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Identity Construction Within MBTI Interest-based Communities Through the Looking-Glass Self Theory

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Abstract. With the widespread dissemination of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) in digital social spaces, interest-based communities formed around personality type labels have gradually evolved into a significant form of youth online subculture. This paper employs the "looking-glass self" theory, proposed by Charles Horton Cooley, as the core analytical framework to delve into how individuals within MBTI interest communities construct their identities through interactions both within and outside the group. The study finds that individuals undergo processes such as "identity projection," "community tracking," and "comparing and awareness" to acquire a "social mirror" projected through MBTI labels. Through repeated cycles of interaction, they construct, revise, and solidify their self-identity and sense of belonging, ultimately achieving "identity recognition." However, this process of identity construction also carries the risk of rigid labeling. This paper aims to enrich academic understanding of identity construction mechanisms in the context of digital socialization and offers reflective suggestions on the social impact and future development of MBTI culture.

Keywords: Looking-glass self, Charles Horton Cooley, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Identity construction, Interactive communities

1. Introduction

The "looking-glass self" theory, proposed by Charles Horton Cooley, elucidates the mechanism by which individuals develop self-awareness through social interactions. In the digital era, the widespread popularity of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) reflects a reconstruction of traditional social interaction models: interest-based communities formed around personality types have become new forms of "social mirrors," enabling users to attain identity recognition through personality labels. Within digital media contexts, MBTI has transcended its role as a mere psychological assessment tool to become a widely utilized means of self-understanding. It has gradually evolved into a highly recognizable symbolic label within online culture, serving as a foundational element in constructing identity among youth interest-based communities.

Currently, online interest-based communities centered around MBTI are no longer confined to sharing common interests; their practice of label-based socialization profoundly influences individuals' paths of identity construction. Individuals engage with and initially accept personality type labels, subsequently joining corresponding digital communities to seek self-affirmation through

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label-based interactions. This form of interaction no longer solely relies on immediate feedback from others but instead offers a new "mirror structure" through collective discourse. In this process, the "self" is gradually shaped through "identity projection," "community tracking," and "comparative awareness," ultimately constructing, revising, and solidifying "identity recognition" through repeated cycles of interaction.

This study aims to explore how MBTI-based interest communities construct identity through interactions both within and outside the group, utilizing the "looking-glass self" theoretical framework. It also seeks to reflect on whether label-based identities reinforce or constrain individuals' self-perceptions. The significance of this research lies in two aspects: first, MBTI provides a natural system of personality classification, facilitating the observation of clear group distinctions in identity formation; second, this phenomenon spans multiple social platforms, exhibiting typical cross-platform dissemination and label-based characteristics, thereby offering a comprehensive view of the evolution from self-awareness to group identity. By integrating multidimensional perspectives from sociology, communication studies, and psychology, this study endeavors to construct an analytical model of identity recognition applicable to digital social environments, aiming to contribute to the understanding of online community formation mechanisms and the guidance of healthy community cultures.

2. Literature review

2.1. The origins and development of the "looking-glass self" theory

The concept of the "looking-glass self" was first introduced by Charles Horton Cooley in his 1909 work Social Organization. Cooley posited that an individual's self-concept is shaped through social interactions, wherein others serve as a "mirror" reflecting back perceptions of the self. He articulated this idea succinctly: "Each to each a looking-glass / Reflects the other that doth pass" [1]. According to Cooley, the formation of the self involves three core components: imagining how one appears to others, imagining the judgment of that appearance, and developing a self-feeling, such as pride or shame, based on the perceived judgments of others [1]. Of these, the first two can only be obtained by reaching out to others and by observing their attitudes.[2]

In response, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan further developed the "mirror theory", in which the construction of the self begins in the mirror stage, and the subject completes the cognition of the self through external images (mirror images). He emphasized that the self exists in the other and that the self can only be known in the other. In the process of identifying the "other", the self walks out of the mirror stage, completes the process of identifying the self and the "other", and thus generates the "subject".[3] Among them, different from Cooley's theory of "looking-glass self", Lacan believes that the subject completes the initial grasp of the self through the identification of the "others" in the mirror stage, but this identification is also the beginning of alienation, and the individual's identification with the mirror image means attachment and dependence on the "others", and at the same time hints at the cracks and contradictions between the real self and the mirror image. This is because the individual obtains the integrity of self-perception through mirror imagery, and this completeness is essentially dependent on the external "others", not on the individual itself.

In the digital age, the "looking-glass self" theory faces new challenges and interpretations. Virtual social environments have transformed the mechanisms of self-perception and identity construction. Individuals now receive feedback not through direct interpersonal interactions but via virtual engagements such as likes, shares, and comments on social media platforms. Consequently, the "others" in Cooley's model have evolved into a collective discourse shaped by online communities.

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This shift necessitates a reevaluation of the traditional "looking-glass self" mechanism, considering the technological mediation of social feedback and its implications for identity formation.

2.2. The origins and development of the concept of identity

Identity refers to an individual's psychological process of integrating self-recognition, group affiliation, emotional experience, and behavioral patterns.[4] According to Deaux K., identity is a person's perception of which group they belong to [5]. Huang Ling pointed out that identity is the degree of recognition and acceptance of the role and characteristics of the group to which an individual belongs[6]. Zou Ying further pointed out that identity is the cognition of individuals who identify with themselves in the sense of emotion and value, as members of a certain group and belong to a certain group, and this recognition is ultimately accomplished through the individual's psychological self-identification, that is, it is achieved through identity.[7]

In the digital age, the mechanisms of identity formation have been reshaped by new forms of symbolic interaction. The widespread dissemination of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) on social media platforms has transformed it from a mere personality assessment tool into a social label. Relevant communication studies have found that through the online language of MBTI, users have formed a circle of social networking, established emotional communication and resonance with others in the circle, and obtained a certain positive experience. On the other hand, while knowing oneself through communication and resonance, and realizing self-identity, they also gain a sense of group identity, and then achieve a certain identity[8]. This type of identity usually comes from other users or circles with the same personality type or the same personality dimension, and has similar experiences in emotions or experiences, forming a strong resonance, which is in line with the user's imagination of their own identity characteristics.

In summary, while the "looking-glass self" theory provides a robust framework for understanding the role of social interaction in self-identity formation, there is a need for further exploration into how MBTI labels function as social "mirrors" dynamically influencing individual identity processes within interest-based communities. This gap presents an opportunity for deeper theoretical investigation.

3. Analysis and findings

Identity formation is a multifaceted psychological process encompassing various layers. On the surface, it manifests as observable behavioral patterns; at an intermediate level, it involves individuals' recognition of shared characteristics with similar groups and awareness of their own identities; at a deeper level, it encompasses the emotional experiences associated with identity traits.

In the context of new media platforms, individuals are exposed to an overwhelming array of information. The interactions and feedback received from others can be positive and psychologically fulfilling, or they may be abstract, illusory, and negative. Consequently, individuals may struggle to accurately grasp their identities through the "mirror" of social interaction. Given the limitations of Cooley's "looking-glass self" theory in the contemporary new media landscape, this study proposes an optimized model. The hypothetical model of self-identity construction within MBTI-based interest communities, from the perspective of the "looking-glass self" theory, aims to delve into how members of MBTI interest communities dynamically construct their identities through processes of identity projection, community tracking, and comparative awareness, transitioning from a "blurred self" to a coherent "identity."(Figure 1)

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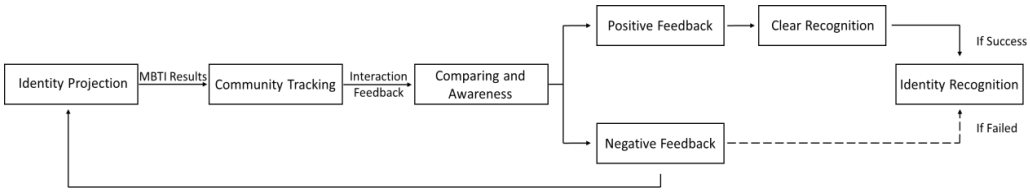

Figure 1 : Hypothetical model of self-identity construction in MBTI interest-based communities from the perspective of the "looking-glass self" theory

3.1. Identity projection

In his "looking-glass self" theory, Charles Horton Cooley posited that individuals form their self-concept primarily through imagined perceptions of how others view them. This process involves imagining others' recognition and judgment of oneself, leading to a preliminary and often ambiguous grasp of one's identity. In the current landscape of new media platforms, content tends to be abstract and complex, exposing individuals to fragmented information and multiple identities, which can result in a blurred self-perception. Cooley emphasized that the first step in developing a self-concept arises from imagining how others "see" us. In the digital age, this "seeing" is often simplified into the projection and interpretation of symbolic labels. Utilizing the results of the MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) test, individuals can readily obtain a projection of their identity. The formative descriptions associated with MBTI type labels facilitate a new form of identity imagination, such as "I might be..."

The MBTI categorizes individuals into 16 personality types based on four dichotomous dimensions: Extraversion (E) vs. Introversion (I), Sensing (S) vs. Intuition (N), Thinking (T) vs. Feeling (F), and Judging (J) vs. Perceiving (P) . These types are represented by concise labels; for example, "INTJ" denotes a logical and strategic thinker, while "ENFP" signifies an enthusiastic and creative individual . Upon completing an online assessment, users receive a stable type label, which serves as a "candidate identity" for self-imagination. The MBTI assessment and its results provide clear delineations of personality and career inclinations, aiding individuals in gaining a deeper understanding of their identity.

Simultaneously, based on MBTI test results, new media platforms have fostered the formation of social groups and circles that discuss various personality types. At this stage, individuals may internally form preliminary identity projections, such as "I might be an INTJ with a propensity for deep analysis." Although self-perception at this point remains fragmented and ambiguous, the type labels offer precise coordinates for subsequent community exploration, effectively transforming the "social mirror" from an abstract concept into an identifiable symbolic carrier.

3.2. Community tracking

Individuals often refine their self-identity through feedback and evaluations from others. On new media platforms, individuals engage in searching and clicking on labels associated with themselves to obtain feedback on how others perceive them. Participation in community discussions further provides more personalized evaluations.

Self-identity is primary, while group identity is derivative, extending and transcending the former[9]. Individuals explore commonalities between themselves and other group members, emphasizing differences with external groups based on self-perception and observation. After acquiring a candidate type label, individuals naturally seek out online communities that align with this label.

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For instance, individuals might input relevant MBTI community keywords on platforms like Weibo, Douban, or Xiaohongshu, such as "ENTP Inventor" or "INFJ's Fantasy Journey," to quickly locate interest circles. These groups often highlight type characteristics in group announcements or pinned posts. For example, a pinned post in Douban's "INFJ's Fantasy Journey" states: "You have an innate affinity for words and usually prefer written communication over speech. You enjoy solitude, finding beauty and fulfillment in being alone." Upon joining such communities, members learn about common stereotypes associated with their type through automated welcome messages and pinned posts, beginning to imagine "how others evaluate me." The emotional responses generated during this stage—curiosity, anticipation, and nervousness—lay the emotional foundation for deeper subsequent interactions.

Additionally, individuals can participate in offline activities to verify the alignment of their online perceptions. Through face-to-face interactions, they observe the behavioral styles of others with the same MBTI type or engage in discussions with members of different types on the same topic, obtaining more concrete and tangible feedback. The fragmented online feedback—likes, comments—complements the offline participants' expressions, tones, and body language, concretizing group boundaries and type labels.

The "community tracking" stage corresponds to the process in the "looking-glass self" theory where individuals interact with others and experience their evaluations. MBTI labels facilitate more efficient community tracking. When individuals perceive shared characteristics with other members, a sense of group identity and membership forms [10], leading to identity recognition at the group level.

3.3. Comparing and awareness

Within MBTI-based interest-oriented social groups, individuals often form smaller, more focused communities comprising members with identical or similar personality types. These communities engage in discussions about their personality tendencies and related behaviors. Through such interactions, individuals reinforce certain aspects of their self-identity, leading to a more distinct self-image. This interest in understanding identity traits across different groups and behavioral tendencies in various situations exemplifies the process of "social comparison."[11]

An individual's identity is closely tied to their "group membership." Henri Tajfel, in 1978, proposed that individuals recognize their affiliation with specific social groups and understand the emotional and value significance of being group members." [12] In these interest-oriented social groups, each personality type group exhibits distinct discussion styles. For instance, members with an Introverted (I) personality type tend to focus on self-reflection and internal thoughts, whereas Extraverted (E) individuals are more inclined to discuss external events and their connections to themselves. These tendencies align with the definitions provided by the MBTI framework.

During interactive comparisons, differences between groups are often accentuated to better distinguish various group identities, thereby reinforcing identity traits more vividly. For example, in INTJ groups, rational decision-making and long-term planning are frequently emphasized, while ENTP groups focus on the spirit of exploring novel ideas, with members mutually appreciating this trait. Such internal consensus provides a stable "mirror" feedback environment, enabling each member to strengthen their type label through cycles of recognition and being recognized.

Simultaneously, external groups, especially non-MBTI communities or groups of different types, may hold differing evaluations and perceptions of these labels. For instance, when INTJ members share their systematic thinking methods in external professional groups, they might be perceived as overly rigid or lacking empathy. Similarly, ENTP members showcasing their debating skills in

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interest circles could be viewed as argumentative or lacking steadiness. Therefore, even if internal group interactions are limited, individuals, through observing external groups, can still develop emotional and behavioral identification with their own groups, gradually clarifying the identity traits attributed to them by their group.

Through continuous "deduction-feedback" cycles, groups collectively construct typified consensus, making members' identity traits increasingly clear and concrete. However, this process may also lead to the risk of "stereotyping," which will be further discussed in subsequent sections.

3.4. Identity recognition

Through frequent interactions and emotional connections within communities, members develop a continuous identity based on MBTI labels. However, they may also encounter identity conflicts or disengagement due to adverse reactions. This phenomenon resembles the "first-person effect"[13], where individuals believe that socially desirable information has a greater impact on themselves than on others[14]. In simpler terms, if individuals receive positive feedback and psychological satisfaction, they are more likely to reinforce their identity recognition. Conversely, if they encounter negative social feedback that fails to meet their psychological needs, they may weaken this identity recognition or even avoid it, seeking new forms of identity.

Similarly, the process of forming MBTI labels exhibits a clear bidirectional dynamic. On one hand, when internal group feedback aligns closely with an individual's self-expectations, members experience a strong sense of belonging and pride, transforming the MBTI label into a core identity —for example, "I am a typical INFP." Academic research supports that an individual's identification with their group forms the basis of group behavior. When individuals strongly identify with their group, they tend to exhibit in-group favoritism and out-group bias [15], motivating participation in collective actions [16].

On the other hand, if significant label conflicts arise within the group—such as being told "you don't seem like an INTP"—members may experience cognitive dissonance, leading them to question the validity of the label or seek new communities. Some members address conflicting feedback by constructing multiple identity narratives, aiming to build a more multidimensional and flexible self-identity.

4. Discussion

4.1. Theoretical review

In traditional social interactions, Charles Horton Cooley's "looking-glass self" theory emphasizes that individuals form their self-concept by imagining how others perceive and evaluate them, subsequently internalizing these perceptions through emotional responses. However, this study finds that within new media interest-based groups centered around MBTI personality types, this mirroring mechanism undergoes a symbolic transformation.

Firstly, the "mirror" shifts from face-to-face interactions to screen-based, labeled reflections. In traditional interactions, this process relies on body language, direct feedback, and contextual cues. In online communities, group members do not rely on others' facial expressions or tones of voice but instead imagine others' evaluations through type narratives such as "ENTJ leadership" or "INFP emotional insight." Labels become the concrete embodiment of the "mirror," and feedback is often presented through fragmented interactions like likes, comments, and shares.

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Furthermore, the "mirror" in virtual communities depends more on collective consensus than individual evaluations. Phrases like "this is a typical INTJ statement" or "standard ENFP behavior" frequently appear, collectively shaping the social meaning of type labels rather than relying on a single observer's subjective opinion. This differs from Cooley's emphasis on "individuals imagining others' evaluations," as the group consensus received in virtual communities is almost ready-made and amplified. Individual evaluations are homogenized by collective discourse, leading to increased efficiency in the "looking-glass self" mechanism but also introducing risks of de-individualization and stereotyping.

Henri Tajfel's social identity theory posits that a sense of group belonging arises from individuals' perception of differences between "us" and "them." In MBTI affinity groups, labels not only delineate internal boundaries but also stimulate members to compare themselves with out-groups, such as the subtle differences in discussion styles between INTPs and ENTPs. This type-based group divide strengthens internal cohesion, providing individuals with a new sense of security and a safe haven amidst fragmented information. However, it may also lead to a thinning of identity: as members reinforce stereotypical traits associated with their types, they may overlook interests, experiences, or roles beyond their type, anchoring themselves to type-related social expectations and diminishing the exploration of their self-complexity.

4.2. Reflection and implications

Research indicates that when the group characteristics projected by MBTI labels—such as "ENTJ excels in leadership" and "INFJ possesses insight"—align closely with an individual's self-experience, members derive strong psychological satisfaction and a sense of belonging from group interactions. This positive feedback fosters internal cohesion within the group and helps individuals find stable identity anchor points amidst fragmented information flows, thereby encouraging continued participation in discussions and experience sharing, creating a virtuous community cycle.

However, label-based interactions may also lead to the risk of group stereotyping. In highly typified discussion environments, the boundaries between "standard" and "atypical" are continually emphasized, making it easy for members to forcefully apply their experiences into narrow type frameworks, even excluding group members who do not conform to stereotypes. This "label fixation" not only compresses individual diversity but also weakens the flexible interpretative space that type labels should possess, hindering individuals' comprehensive understanding of their complex selves.

This study reveals the dynamic process of individual identity construction within MBTI groups and emphasizes the applicability of Cooley's "Looking-Glass Self" theory and Tajfel's Social Identity Theory in digital social environments. For individuals, MBTI tests should be viewed as reference tools for self-exploration rather than absolute labels. Actively collecting diverse feedback from family, friends, or other interest circles can help avoid falling into a single identity framework.

Platforms should encourage communication and collaboration among members of different MBTI types, breaking down type barriers and preventing stereotypical descriptions and misuse of MBTI labels. In practice, this study suggests that platform providers first improve algorithms to balance the recommendation weight of type-related content, increase exposure to topics "beyond type," and provide visualized label sources and adjustment functions, allowing users to remain vigilant about the logic behind group image generation. Alternatively, platforms can guide users to rationally view type differences, avoiding using MBTI labels as the sole standard for evaluating others, thereby reducing misunderstandings and conflicts.

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In summary, platforms need to make dual efforts in recommendation algorithms and community management, enabling users to enjoy the social efficiency brought by labels while maintaining reflection in broader topics. Community operators should ensure that group identity is both cohesive and inclusive. Individuals should regard MBTI tests as reference guides for self-exploration, continuously examining and adjusting the application boundaries of type labels. Only through the collaboration of platforms, communities, and individuals can stable and healthy identity construction be achieved in the digital "Looking-Glass Self" practice.

5. Conclusion and outlook

This study, based on Cooley's "Looking-Glass Self" theory and Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, constructs a four-stage model of individual identity construction within MBTI interest-based communities. It systematically depicts the dynamic path from identity projection, community tracking, comparative awareness to identity recognition, revealing how individuals achieve self-evaluation and group recognition through label-based social interactions in the digital age. At the same time, through participatory observation, this study verifies that MBTI type labels in digital social environments can promote individual self-cognition and group cohesion but may also lead to identity stereotyping and compression of diversity.

MBTI interest-based communities provide rich cases for identity construction in the digital age. Future research can conduct more diverse comparative studies based on this, such as exploring differences in the acceptance of MBTI type labels in different cultural contexts and further examining the impact of cultural factors on identity construction. Longitudinal tracking research methods can also be employed to follow the identity development trajectory of individuals within MBTI groups, revealing the long-term evolution process of identity recognition.

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