bilibili Website

"The thought-chain begins in a practical situation." [5]. When a bullet comments viewer watches a particular video, they will have a sense of sensory extension as if they were physically present, and experience similar psychological fluctuations as if they were in the same situation as the parties involved. This triggers the viewer's own contextual chain of thoughts based on their life experiences, knowledge reserves, movie-watching experiences, speech habits, and other factors stored through previous ritual experiences. It's not difficult to imagine that when editing bullet comments, participants will inevitably blend their previous contextual experiences into the words. Each bullet comments that bears the personal mark of the viewer is embedded in the interaction ritual chain

composed of many contextual experiences, preparing for the next time they participate in watching the video and launching bullet comments [7].

Furthermore, it is especially important that the unity of the ACG culture group is sustained and reserved through bullet comments. In the time after the video is played, if there is no participation in new interaction rituals, the emotional energy accumulated in the initial interaction ritual will gradually be consumed and depleted, because each collective excitement caused by bullet comments is short-lived. Therefore, only when emotional energies and symbols are stored in bullet comments that can rekindle them can they truly impact the interaction quality of the ACG culture group's members, individual group identity, and emotional energy through sharing emotional energies and symbols in future contexts.

3.2.2. Pro-anorexia Websites

Pro-ana or pro-anorexia websites refer to online message boards, communities, blogs, and other resources that encourage disordered eating. Many times, these sites promote harmful behaviours by emphasising thinness, restriction, and compensatory behaviours. People who participate in these communities reinforce that people don't need treatment for struggling with an eating disorder; instead, they claim that people are better off staying sick. This paper will examine the interaction ritual and interaction ritual chains of online subcultural groups in pro-anorexic websites.

3.2.2.1. Interaction Ritual of Online Subcultural Groups in Pro-anorexic Website

The various member activities on pro-anorexic websites can constitute a certain interaction ritual, and this article will analyse the four elements of its interaction ritual. Firstly, users' activities on the website such as posting, leaving messages, and communicating with each other have already achieved bodily co-presence, which can refer to the discussion of Bilibili users' bodily co-presence in subsection a in section 3.2.1. Secondly, the barrier to outsiders in the group has also naturally formed. It takes an outsider who is unfamiliar with the linguistic norms multiple visits to decipher the abbreviations that the users post [8]. Moreover, for outsiders who are not familiar with the group's language norms, their first post on the website is easily recognised by the group as an outsider, and they will be attacked by the group [8]. Thirdly, the mutual focus of attention of group members is easily formed, that is, the attention to anorexia and weight loss. Finally, group members have formed a shared mood during posting and participation in discussions, which can be broadly divided into negative emotions towards "successful fasting" and its techniques and negative emotions towards "failed fasting". The mutual focus of attention and shared emotional mood are mutually reinforced through joint communication such as "code words," which ensures the success of the interaction ritual.

3.2.2.2. Interaction Ritual Chains of Online Subcultural Groups in Pro-anorexic Websites

After group members post and discuss with other members, the interaction ritual ends, and the group has relevant emotional energy and symbols. Because group members are easily able to form mutual focus of attention, they will share this emotional energy and symbols with their group members in the next encounter, such as experiences of their own or others' successful or failed fasting, new secret language, etc. This goes on, and interaction ritual chains gradually form.

3.3. The Generation Process of Online Subcultural Groups' Emotional Climate

It has been suggested by previous research that emotion sharing can lead to the generation of an emotional climate [9]. This article will explain how online subcultural groups generate an emotional climate through emotion sharing under the perspective of the Interaction Ritual Chains theory. A

single interaction ritual only ensures the formation of individual emotions, which can not guarantee the generation of an emotional climate in the group. In an encounter, members of online subcultural groups form successful interaction rituals through watching videos, sending bullet comments, leaving messages, posting, and participating in discussions. While they have shared emotional mood before the ritual ends, the scope and degree of this shared emotional mood are low, so it does not generate an emotional climate. After the ritual ends, individuals obtain emotional energy and new symbols. If they do not engage in emotion sharing, such as sending previous symbols (memes, buzzwords, witticism, jokes, etc.) in a new video or forwarding and discussing posts, they will not be able to generate an emotional climate [7]. The process of emotion sharing triggered by a specific event is the formation process of interaction ritual chains, which ensures the generation of an emotional climate. On Bilibili website, individuals usually send memes in comments or leave messages to engage in emotion sharing. In other online subcultural websites, such as pro-anorexic websites, individuals usually post to express their own views, listen and think to engage in emotion sharing. Secondary and tertiary emotion sharing correspondingly follow, and in this process, the original emotional energy and symbols play a key role. Collins proposed that successful emotional energy and symbol sharing can form new interaction rituals, generating new emotional energy and symbols, and these form a new interaction ritual in the next encounter [5]; therefore, certain interaction ritual chains can be formed, which can significantly impact the emotional energy of the group. Wang suggested that the social manifestation of emotional energy is an emotional climate [4]. In summary, Collins's conclusion seems to confirm the theory of emotion sharing. The emotion sharing triggered by a specific event is the sharing of individual emotional energy and symbols. Secondary and tertiary sharing are the process of interaction ritual chains, which form the emotional climate in the group.

4. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the generation process of online subcultural groups' emotional climate under the perspective of Interaction Ritual Chains theory. And in this paper, it is found that emotion sharing triggered by a specific event is the process of forming interaction ritual chains, and the reason why members' emotion sharing triggered by a specific event enables the group to generate an emotional climate is that the emotional energy and symbols produced by the interaction ritual created in emotion sharing are successfully shared by the group members, which can influence the emotional energy of groups that on a social dimension can be seen as emotional climate. This research is qualitative research adopting the case study method. So it might have been more empirical and convincing if quantitative research methods or interviews had been used. In addition, research on this topic can also be conducted using theories from other disciplines, such as psychology, communication, anthropology, etc.

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