

Emotional Needs and Projection: A Study on the Phenomenon of Language Cosplay in Youth Subcultures

Qinli Hu

Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Nanjing, Jiangsu, China

1691525777@qq.com

Abstract. Language cosplay is a niche subculture that involves role-playing through text. Initially relying heavily on social platforms like Baidu Tieba and QQ, it has shown a trend of expanding outwards in recent years. This paper aims to explore the underlying motivations behind this phenomenon and the changing emotional needs of contemporary youth reflected in it. The study constructs an analytical framework based on Freud's theory of projection and Cooley's theory of the "looking-glass self," and collects and analyzes data through in-depth interviews. The study finds that due to the rapid development of modern society and the accelerated pace of life, contemporary youth are experiencing increased pressure. Young people project themselves onto virtual characters and construct their "looking-glass self" through interactive feedback to improve self-awareness and gain emotional value. This research provides assistance to society and parents in providing correct and reasonable psychological support and guidance for the emotional needs of adolescents.

Keywords: Language Cosplay; Projection Theory; "Looking-glass Self" Theory; Emotional Needs of Youth.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In recent years, information technology has been further developed, major social platforms have emerged, and the dissemination and development of subcultures have become more active, and in today's society where the pace of life is more rapid, the emotional needs of the new generation of young people have also changed. The existing research rarely combines language subcultures with youth emotional needs, and this study mainly explores the two-way influence of language cosplay subcultures and youth emotional needs, as well as the social and personal factors that cause this phenomenon.

1.2 Research Object and Research Significance

In the information age, the rise of online social platforms such as Baidu Tieba and QQ has provided a communication platform for language cosplay. According to the author's research, language cosplay began to emerge around 2004, so this study focused on the "Age Z" youth in the age range of 18 to 24. Such young people were born in the era of the information revolution. They are coerced by the wave of development of the information age, are greatly influenced by intelligent networks and electronic devices, and have more opportunities to come into contact with some niche subcultures. And unlike those born after 2010, the growth environment of "Generation Z" youth is changeable, and while science and technology develop, social phenomena are gradually changing, and social cognition is also constantly developing, which makes the emotional needs of "Generation Z" young people also different from other generations. This study focuses on the role of language cosplay in the emotional needs and projection of "Generation Z" youth, and explores the changes in the emotional needs of contemporary adolescents, so that society and parents have a clearer and more correct understanding of the emotional needs of adolescents, and adopt the correct methods for psychological relief and guidance.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research on Language Cosplay Culture

The number of research papers on language cosplay culture has increased significantly compared to previous years. As of mid-2025, a rough calculation using the keywords "language cosplay" and "language cosplay culture" on CNKI yields nearly twenty relevant research papers. Here, the author selects ten papers most suitable for the research topic for reference, choosing eight papers related to language cosplay from CNKI between 2020 and 2024, and two English papers related to psychological principles from Web of Science.

2.1.1 The Presentation of Language Cosplay Culture

Language cosplay is language role-playing, commonly referred to as “Yu Cha” in the player circle. “Yu Cha” is a branch of the cosplay subculture in the context of animation, comics, games and novels, and the main audience is the post-00s and even post-10s teenagers. Language Cosplay players play games on social media networks according to the rules of specific subcultural circles, and use words to play virtual roles to meet their social needs and emotional value needs [1]. Chen Jiao uses the three-dimensional framework method of Fairclough's discourse analysis in "Research on the Discourse Analysis of Language Cosplay", combined with participatory observation and text analysis, to conduct a profound study on the discourse analysis in the language cosplay culture, and proposes that language cosplay can be regarded as a departure from the real self, and can also be regarded as an extension of the real self. The discussion of the virtual deduction mode and psychology of the language cosplay group is not detailed and profound. In "The Construction of Generation Z Subcultural Field: A Study on the Cultural Practice of Language Cosplay Groups", Mo Fei uses the concepts of habit, capital, and field in the theoretical framework of Bourdieu's social practice theory to study the language cosplay subculture, explores the essence of language cosplay subculture from both macro and micro perspectives, and proposes that language cosplay subculture is extremely dependent on social media and has strong media dependence. From a completely different perspective, the development trend of language cosplay culture is confusing [2].

2.1.2 Social Context for the Development of Language Cosplay Subculture

The development of the language cosplay subculture is largely driven by social factors. The lack of peer companionship among only children, the lack of discourse power due to intergenerational conflict, and adolescents' identity anxiety leading them to seek a "second identity" all contribute to the social context that supports the development of language cosplay culture. Furthermore, research on the language cosplay subculture cannot be separated from the analysis of its linguistic expressions. The use of abbreviations, alternative symbols, and coded language are among its undeniable characteristics. The existence and use of these professional terms provide a natural filtering system for the language cosplay community, and give the language cosplay community and its players a certain degree of exclusivity and group characteristics [3].

Unlike the traditional Birmingham School's research on youth subcultures, Liu Xiaoyan's "Style and Meaning: A Study of Role-Playing Culture from the Perspective of Subculture" does not presuppose a confrontational relationship of resistance and co-optation between role-playing culture and mainstream culture. This suggests that role-playing culture, compared to other subcultures, has weaker inherent resistance and is confined to cyberspace. Role-playing players tend to temporarily abandon worldly constraints during role-playing and freely express themselves. The inner needs and emotional expressions of the youth group are particularly noteworthy and require guidance.

Besides, some literature focuses on the psychology of adolescents. For example, Lou Yinan, in "Analyzing the Psychological Needs of Adolescents for Role-Playing from the Perspective of Role-Playing," attributes the reasons why young people engage in role-playing subculture activities to three psychological needs: "bridging the gap between fiction and reality, shaping an ideal self, and fulfilling the subculture's need for creation and communication" [4].

2.2 Research on the Emotional Needs and Emotional Projection of Contemporary Adolescents

Freud once proposed "projection", which he believed was the "projection" of an individual's own personality, emotions, thoughts or desires onto others. Fisk also proposed three ways to form identity in "Key Concepts: A Dictionary of Communication and Cultural Studies": (1) extending the self to certain others; (2) borrowing oneself from some others; (3) Integrating the self with some others [5].

Rogers' humanistic theory proposes that each individual possesses abundant internal resources for self-understanding, changing self-concept, basic attitudes, and self-directed behavior. The conditions that enable these internal resources are: congruence or genius, unconditional positive regard, and empathy. In today's world, very few people can achieve these three things, whether in the family or in society. Especially during the period of healthy physical and mental development of adolescents, the positive attention and empathy given by parents and family members are very little, which will affect young people's self-understanding and self-direction, and thus turn to subcultural groups to seek self-identity and emotional needs [6].

Charles Horton Cooley, one of the representatives of the American school of social psychology, proposed the concept of "Looking-Glass Self" to illustrate the formation process of self-concept. From the perspective of "Looking-Glass Self", human beings are dynamic participants in social interaction, and gradually form individual self-awareness and construction in their interactions with others. In this theory, "emotion" plays a central role, "interaction is a social control process, regulated by the process of positive emotions (pride) and negative emotions (fear and shame)", that is, human beings can truly form themselves and social people only by experiencing their own emotions and each other's emotions in communication [8]. Under the theory of "Looking-Glass Self", the communication relationship in language cosplay can also be understood as an extension of human beings projecting emotions and constructing an ideal self in social interactions.

3. Research Problems and Methods

In recent years, language cosplay has expanded from early social platforms such as Baidu Tieba and QQ to emerging social platforms such as Rednote and Douyin, and its audience is constantly growing. Many young people post on Rednote to find language cosplay commissions and enjoy the emotional value that role-playing brings them. So, as a niche subculture, why has language cosplay gradually become a way for contemporary youth to express their emotions and seek emotional fulfillment?

Considering the niche nature and exclusivity of the language cosplay community, it was impossible to find a large number of relevant people for a large-scale questionnaire survey, and quantitative research was not suitable. Therefore, it was decided to use in-depth interviews to conduct the research, selecting 10 young language cosplay players. Some of the interviewees were friends of mine who have been involved in language cosplay activities for many years, and the rest were selected by me from language cosplay software. The interviewees were between 18 and 23 years old, belonging to the youth category. Table 1 are my preliminary in-depth interview questions.

Table 1. The Interview Questions

1	How did you learn about role-playing (RP)? And why did you join this community?
2	How long have you been in the role-playing community? What motivated you to participate?
3	What did you hope to gain through role-playing? And what did you actually gain (positive and negative)?
4	What is the status of your family of origin? Are you eager for intimacy or seeking emotional sustenance?
5	Did you want to gain attention or recognition through role-playing activities?
6	During role-playing, did you develop any emotional attachment or dependence on the other person? Did you develop a close relationship with them? How long did the relationship last?
7	Do you think this emotion is for the character or to the actor himself? Is it normal?
8	Why do you think the role-playing (RP) culture is expanding outwards? Do you have a positive or negative attitude towards it?

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Group Characteristics of Language Cosplay Players

The author interviewed ten young language cosplay players within half a month, and the specific information integration is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Statistics on the Reasons and Channels Through which Players Became Involved in Language Cosplay

Number	Circle Age	Causes and Ways
Interviewee 1	about 10 years	Game and web recommendations
Interviewee 2	4, 5 years	Fan works and QQ group announcements
Interviewee 3	about 6 years	Group announcements on Qzone
Interviewee 4	8 years	Fan works and Baidu Tieba publicity
Interviewee 5	7, 8 years	Accidentally joined a role-playing group
Interviewee 6	8 years (intermittent)	Fan works and post Baidu Tieba group publicity
Interviewee 7	About 10 years	Fan works
Interviewee 8	6, 7 years	Accidentally downloaded role-playing related software
Interviewee 9	8 years	Baidu Tieba Group Publicity
Interviewee 10	5, 6 years	Games, Fan works, Group announcements and Role-playing software

Most role-playing cosplayers are exposed to this niche subculture through online social platforms such as QQ or Baidu Tieba, indicating that the development of information technology and communication platforms has promoted the spread of role-playing culture. Furthermore, with the further popularization of the internet, related role-playing software has also emerged, giving role-playing cosplay its own dedicated subcultural communication platform. Furthermore, the language cosplay players interviewed had all been involved in the subculture for over five years, with some having been there for as long as ten years. This demonstrates the high level of engagement within this niche subculture. When participating in such activities, respondents reported receiving praise from many like-minded individuals and making friends from all over the country. The emotional value they gained far exceeded what they experience in real life. They also acknowledged that this positive feedback is what motivates them to continue participating in this subculture.

Based on the interview content and data, the majority of language cosplay enthusiasts have been involved in this subculture for a long time, measured in years, indicating its strong appeal. Respondents primarily encountered language cosplay through early online social platforms like Baidu Tieba and QQ, gradually expanding to emerging platforms like Rednote with the passage of time and advancements in internet technology. The interview records show that most language cosplay players empathize with their characters and project their own emotions onto the virtual figures. While role-playing, players also expressed that they made many like-minded friends through this relatively private social mode, and gained a lot of emotional value and positive feedback that they did not receive in real life. In this circle, they can release a part of their hidden selves in real life. However, some interviewees also said that they became too immersed in the virtual life of role-playing and became disconnected from real life. There are also many experiences of being deceived in virtual social interactions.

4.2 Reasons for the Popularity of Language Cosplay among Young People

4.2.1 Sense of Belonging in Community Relationships

Language cosplay was first spread and developed through online forums and QQ communities. Among the ten young language cosplay players I interviewed, seven of them came into contact with this niche subculture of language cosplay through these two media. Moreover, as a niche subculture, language cosplay has its own set of slang and speech habits. The use of exclusive terms and hidden codes makes language cosplay itself have a certain degree of exclusivity and selection. Young people who stumble upon or are drawn to this subculture need to spend time learning the slang and jargon.

During this process, those who cannot accept or understand it are weeded out, leaving the remaining youth connected by a shared language system incomprehensible to outsiders. This creates a common language among members, fosters a community, and subtly alters players' awareness and perception. One of my interviewees, a role-playing (RP) player who has been in this community for ten years, said regarding her experience and the impact of RPG culture on her: "I've been playing for a long time without realizing it. I've thought about quitting at times, but every time I watch a movie or anime, my first thought is what character I can portray. I'm completely ruined by RPGs." Several other interviewees also stated that they have been in the RPG cosplay community for a long time and find it difficult to connect with people from other communities in social situations. Conversely, players within a circle can easily build emotional connections and make friends with similar interests. This community gives young players a strong sense of belonging, which fills their desire for social interaction. Within such a community, young people can build comfortable social relationships with less time and energy, sharing similar interests and common ground. Compared to constantly trying and failing in real life, it's indeed a better social circle for emotional exchange and emotional support.

4.2.2 Self-Identity When Playing a Role

The core of language cosplay lies in role-playing, and players often project their own emotions onto the character they are portraying. Some even project their affection for a character onto another character's actor. Of the ten language cosplay players I interviewed, almost all mentioned their love for the character they portrayed and indicated that they developed an emotional dependence on the actor because of their affection for the character. The character portrayed and the actor themselves share some similarities, whether overt or repressed. Playing a role allows one to effectively showcase their personality and experience a virtual online life different from reality. Because role-playing is done through text, it doesn't require a large investment, and no one will be little players based on their family background or appearance. People within the community will only evaluate the role-player based on the beauty of their writing and the accuracy of their portrayal. Young role-players not only experience different identities but also receive fair feedback and praise, greatly contributing to their sense of self-identity.

Furthermore, according to Freud's theory of projection, when individuals cannot accept their inner conflicts, they attribute these emotions to others or external things. This projection phenomenon is essentially a psychological defense mechanism that helps alleviate negative emotions such as anxiety and tension. It can also be used to judge and reflect the individual's inner psychological state. Therefore, young people projecting their emotions onto virtual characters also reflects the anxiety and unease within contemporary youth. With a faster pace of life, increased social competition, and rising costs of entertainment, young people cannot quickly relieve stress and anxiety, thus resorting to projection as a psychological defense. The subculture of language cosplay is niche, yet highly cohesive, with low entertainment costs, allowing for a quick sense of identity and enabling young people to effectively relieve inner stress.

4.2.3 The Need for Praise and Positive Emotional Value from Others

As mentioned above, the criteria for judging the quality of language cosplay are not material conditions such as family background or appearance, but rather the beauty of the cosplayer's writing and the degree of resemblance in their imitation. Because of this criterion, language cosplayers are more likely to receive praise from within the community, and due to the unique nature of written communication, many people are attracted by beautiful words, thus developing feelings for the cosplayer and making it easier to establish a quick, superficial relationship. Of the ten people interviewed, all mentioned receiving praise from members of their community during their cosplay, and felt joy and pleasure from this praise, gaining a great sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Furthermore, many of them had developed one or more intimate relationships with others within their social circles. However, when asked if these relationships were normal, the respondents all indicated that they knew such short-term, casual relationships were not normal; they simply relied on others because they were under too much pressure or lonely. Through language-based cosplay activities,

young players can obtain positive emotional value at low cost and with minimal effort, often without needing to take responsibility. According to the "looking-glass self" theory, "emotion" plays a central role. "Interaction is a social control process, regulated by positive emotions (pride) and negative emotions (fear and shame)." This means that humans can only truly form a self and a social being by experiencing their own and others' emotions in interactions. Contemporary youth, regulated by positive and negative emotions in their emotional interactions, engage in emotional interaction through low-cost methods, which is essentially a product of social repression. Language-based cosplay provides contemporary youth with a haven for self-expression. They can briefly forget the troubles of real life while playing a role, without worrying about societal criticism of their hidden inner selves. They can also communicate freely with like-minded friends without pretense, releasing psychological pressure and fulfilling emotional needs. However, every advantage has its drawbacks. As a niche subculture, language-based cosplay naturally has its disadvantages. Some young people become too engrossed in role-playing games, becoming disconnected from real life and neglecting its importance. They invest too much time and energy in the virtual world, ultimately putting the cart before the horse and creating greater pressure in their lives. Furthermore, the subculture is a mixed bag, and young people are inevitably influenced in their values and perspectives. Without proper intervention and guidance, they can easily go astray.

5. Conclusion

This paper explores the underlying reasons for the outward expansion of the language-based cosplay subculture and the changing emotional needs of contemporary youth reflected in this phenomenon. This research can help society and parents correctly understand the emotional needs of contemporary youth and provide appropriate guidance to alleviate their inner pressure and anxiety. This paper uses in-depth interviews as a research method, combining Freud's theory of projection and Cooley's theory of the "looking-glass self," integrating the interview results as research evidence. The reasons why contemporary youth use language cosplay as a way to express their emotions and seek emotional fulfillment are as follows: 1. The fast pace and high pressure of modern life, with fragmented time, lead young people to prefer fast-paced intimate relationships to obtain sufficient emotional feedback in a short time. 2. Insufficient care and love from their families of origin leads to emotional emptiness, prompting them to seek emotional value from the outside world. 3. Youth are suppressed by the social environment, lack self-confidence, and experience personality repression; they project emotions through role-playing to improve themselves and achieve self-healing. This research focuses on the mental health of youth, exploring the phenomenon of language cosplay, a niche subculture, gradually growing in the public eye, raising social awareness of the psychological and emotional needs of youth, and facilitating proper guidance and intervention. In addition, the development potential of language cosplay-related industries is also worth exploring. However, this study only explores the emotional needs of young people and does not systematically examine how society should address this phenomenon. Future research might combine virtual role-playing with the contemporary entertainment industry to further investigate how and where language-based cosplay subculture brings emotional value to young people.

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