

Individualized Existence and Manifestations of Digital Emotional Practices in the Context of Risk Society

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Abstract: In the context of the continuous deepening of social modernization, the domestic social structure and public life patterns have undergone continuous iterations, thereby reshaping the generation mechanism and evolution pattern of modern social risks. Under this background, the theory of risk society and the theory of modernity disengagement can effectively explain the survival situation and behavioral logic of contemporary young people during the social transformation process. The constraints of the traditional clan society gradually weakened, and the fixed individual development model was constantly dismantled. Contemporary young people are no longer subject to the traditional growth paradigm and mainly plan their personal development paths through autonomous choice and self-striving. With the comprehensive penetration of digital technology into social production and daily life, the behavioral patterns and emotional interaction methods of the youth group have undergone profound changes, giving rise to digital emotional interaction forms that are different from traditional face-to-face communication. Based on the current era context of accelerated social transformation and the continuous awakening of young people's subject consciousness, this study systematically examines the actual situation of contemporary young people's digital emotional practices, and explores the formation mechanism and core characteristics of their individualized lifestyle. Relevant research data indicate that the digital emotional interaction mode is highly compatible with the fast-paced life rhythm of young people, but it also gives rise to practical problems such as shallow emotional experience, weakened interpersonal connection, and utilitarianization of emotional demands. In response to this, this study constructs optimization paths from three dimensions: individual behavior adjustment, network platform regulation, and social environment optimization, clarifying the internal connections of various elements, and providing reliable theoretical support and practical references for the cultivation of young people's emotional literacy, the construction of mental health systems, and the governance of online emotional ecology in the new era.

Keywords: Risk Society, Individualized Survival, Digital Emotional Practice, Modernity, The Youth Group.

1. Introduction

Modernization has reshaped the domestic social operating system, bringing about substantial changes in residents' lifestyles and risk environments. In traditional societies, security threats primarily stemmed from natural forces beyond human control, with natural disasters and public health crises being the main disruptions to people's daily lives. With the advancement of industrialization and the widespread adoption of digital technologies, new risks arising from human social practices have gradually emerged, increasingly replacing natural risks as the dominant component of today's social risk landscape. Unlike the gradual modernization process seen in Western societies, China's social transformation is characterized by rapid pace and concentrated, compressed change. This unique developmental pattern has led to overlapping coexistence of old and new social issues, with collective values and individualized development aspirations intertwining, further intensifying fluctuations within the social system and increasing the complexity of grassroots governance [1].

As social structures continue to evolve, the social functions of traditional clan rituals and rural customs have progressively weakened, diminishing their constraints on individuals and their foundational role in providing support. The stable order systems built upon close-knit communities and fixed life trajectories in traditional society are no longer compatible with the pace of contemporary development, placing the entire system in a dynamic phase of deconstruction and reconstruction. The regulatory and

supportive capacities of local communities and rural collectives have steadily declined, effectively loosening constraints on youth development. Contemporary young people have broken free from the limitations imposed by family background and rigid class structures, actively engaging in social competition and independently shaping their academic plans and career paths. An individualistic and autonomous lifestyle has thus become the mainstream mode of living among youth.

The rapid growth of the digital economy has driven various social media platforms deeply into everyday life, fundamentally transforming patterns of interpersonal communication and emotional expression among today's youth. Compared to offline interactions, which tend to be formal, rigid, and heavily influenced by social obligations, online interaction offers a relaxed atmosphere and lower social costs, providing new channels for emotional release and communication. Uncertainty, as a core characteristic of a risk society, permeates every stage of youth development—from personal growth and daily routines to career advancement. Frequent fluctuations in the labor market, intensifying industry competition, and the fast-paced urban lifestyle have accumulated multiple real-world pressures, leaving most young people enduring prolonged psychological distress marked by anxiety, confusion, and emotional emptiness.

Real-life social interactions suffer from complex rights and responsibilities and rigid patterns, easily triggering interpersonal friction and mental exhaustion—factors that fail to meet the youth's preference for lightweight, flexible social

engagement. The online space, with its inclusive, open, immediate, efficient, and low-pressure advantages, compensates for these shortcomings in offline interactions, becoming a vital platform for youth to relieve psychological stress, express authentic emotions, and build self-identity and group belonging. Against the backdrop of intensified social competition and growing individualism, the emotional needs of young people have undergone significant evolution. What was once a supplementary form of emotional exchange, online interaction has now become a crucial pathway for alleviating loneliness and adapting to high-pressure living conditions, playing an essential role in safeguarding youth mental health [2].

The deep integration of individualized living and digital emotional practices has reshaped youth social dynamics and the broader social emotional ecosystem, yet it has also given rise to numerous psychological challenges and governance concerns. Based on long-term observations of youth online behavior, this article focuses on the intrinsic connections between individualized living and digital emotional practices, identifies existing shortcomings and potential risks in these new forms of emotional engagement, and explores practical, era-appropriate governance solutions to support mental health development among contemporary youth and promote healthy online social governance.

2. The Generation Logic and Core Characteristics of Individualized Existence in the Context of the Risk Society

2.1. The Generation Logic of Individualized Survival: Modernity's Detachment and Risk Reconfiguration

Deep social structural changes have disrupted the stable pattern of traditional society where "society protected individuals and imposed constraints on them", and the survival mode of the people has undergone a complete modernization transformation. The familiar social structure has loosened, and the constraints of the collective on individuals have gradually dissipated. This is the core reason for the formation of the contemporary individualized survival mode. The familiar social structure has loosened, and the constraints of the collective on individuals have gradually dissipated. This is the core reason for the formation of the contemporary individualized survival mode. In traditional rural society and the era of planned economy, individual development was highly dependent on clans, rural collectives, and work units. The acquisition of personal resources, career direction, behavioral norms, and social boundaries were all defined by the fixed social structure and institutional rules. At that time, individuals did not have to independently bear the risks of survival, and their subjective thoughts and individual characteristics were also difficult to be expressed.

The deepening of reform and opening up and the arrival of the digital age have completely restructured the risk system of modern society. Problems such as employment fluctuations, difficulties in social mobility, and conflicts of multiple values have become more common. The traditional family, neighborhood, and work collective have continuously lost their functions of risk coverage, emotional comfort, and life security [3]. The market economy's competitive mechanism, the open social environment across the network, and the

diversified social thoughts have created sufficient space for individual independent development. People gradually broke away from the state of collective dependence, autonomously controlled the pace and direction of personal development, and the independent and autonomous modern survival mode completely replaced the traditional dependent survival mode. The shift of risk responsibility to individuals, the non-fixation of social identity, and increasingly free development choices have formed the core formation mechanism of the individualized survival mode.

2.2. The Four Core Characteristics of Individualized Survival

Based on the actual situation of social transformation in China over the past two decades and the real living conditions of contemporary young people, individualized survival mainly encompasses four core characteristics: individualized risk-taking, fluid identity construction, fragmented social connection, and self-centered emotional expression. These four characteristics interact with each other and are interlinked, fully presenting the living appearance and mental state of young people in the digital age, and also laying a realistic foundation for the wide spread of digital emotional practices among the youth.

Individualized risk-taking is the most obvious external manifestation of the risk society. In the past, family, neighborhood, and workplace would help individuals shoulder the pressure of life and alleviate negative emotions. This traditional risk buffering mechanism has largely failed nowadays. Contemporary young people need to independently face various uncertain issues such as academic competition, career advancement, interpersonal relationships, and life changes. All consequences brought about by personal choices must be fully borne by themselves. Living in a high-pressure and unstable environment for a long time, young people's negative emotions accumulate continuously, and their demands for emotional comfort, psychological adjustment, and emotional expression continuously increase. This is also the key reason why digital emotional interaction can rapidly spread among the youth [4].

Fluid identity construction breaks the traditional society's unchanging identity system. In traditional society, individual identities come with inherent attributes, and regions, families, and work units basically fixed one's social role for a lifetime. The digital age has completely changed this rigid pattern. Young people can freely shape their personal image, convey values, and make friends with like-minded people through various online channels such as short video platforms, interest communities, and social groups. The flexible identity construction method fully releases the subjective initiative of young people. Without stable value support and spiritual anchors, some young people are prone to experience real-life problems such as unclear self-awareness, spiritual emptiness, and confusion.

Fragmented social connection reshapes the social logic of contemporary young people. The neighborhood ties and community connections in the traditional close-knit society were closely and stable. These were the most core emotional support sources for the people in the past. With the continuous refinement of social division of labor and the continuous acceleration of life and work rhythms, offline interpersonal communication gradually became more utilitarian, superficial, and loose. Many young people are in complex social networks, but they often feel lonely inside. Group loneliness has become

a typical social dilemma for the Z-generation youth. The alienation and interaction pressure inherent in real social interactions make young people more willing to choose a relaxed atmosphere and a more compatible online space to obtain emotional companionship and spiritual support.

Self-centered emotional expression has overturned the traditional society's emotional operation rules. In traditional society, emotions were constrained by ethics and public norms, and individualized emotional expression was not encouraged. Individuals' emotions were required to obey collective order and public norms. After individualization became the mainstream of society, the youth's subjective consciousness fully awakened, and they placed greater emphasis on their own subjective experience and spiritual satisfaction [5]. People no longer blindly follow unified public emotional norms but instead actively express themselves and pursue exclusive emotional experiences. Emotional expression, value identification, circle belonging, and spiritual resonance are personalized needs, which are the core internal motivations for young people to rely on online emotional interaction.

3. The Generating Motivations and Real Manifestations of Individualized Digital Emotional Practices in the Risk Society

3.1. The Generating Factors of Digital Emotional Practice: Bidirectional Drive by Individual Anxiety and Technological Empowerment

The normalization and popularization of digital emotional practice can occur among young people because there is a mutual alignment between individual emotional needs and the empowerment of digital technology. The survival predicaments brought about by individualized risks, atomized social interactions, and fluid identities have led contemporary young people to be in a state of anxiety, loneliness, and confusion for a long time [6]. They urgently need convenient, efficient, and low-stress ways of emotional counseling. Traditional offline emotional exchanges are restricted by multiple factors such as time and space, social circles, and interpersonal relationships, and the process is cumbersome and has poor adaptability, fundamentally failing to meet the frequent, immediate, and relaxed emotional release needs of young people.

Under such a development context, the traditional offline serious, rigid, highly restrictive, and heavy-laden emotional interaction mode has gradually weakened, and free, lightweight online emotional interaction has become the mainstream, dominating the daily emotional life of contemporary young people [7].

3.2. Four Types of Real-world Representations of Digital Emotional Practices

Digital technology has permeated every aspect of daily life, not only changing the lifestyle of the general public but also completely reconfiguring the logic of the generation and dissemination of human emotions. Based on long-term observation records and specialized research data from the youth's online field, the contemporary youth's digital emotional practices can be classified into four core patterns: symbolic performance-based emotional expression,

fragmented and immediate emotional venting, circle-based homogenized emotional connection, and virtualized and lightweight emotional relationships.

The interests, likes, popularity, and other benefits of the platform will directly intervene in the online expression behavior of young people. The majority of young people's online emotional output is not from the heart, more for shaping their personas and attracting platform attention. The formal and shallow characteristics are very prominent, and deep spiritual communication is increasingly scarce in online social interaction [8].

Fragmented and immediate emotional venting highly aligns with the fragmented and fast-paced work and life patterns of contemporary youth. The uncertainty of social development and the regular competition in industries have led young people to accumulate hidden negative emotions, but they do not have sufficient time for in-depth psychological adjustment in daily life. Lightened online scenarios such as short video comments, social updates, anonymous tree holes, and interaction in comment sections allow young people to quickly and without barriers release emotions, alleviating psychological pressure and relaxing the body in a short period of time. This short-term emotional release can only solve superficial psychological problems and cannot build a long-term and stable emotional support system. It cannot touch the deep psychological predicaments of young people and cannot address the persistent inner anxiety from the root.

Circle-based homogenized emotional connection is an important way for contemporary youth to alleviate the sense of social isolation from reality. The utilitarian and cold trend of real interpersonal communication makes young people value emotional resonance and value alignment more. The intelligent push algorithm of the network platform will precisely aggregate young people with similar interests and viewpoints, forming relatively closed and highly homogeneous emotional circles. Frequent interaction and emotional exchange within the circle can effectively alleviate individual loneliness and make up for the lack of emotional belonging brought by individualized survival. Long-term adherence to a single emotional circle will bring negative effects. Personal cognition gradually becomes rigid, the ability to accept diverse viewpoints continues to weaken, and the emotional barriers and ideological opposition between different circles and groups will continue to intensify [9].

Virtualized and lightweight emotional relationships are the most recognized and participated-in new emotional interaction mode by young people in the past five years, covering AI virtual companionship, online social matchmakers, online intimate relationships, and fan community bonds and other various life forms. Traditional emotional relationships are established based on long-term offline interaction, real interaction, and clear responsibility constraints, possessing stable, lasting, and responsible characteristics. Network emotional relationships are real scenes and ethical responsibilities, mainly relying on temporary online interaction and emotional complementation to maintain, with loose relationships, strong plasticity, and high substitutability. This low-pressure interaction mode can help young people avoid conflicts and internal tensions in real social interactions and adapt to the fluid and uncertain modern living conditions. Long-term immersion in virtual emotional scenarios will gradually weaken young people's ability to manage real emotions, handle interpersonal conflicts, and maintain intimate relationships, resulting in a balanced

situation of excessive virtual emotions and the absence of real emotions. Relevant research data shows that over 60% of the young people surveyed stated that relying on virtual emotional companionship for a long time would lead to a stubborn psychological dependence, and their ability to regulate emotions and cope with stress would significantly decline.

4. The Multiple Practical Challenges of Individualized Digital Emotional Practices in a Risk Society

4.1. Individual Predicament: Surface-level Emotional Experience and Internal Depletion Caused by Psychological Dependence

Utilizing digital emotions to regulate one's mental state is a proactive choice made by contemporary young people to adapt to the risk society environment and alleviate the pressure of individualized survival [10]. It is also an inevitable outcome of the development of the times. The combination of multiple conditions such as technological iteration, capital pursuit of profit, and individual emotional needs has led the digital emotional practice, originally an emotional buffering tool, to deviate from a positive development path and give rise to multi-dimensional real-life predicaments. The main issues at the individual level mainly lie in two aspects: one is the general shallowness of emotional experience, and the other is the continuous self-depletion caused by psychological dependence. The standardized symbolic expressions of the internet and the fragmented instantaneous emotional venting have made the majority of online emotional interactions only remain at the surface emotional flow, while deep spiritual conversations, value resonance, and heart-to-heart communication have been in a long-term missing state.

Long immersed in the homogeneous online social environment, contemporary young people have developed shallow emotional expression habits, accustomed to using internet symbols to replace their own real and delicate emotions, and using short-term online relaxation to replace deep self-reflection and psychological reflection. The fixed interaction mode makes it difficult for young people to build a complete, stable, and mature emotional and psychological cognitive system. Long-term exposure to low-quality online social atmosphere has led to the continuous deterioration of the emotional perception, empathy ability, and interpersonal communication ability of young people, ultimately forming the typical social paradox of "online social life is lively and diverse, but the inner world is closed and lonely".

The ease, convenience, and stress-free interaction characteristics of digital emotions are highly attractive to young people whose minds are not yet mature and whose emotional regulation systems are not yet perfect. This can easily lead to long-term psychological dependence. Many young people deliberately avoid academic pressure, workplace conflicts, and real interpersonal disputes, and regard the virtual network as the only emotional support. This excessive addiction behavior will sever the deep connection between individuals and the real society, weaken the ability to respond to risks and psychological resilience, forming a vicious cycle of "anxiety addiction - brief relaxation - renewed anxiety", constantly accumulating hidden

psychological risks, and causing continuous mental exhaustion. The first-line intervention cases of the university mental health center fully confirm this problem's universality. Many college students with psychological adaptation disorders have long used AI emotional companionship software. Some users have an average daily interaction duration of six to eight hours. They actively distance themselves from real interpersonal relationships such as relatives, friends, and classmates. Subsequently, they gradually experience psychological problems such as low mood, social avoidance, and self-isolation.

4.2. Community Dilemma: The Solidification of Social Circles and the Severance of Social Connections

The precise push of intelligent algorithms has established a closed, segmented social model. This model can meet the emotional resonance needs of young people, but it also builds an information cocoon and an emotional cocoon that are difficult to break through. Prolonged immersion in a homogeneous information environment and continuous reception of a single emotional perspective and value concept will cause users to actively block and reject heterogeneous viewpoints and diverse life experiences. One-dimensional information reception will gradually lead to the rigidity of young people's thinking, extreme emotions, and one-sided cognition. Excessive focus on private emotional circles and indulgence in self-emotional experiences will weaken young people's public concern and social responsibility, narrow their personal cognitive horizons and patterns [11].

Cognitive rigidity and the lack of public consciousness have reduced the emotional inclusiveness and value diversity of the entire society, intensified the estrangement and opposition between different circles, and amplified the structural contradictions and group fragmentation problems of the risk society. The segmentation of circles not only limits the cognitive growth and vision expansion of young people, but also disrupts the overall balance of the social emotional ecology, making the public emotional connections in society increasingly loose, social cohesion continuously declining, and further exacerbating the trend of social atomization.

4.3. Industrial Predicament: Alienation of Emotional Utilitarianism and Imbalance of Ecological Order

The competition for traffic on online platforms and the profit-driven nature of capital have deeply infiltrated the emotional domain of the masses, undermining the purity and authenticity of traditional emotions. The originally pure emotional exchanges and acts of comforting the soul have gradually deviated towards utilitarian and commercial directions. In recent years, emerging business models such as emotional self-media, emotion operation accounts, and virtual companionship platforms have rapidly emerged and become an important part of the online ecosystem. Some content creators focus on generating traffic and achieving commercialization as their core goals, deliberately creating extreme emotional hotspots, stoking group conflicts, and conducting false emotional performances, turning pure emotional interactions into profit-making tools [12]. False marketing, emotional incitement, and malicious pursuit of popularity have repeatedly failed to be curbed.

The online cognition of young people is not yet mature, and

their value judgment system is still in the stage of construction. They are easily misled by the quantitative data of the platforms. Most young people overly focus on shallow traffic indicators such as likes, topic popularity, and fan numbers, simply equating platform recognition with their own value and emotional value, forming a one-sided cognitive bias. The utilitarian mode of emotional practice has completely deviated from the essence of emotional communication, emotional healing, and emotional resonance, continuously causing self-damage and emotional anxiety among young people, seriously damaging the clear online emotional ecosystem, and resulting in an overall network atmosphere that is superficial, utilitarian, and disorderly [13].

5. The Multi-dimensional Optimization Path of Digital Emotional Practice in the Risk Society

In the digital living context, the emotional deviations and psychological imbalances of contemporary young people are the result of the interaction of multiple factors. It is necessary to implement coordinated policies from three dimensions: individual, platform, and society, to systematically alleviate the digital emotional predicaments of young people. From the individual perspective, young people need to actively correct their emotional cognitive biases, rationally distinguish the boundaries and values between virtual online emotions and real interpersonal emotions, break free from the constraints of homogeneous online circles, and actively embrace diverse life experiences [14]. At the same time, they should reasonably control the scale of digital emotion use, abandon excessive reliance on online emotional comfort, reduce ineffective online emotional consumption, and actively deepen real-life interpersonal relationships such as family ties, friendships, and workplace collaboration. By nourishing the inner world with sincere and stable offline emotions, they can effectively alleviate the anxiety and loneliness brought by modern social competition and achieve dynamic psychological balance. The online platform, as the shaping entity of the digital emotional ecosystem, should break away from the fixed operation thinking of pursuing only traffic, optimize algorithm push based on the growth patterns of young people, break the shackles of information cocoons, and guide young people to broaden their cognitive horizons and cultivate public sentiments with high-quality positive content. At the same time, strictly rectify phenomena such as emotional hype, false personas, and online opposition, curb the excessive commercialization of emotions, and precisely guide young people's negative emotions by leveraging technological advantages [15]. The social level needs to improve public services such as employment assistance and psychological counseling, and collaborate with multiple entities to carry out offline practical exchange activities, supplement real-life emotional support, solve the problem of social atomization among young people, and achieve a positive symbiosis of virtual and real emotions.

6. Conclusion

The compressed transformation of modernity has led our society to fully enter the stage of individualization. The deep popularization of mobile internet and artificial intelligence has completely changed the emotional generation logic and practical paradigm of contemporary youth. Symbolic, fragmented, segmented, and virtualized digital emotional

practices are the rational choices of young people to adapt to the uncertainty of modern society, alleviate the pressure of survival, construct self-identity, and seek emotional belonging, which conform to the trend of individualization in the era of risk society. The influence of multiple social factors has exposed many development shortcomings of digital emotional practices. Problems such as shallow emotional experience, solidification of cognitive circles, alienation of value utilitarianism, and virtual emotional addiction will not only cause emotional crises and mental exhaustion for individual youth, but also disrupt the orderly operation of the network public emotional ecology.

The normalization of social risks and the individualization of individual survival are irreversible trends of the times. Digital emotional practices will also persist in the daily lives of young people for a long time. The three-dimensional governance system composed of individual rational adjustment, technological humanistic empowerment, and social collaborative support can effectively avoid the negative effects of digital emotional practices and fully exert their positive values of emotional guidance, self-growth, and social connection. The implementation of multi-dimensional optimization paths can not only help young people build a healthy and stable emotional system, but also promote the benign reconstruction of the network public emotional order, achieving a two-way win-win situation of young people's healthy growth and the orderly governance of the network society.

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