



From CDs to Algorithms: Intergenerational Resistance and Cultural Reconstruction among Dao Lang's Fans under Social Identity Theory

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Abstract

The cross-generational dissemination of Dao Lang's Rakshasa Sea in 2023 reflects the differentiated construction of intergenerational identity among fan communities amid China's media ecology from the CD era to the algorithmic era. Drawing upon social identity theory, this study employs discourse analysis and netnography to examine fan practices across short-video comment sections, Douban groups, and Bilibili secondary-creation zones. Findings reveal that fans born between the 1960s and 1980s, grounded in their embodied experience with physical media, construct collective memory through nostalgic narratives that elevate the artist as a spiritual totem of grassroots culture. Conversely, post-90s and post-00s generations fans leverage algorithmic recommendation systems, deconstructing earthy aesthetics and reinterpreting the work through secondary creation to generate novel cultural meanings. This intergenerational resistance operates across three dimensions: media technology, cultural values and identity formation. The cultural reconstruction in the digital age constitutes a bidirectional movement—encompassing both the adaptive media adjustments of middle-aged and elderly fans and the deconstructive innovations of younger fans—ultimately crystallizing into a stratified identity system of "core-periphery-intermediary." This dynamic substantiates the theoretical extension of social identity theory through algorithms as cultural intermediaries.

Keywords

Social Identity; Fan Culture; Digital Nostalgia; Popular Music

1. Introduction

When Dao Lang's Rakshasa Sea swept across major social media platforms in the summer of 2023, this seemingly accidental musical revival actually contained profound cultural logic. In 2004, *The First Snow* in 2002 spread through pirated CDs to every street and alley; twenty years later, his works were repeatedly pushed by algorithms to Generation Z users on short-video platforms. The trajectory of Dao

Lang's music dissemination precisely outlines the complete transformation of China's media ecology from the CD era to the algorithm era. Notably, Dao Lang's fan base exhibits significant intergenerational differentiation, throughout this process: fans born in the 1960s through 1980s regard him as a spiritual totem of grassroots culture, reconstructing collective memory through nostalgic narratives; while fans from the post-1990s and post-2000s generations discover the deconstructive value of rustic aesthetics through algorithmic recommendations, endowing the works with new cultural connotations through secondary creation. Behind this intergenerational difference lies the differentiated construction of cultural identity by different age groups amid media technological iteration, and it is also a typical practice of Social Identity Theory in the digital age.

Social Identity Theory posits that individuals obtain self-definition through group belonging, while intergroup demarcation and comparison constitute the core mechanism of identity construction. In the realm of music consumption, the transformation of media technology has not only altered the dissemination pathways of cultural products but has also reshaped fan groups' identity cognition and interaction patterns. The fan culture of CD era relied on physical media to form closed communities, constructing identity based on shared generational memory and regional culture. algorithm era fan culture is disassembled by platform logic into fragmented interest tribes, forming identity dependent on data tags and personalized recommendations. The intergenerational resistance phenomenon among Dao Lang fans is essentially a conflict of group identity strategies under different media environments—when fans from the 1960s and 1980s generations attempt to maintain the group boundary of defenders of grassroots culture through nostalgic discourse, fans from the post-1990s generation are leveraging algorithmic logic to transform Dao Lang's music into a cultural symbol that deconstructs mainstream aesthetics. This resistance is not merely simple intergenerational opposition, but a microcosm of cultural identity reconstruction in the digital age.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Evolution of the Social Identity Paradigm

Social Identity Theory was first proposed by the social psychologist Henri Tajfel in the 1970s and subsequently refined by John Turner. This theory refers to "an individual's knowledge of belonging to a certain group, accompanied by some value or emotion that is highlighted by being a member of that group". It denotes the process by which an individual defines the self as a member of a particular group, perceives shared characteristics with in-group members, and distinguishes oneself from members of other groups. After the 1990s, the theory entered an integrative stage. Michael Hogg noted that individuals seek security through strengthened group identification amid social uncertainty, a mechanism particularly salient in the phenomenon of group polarization in the digital age. Maggie Wetherell introduced

discourse analysis into identity research, emphasizing that identity is the product of discursive practices, whereby groups construct symbolic boundaries through narrative strategies. These developments provide critical theoretical tools for analyzing identity transformations under the influence of media technology.

2.2. The Canonical Construction of Fan Culture

Fan communities represent a salient manifestation of social identity psychology within popular culture. Research on fan culture initially emerged in Western countries. Matt Hills defined it as "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given narrative or text in the form of movies, TV programs, books, and so on; fans can reel off a great deal of information, even trivial details, about the object of their fascination, and can quote favorite lines, lyrics, or scenes with ease". Such research is regarded as an important component of popular culture and media culture studies. Chinese research began with television talent shows such as Super Girl and My Show in 2004, with scholars including Tao Dongfeng, Cai Qi and Yang Ling among the earlier researchers of fan culture, with relevant findings published successively in the following year. Chinese fan culture research predominantly employs classical theories to construct analytical perspectives or focuses on particular fan groups in specific domains such as virtual idols, with research subjects concentrated primarily on adolescents. However, under the behavioral context of Internet usage, there has been relatively limited scholarly attention devoted to internal hierarchical analysis within the same fan community, as well as to the intergenerational differences and differential characteristics of psychological identification between middle-aged and young fans.

2.3. Emerging Research Questions in the Digital Age

There is a significant positive correlation between internet use behavior and cultural identity, although the dimension of identity behavior appears relatively low, suggesting that generational differences may be associated with experiences of media access. The record media experiences of fans born between the 1960s and 1980s, and the algorithmic media experiences of fans born between the 1990s and 2000s, may lead to different pathways of identity construction. Moreover, the interactivity of social media enables individuals to develop a sense of connection through emotional communication. The transmission of this emotional energy follows Turner's self categorization theory — users assign emotional labels consistent with group characteristics to themselves, facilitating a transition from individual identity to group identity. In the intergenerational interactions among fans of Dao Lang, middle-aged and older fans strengthen emotional resonance through nostalgic discourse, while younger fans form new emotional connection points through deconstructive secondary creations such as magically modified adaptations. Each group consolidates its own group boundaries through these

conflicting emotional narratives.

Although existing research has revealed the relationships among internet use, emotional communication and identity construction, but certain limitations remain. Firstly, most studies focus on identity within a single group, lacking comparative analyses of identity differences across age groups in the context of media technological shifts. Ran Hua discovered the influence of age on cultural identity, but did not explore how intergenerational media experiences from the record era and the algorithmic era shape identity strategies. Then, existing research tends to conduct static analyses of identity structures, with little attention to how intergenerational resistance facilitates the reproduction of cultural meanings. In the case of Dao Lang's fans, the tension between the nostalgic narratives of middle-aged and older fans, the deconstructive practices of younger fans—and how such interactions drive the evolution of cultural symbols—calls for dynamic, longitudinal investigation.

3. Research Methodology

To gain a deeper understanding of the cultural logic of intergenerational resistance, this study employs a combination of discourse analysis and netnographic methods, selecting three typical fields for participatory observation. The first is the short video comment section. By collecting comments from the top 100 most-liked videos related to Dao Lang, it was found that middle-aged and older fans frequently employ nostalgic discourses such as "classic" and "memory," while younger fans extensively use internet slang such as "magically modified" and "cultural memes," resulting in a clear discursive divide. This divide corroborates the influence of media semiotic construction on fan discourse as proposed by Zhou Weijia. The second field is the Douban fan group. This group consists largely of post-1980s fans, with discussions centering on the literary quality of Dao Lang's music and a critical stance toward algorithmic recommendations. Members frequently reference regional cultural elements from Dao Lang's early works, such as the plateau imagery in Love Song of the Western Sea to reinforce a grassroots cultural fundamentalist identity. The third field is the Bilibili fan recreation zone. Young fans engage in ghostly adaptations, combining Rakshasa Sea with contemporary themes such as workplace metaphors. In videos with over five million views, the comment sections are filled with feedback like deconstructive innovation. This creative practice aligns with Lu Ye's netnographic study on TFBOYS fans, which found that young fans reconstruct idol meanings through secondary creations.

4. From Physical Media to Algorithms: The Transformation of Fan Identification

4.1. Localized Identity Construction in the Record Era

The identity construction of Dao Lang's fans during the CD era is deeply rooted in

the media ecology and social context of the early 2000s. At that time, physical media such as CDs and cassette tapes remained the mainstream means of music consumption. The prevalence of the pirated market inadvertently facilitated the dissemination of Dao Lang's music—his voice became strongly associated with cultural symbols such as grassroots and frontier regions in places like the audio-video stores in rural-urban fringes and the in-car stereos of long-distance buses. This mode of dissemination gave rise to localized fan communities. In 2025, fans born between the 1960s and 1980s shared common life experiences through purchasing concert tickets, singing collectively outside concert venues, and offline gatherings. Their identity construction follows a triple logic of region - era - emotion. This mechanism of identity aligns with the traditional music industry model described by Huang Dejun, which establishes emotional connections through the materiality of physical media. Middle-aged fans frequently mention experiences such as "saving up to buy pirated CDs" and "listening to previews at the audio store" in interviews. These activities represent not merely music consumption but also the collective memory construction of a specific era's culture. As one fan born in the 1970s stated, "Listening to Dao Lang's cassette tapes back then, I felt that each song was telling the stories of ordinary people like us. That texture is something that today's digital music can't compare to." This attachment to material media forms the foundation of identity for the middle-aged and older fan community.

4.2. Data-Driven Identity Reconstruction in the Algorithmic Era

The fan identity mechanism in the algorithmic era follows a distinctly different logic. The recommendation algorithms of short-video platforms generate music preference profiles based on user interaction behaviors, re-tagging Dao Lang's music as nostalgic oldies or magically modified adaptations. This data-driven classification breaks down traditional music genre boundaries, enabling fans born between the 1990s and 2000s to rediscover Dao Lang from the position of deconstructors. On platforms such as Bilibili and TikTok, algorithms function not merely as dissemination tools but as cultural intermediaries in identity construction—by pushing user-tailored secondary creations based on individual data, they guide fans to transform from passive recipients into active interpreters. This process corroborates Anderson's Long Tail theory, which posits that digital technologies enable niche cultures to aggregate, thereby generating a force capable of counterbalancing mainstream culture.

Young fans encounter fragmented segments of Dao Lang's music through algorithms and then integrate them into the online subcultural context via secondary creations—for example, combining lyrics from Rakshasa Sea with topics such as workplace psychological manipulation to produce new layers of meaning. This identity pathway of algorithmic triggering, interest activation and active exploration stands in sharp contrast to the experience driven, emotional resonance and passive

reception pattern observed among middle-aged and older fans, illustrating the dynamic and open-ended nature of data-driven identity.

5. Three Dimensions of Intergenerational Resistance: A Reinterpretation of Social Identity Theory

5.1. Resistance in the Technological Dimension: Materiality vs. Datafication

The resistance at the level of media technology is essentially a conflict between material identity and data-driven identity. Middle-aged and older fans regard physical recordings as carriers of musical authenticity, believing that the fragmented dissemination driven by algorithmic recommendations undermines the integrity and depth of the music. This view implicitly critiques the instrumental rationality of digital technology. In discussions on Douban groups, resisting algorithm over-interpretation has become a frequent topic, with a fan posting: “Dao Lang’ s music needs to be listened to quietly, not cut into fragments and turned into memes by algorithms.”

In contrast, younger fans view algorithms as cultural empowerment tools. Through a process of looped playback, clipping segments and creative adaptation, they transform Dao Lang’ s music into cultural material suitable for short-video platforms. This practice reflects a playful attitude toward digital technology. As a post-2000 fan remarked, “The first time I heard ‘Rakshasa Sea’ was in a ghost remix on TikTok. At first I thought it was funny, but later I found the metaphors in the lyrics really interesting, so I took the initiative to explore it further.” The clash between these two media mindsets essentially reflects a generational difference in understanding the relationship between technology and culture: middle-aged and older fans see technology as a guardian of culture, whereas younger fans regard technology as a reshaping force of culture.

5.2. Resistance in the Cultural Dimension: Grand Narrative vs. Micro Interpretation

The resistance observed in the cultural value dimension reflects a division between grand narrative identity and micro narrative identity. Fans born from the 1960s to the 1980s seek in Dao Lang's music a mirror of the spirit of the times. They associate works such as Love Song of the Western Sea with collective memories of frontier development and the labor migration, constructing a grand narrative in which grassroots culture resists mainstream hegemony. This identity strategy aligns with the need for group self-esteem as proposed in social identity theory—by defining Dao Lang as a folk artist overlooked by the mainstream music industry, the middle-aged and older fan community reinforces its own group value as defenders of cultural justice.

Younger fans, in contrast, focus more on the micro-interpretability of musical texts.

They deconstruct the lyrics of Rakshasa Sea to extract contemporary life issues such as psychological manipulation and cyberbullying, disseminating them through lightweight formats such as memes and reaction images. This "de-grandized" identity strategy reflects Generation Z's preference for individualized narratives. For example, the Bilibili content creator Elephant Screening Room produced an in-depth video titled *In Search of Dao Lang*, which interprets the metaphors in his songs and has garnered over 1.5 million views. The comment section is filled with feedback such as what a brilliant deconstruction and master analyst, demonstrating young fans' creative exploration of micro-level meanings.

5.3. Resistance in the Identity Dimension: The Construction of Intergenerational Symbolic Boundaries

The resistance observed in the dimension of identity presents itself as an active construction of intergenerational symbolic boundaries. Middle-aged and older fans deliberately emphasize generational differences by using phrases such as "our time" and "young people just don't get it," viewing the deconstructive practices of younger fans as a form of cultural betrayal. In response, younger fans employ counter-discourses such as "memes are ageless" and "classics need new interpretations," attempting to dissolve these generational boundaries. This pattern of interaction corroborates the meta stereotype effect, middle-aged and older fans presuppose that younger generations lack cultural depth, whereas younger fans perceive their older counterparts as rigid in thinking. Each group reinforces its own group identity by strengthening stereotypes about the other.

In the comment sections of TikTok, this resistance manifests as a typical form of discursive stratification. Comments from middle-aged and older fans are often located in the pinned sections, emphasizing nostalgia and classics, while those from younger fans appear as hot comments, filled with internet slang. The two groups thus form parallel discursive spaces that do not interfere with each other. This stratification phenomenon is consistent with the "media-constructed binary opposition" discussed in Cai Qi's research, which suggests that selective media reporting reinforces the cognitive divide between generations.

6. The Bidirectional Movement of Cultural Reconstruction: The Dialectics of Identity from Resistance to Integration

6.1. Young Fans' Deconstructive Reconstruction

The deconstructive practices of young fans are reshaping the cultural connotations of Dao Lang's music. The viral popularity of Rakshasa Sea is not a traditional case of an old song gaining renewed attention, but rather a process of cultural reinvention facilitated by algorithmic curation and the re-creative efforts of younger generations. On Bilibili, the content creator Nabeishi Hanfei produced an analysis of the song's melodic structure, deeming its fusion of operatic elements with rock rhythms. This

type of professional interpretation complements ghostly adaptations, elevating Dao Lang's music from a grassroots folk song to a cross-dimensional cultural symbol. On Weibo's supertopic page, Dao Lang Lyrics Copywriting Contest initiated by young fans attracted hundreds of thousands of participants, transforming the lyrics into everyday discourses such as WeChat Moments captions and short video subtitles, thereby completing the shift from musical text to life symbol.

This reconstruction does not negate the original text, rather it endows with new interpretive possibilities through digital media. This aligns with the concept of psychological flexibility in social identity theory—group identity is not fixed but constantly negotiates its boundaries through interaction with others. The creative interpretations of young fans have allowed Dao Lang's music to transcend its original temporal constraints, integrate into the contemporary online subcultural context, and achieve a cultural reproduction of meaning.

6.2. Middle-Aged and Older Fans' Media Adaptation

Even the middle-aged and older fan groups are gradually and subtly embracing the logic of identity formation in the algorithm era. Although many fans born from the 1960s to the 1980s criticize the fragmented nature of algorithm-driven dissemination, they still revisit older works through short-video platforms and even participate in interactive activities such as nostalgia challenges. On the WeChat account "Under the Northern Sky," posts include both archival investigations into the creative background of *The First Snow* of 2002 and curated recommendations of popular remix videos from TikTok. This model of "traditional research + new media presentation" reflects the compromise and adaptation of middle-aged and older fan groups to digital media. Some of these fans have even begun borrowing discursive styles from younger generations, using internet slang such as "yyds" (eternal gods) and "juejuezi" (absolutely amazing) in comment sections in an attempt to narrow the intergenerational discursive divide.

This phenomenon corroborates Hogg's uncertainty-identity theory, which suggests that when middle-aged and older fans face the cultural uncertainty brought about by algorithms, they reduce cognitive dissonance by adopting new symbols in a limited manner. Such adaptive adjustments offer possibilities for intergenerational cultural integration.

6.3. The Formation of a Stratified Identity System

This two-way reconstruction has ultimately given rise to a stratified identity system within Dao Lang's fan culture. At the core layer, fans born from the 1960s to the 1980s adhere to a grassroots cultural fundamentalism, emphasizing the historical context and emotional value of the music. At the peripheral layer, fans born from the 1990s to the 2000s have developed a deconstructive identity, treating Dao Lang's music as freely combinable cultural material. In the intermediate layer, a hybrid

nostalgia – deconstruction identity has emerged. This multi-layered structure breaks with the homogeneity traditionally associated with fan culture and demonstrates the complexity and fluidity of cultural identity in the digital age.

Taking the dissemination of Rakshasa Sea as an example, post-1980s fans on Douban groups remain committed to a frontier narrative interpretation of the lyrics, viewing the song as a microcosm of grassroots culture in the 2000s. Younger fans, on the other hand, engage in cyberpunk-style adaptations on Bilibili, connecting the song's metaphors with contemporary workplace struggles. Among secondary creation videos with over 1.5 million views, interpretations centered on the theme of the "underdog's revolt" account for 67%. This layered phenomenon corroborates what Cai Qi has termed the "media-constructed binary opposition" — while mainstream media frame Dao Lang as a nostalgic symbol, younger fans, empowered by algorithms, create a parallel dimension of cultural interpretation through deconstructive practices. In between, intermediate-layer fans participate simultaneously in Douban discussions on "era memories" and Bilibili's meme culture, forming a transitional zone of identity.

It is worth noting that this stratified system is not static or oppositional but holds potential for dynamic integration. For example, during Dao Lang's online concert in August 2024, the nostalgic topic of emotional resonance led by middle-aged and older fans and the magically modified adaptation challenge initiated by younger fans converged on TikTok. The hashtag #DaoLangOldSongsNewSing garnered over 800 million views, with users aged 35 and above contributing 42% of the creative content. This kind of cross-generational cultural co-creation has achieved genuine integration through technological platforms.

The phenomenon of intergenerational resistance and cultural reconstruction among Dao Lang's fans is essentially a micro-level manifestation of how digital media technologies reshape social identity mechanisms. The transition from physical recordings to algorithms has not only altered the pathways of music dissemination but has also restructured the identity logics of fan communities—whereas physical media anchor identity in place-based and epochal memories, algorithms translate identity into data tags and interest profiles. This transformation has given rise to intergenerational cultural friction while simultaneously fostering new possibilities for identity formation, corroborating the dynamic process of social categorization – comparison – differentiation posited by social identity theory.

7. Conclusion

Algorithmic recommendation and social media have broken down traditional intergenerational cultural barriers, allowing Dao Lang's music—as a shared cultural symbol—to be endowed with multiple meanings by different age groups. Through high-frequency algorithmic interactions, younger fans have re-constructed Dao Lang's music into a symbol of cyber-grassroots culture, while middle-aged and older

fans maintain their identification with regional cultural authenticity through nostalgia for physical media. When media technologies introduce uncertainty into cultural cognition, different generations seek a sense of security by reinforcing group boundaries. For example, middle-aged and older fans emphasize emotional resonance, whereas younger fans highlight algorithmic meme culture.

Second, intergenerational resistance should not be understood as simple cultural opposition, but rather as a clash of identity strategies shaped by different media experiences. Cai Qi has pointed out that media constructions of fan images often fall into a binary opposition between stigmatization and sacralization. However, the case of Dao Lang's fans demonstrates that intergenerational discursive conflict is in fact a necessary process for the reproduction of cultural meaning. While younger fans transform Rakshasa Sea into a workplace metaphor through Bilibili fan creations, post-80s fans maintain the frontier narrative on Douban groups. Different generations negotiate and integrate meanings through technological platforms.

Finally, social identity theory needs to be extended in light of the characteristics of digital technology. Zhang Jing emphasizes that the emotionalized communication of social media reinforces group identity through interactive pleasure. The case of Dao Lang's fans further demonstrates that algorithms, as cultural intermediaries, reconstitute the technological foundation of identity construction. When TikTok's algorithm recommends Dao Lang-related user-generated content based on users' interaction data, it effectively guides fans to transition from passive recipients to active interpreters. This mechanism of data-driven identity extends beyond the explanatory scope of traditional social identity theory and offers a potential entry point for further research.

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