

Identity Construction and Psychological Compensation Among “Online Leftist Youth” on Social Media-A Qualitative Study of Douyin and Bilibili

Yiduo Zhao

Fuzhou University, Xiamen, Fujian, China

Abstract: This paper examines how young Chinese users who identify with left-wing politics build group identity on Douyin and Bilibili. Data were collected through netnography and semi-structured interviews. Three findings stand out. First, identity formation begins with learning a covert symbolic vocabulary rather than declaring political beliefs. Second, left-wing discourse functions as psychological compensation: it shifts blame from personal failure to structural causes and wraps anger in irony. Third, the two platforms support different modes of engagement. Bilibili encourages deeper, knowledge-based belonging; Douyin enables quick emotional release. The paper extends Jenkins’s participatory culture framework to a censored political context and proposes the concept of discursive compensation to account for the gap between online expression and offline action.

Keywords: Online Leftist Youth; Identity Construction; Psychological Compensation; Participatory Culture; Social Media; Coded Discourse; Netnography

1. Introduction

A loose community of left-leaning young users has grown steadily on Chinese social media over the past decade. They are commonly called “online leftists” (wangzuo). Most are active on Douyin or Bilibili. Their political views rarely appear in direct statements. Instead, they communicate through irony, in-group slang, and memes.

Terms like “Niuma” (a compound implying overworked laborers), “Jiben Pan” (base constituency), and “This comrade” work as recognition signals. Using them marks someone as a member of the circle. Not knowing them marks someone as an outsider. This kind of coded language is not incidental—it is central to how the group maintains itself under platform

censorship.

Existing scholarship on Chinese youth politics has concentrated on patriotism and nationalist mobilization. Research on left-wing subcultures online is sparse. Even less attention has been paid to how platforms shape these groups differently. Douyin and Bilibili have very different designs, user cultures, and moderation environments. How do those differences matter for identity and psychological experience? That question motivates this study.

Three research questions guide the analysis. 1: How do online leftist youth build collective identity through participatory practices on Douyin and Bilibili? 2: What psychological functions does left-wing discourse serve for these users? 3: How do the two platforms produce different outcomes for identity and compensation?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Participatory Culture

Jenkins et al. described participatory culture as a media environment where ordinary people can create, share, and respond to content with relatively low barriers [1]. Four features define it: accessible expression, informal knowledge transfer, a strong sense of social connection, and a belief that one’s participation matters. The concept was developed mostly in the context of fan communities. More recently, Jenkins and You extended it toward political participation, arguing that the same dynamics can drive civic engagement—though the pathway looks different depending on national context [2].

China presents a distinctive case. Platforms operate under state censorship, and algorithmic recommendation shapes what users see. Political participation cannot be open in many cases. So it migrates into cultural forms: jokes, allusions, coded terms. This study treats that migration as a form of constrained participatory culture.

2.2 Online Political Subculture in China

Most studies of Chinese youth politics focus on patriotism. Fan [3] analyzed populist discourse among young netizens. He [4] examined how youth patriotism was organized on Bilibili. Left-wing subcultures have received far less attention, despite their visible presence. The gap in the literature is the starting point for this paper.

Left-wing content differs from patriotic content in one important respect: it tends to criticize existing economic structures, not defend national identity. That orientation makes it more vulnerable to censorship. It also makes covert expression more necessary.

2.3 Relative Deprivation and Compensation

Gurr argued that political frustration arises when people perceive a gap between what they expect and what they actually get [5]. He called this relative deprivation. Zhang observed a similar dynamic among contemporary Chinese youth, who face stagnating wages, blocked career paths, and intensifying competition [6]. Left-wing discourse offers a way to make sense of that experience. It names structural causes. It shifts the source of blame away from the individual. Whether or not it leads to action, it provides psychological relief.

This paper combines both frameworks. Participatory culture explains the social mechanics of how online leftist groups form and persist. Relative deprivation explains why individuals are drawn to them in the first place.

3. Research Method

The study uses a qualitative design. Two data sources were combined: systematic observation of online content (netnography) and semi-structured interviews.

For the netnography component, the researcher observed Douyin and Bilibili from December 2025 to May 2026. Sampling focused on content using covert left-wing markers such as “Niuma,” “Jiben Pan,” “Thank the boss,” and “Leeks.” Some explicit political terms were also included, such as “class” and “surplus value.” Thirty-five text units were collected in total: twenty from Bilibili, fifteen from Douyin. These included video captions, bullet-screen comments, reply sections, and account descriptions.

Seven participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Table 1). All identified with left-wing or progressive politics and used at least one of the two platforms regularly. Ages ranged from 22 to 31. Interviews averaged 75 minutes. They covered four areas: how participants came to hold left-wing views, how they use the platforms, what they get out of it psychologically, and how they draw lines between in-group and out-group members. Recordings were transcribed and all identifiers were removed.

Analysis followed the six-phase thematic analysis procedure described by Braun and Clarke [7]. Coding began inductively. Three themes emerged from the data. Theoretical saturation was reached after the sixth interview. All textual data were publicly available; interview participants gave informed consent.

Table 1. Participant Information

ID	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Platform
P01	M	23	Undergrad.	Student	Bilibili
P02	F	26	Master's.	Internet worker	Bilibili + Douyin
P03	M	22	Undergrad.	Student	Douyin
P04	F	29	Bachelor's.	Factory admin.	Douyin
P05	M	24	Diploma.	Delivery rider	Douyin
P06	F	27	Doctorate.	Student	Bilibili
P07	M	31	Bachelor's.	Freelancer	Bilibili

4. Findings

4.1 Learning the Code: How Identity Forms

None of the participants described a moment of political declaration as the start of their identity. It happened more quietly. They encountered unfamiliar terms in comment sections, saw them repeated, and gradually decoded them. Only then did they start to feel part of something.

P01 (male, 23) described it this way: “The first

time I saw ‘This comrade’ I had no idea what it meant. But it kept coming up. Once I got it, it felt like clearing a hidden level—suddenly I was inside a circle.” That image of “clearing a level” captures something real about this process. The symbolic vocabulary functions as an entry test. Understanding it grants access. Not understanding it keeps you out.

This is consistent with Jenkins’s account of informal knowledge transfer in participatory communities [1]. New members learn by

observing. No one explicitly teaches them. The code circulates, and those who are paying attention eventually pick it up.

The code also does boundary work. Comments like “Those who know, know-explaining won’t help” (T03) are common. They signal membership to insiders and screen out casual readers at the same time. Similarly, “That UP-er actually gets it-not just keyboard politics” (T06) distinguishes those seen as intellectually serious from those dismissed as performative.

Bilibili’s bullet-screen feature adds a layer to this. When a video touches on labor conditions, dozens of “Niuma reporting for duty” comments scroll across the screen at once (T23). It looks chaotic, but it works as a collective ritual. Seeing others respond in the same way, at the same moment, produces a sense of shared presence. That experience is harder to replicate in a standard comment section.

One pattern that cut across all interviews was the gap between online and offline identity. Almost no one spoke openly about these views in daily life. P06 (female, 27) put it plainly: “I would never post this on WeChat Moments. On Bilibili, people get the reference without needing it spelled out. That unspoken understanding—that’s what makes it feel worth it.” This split points to something important: the identity only really exists on certain platforms. It is situational, not portable.

4.2 What Left-Wing Discourse Does Psychologically

Across the interviews, participants described left-wing discourse as doing something for them emotionally. Two mechanisms appeared repeatedly.

The first is reattribution. Learning to analyze class and economic structure shifted how participants understood their own situations. P02 (female, 26) said: “Before, I thought I was poor because I wasn’t working hard enough. After learning this stuff, I realized it’s systemic. Nothing in my life actually changed. But I felt better.” This shift from self-blame to structural critique matches the compensation logic described by Gurr [5]. The frustration does not go away. But it gets directed outward, and that changes how it feels.

Textual data showed the same pattern. “Involution isn’t because we work too hard-the pie is just this small, and someone took extra” (T15). “I used to think it was my fault. Now I

know it’s the system” (T14). These are not just political statements. They are ways of managing an uncomfortable situation.

The second mechanism is irony as emotional cover. Direct anger is risky online in China. Ironic phrasing is safer and, according to participants, more satisfying. P03 (male, 22) explained: “Saying it sarcastically feels better than saying it straight. It’s also harder to delete. Everyone understands anyway. It’s resistance, but with a mask on.” Phrases like “Thank my boss for the opportunity to strive” (T08) carry real bitterness. The joking register does not neutralize the critique. It packages it.

Group belonging added a third layer. P05 (male, 24, delivery rider) said: “I ride all day. Ranting in the comments, seeing others do the same-at least I don’t feel alone with it.” That sense of shared burden was meaningful to him, even without any practical outcome.

4.3 Two Platforms, Two Kinds of Compensation

Bilibili and Douyin differ structurally, and those differences shape how left-wing participation unfolds on each.

Bilibili supports long videos, written articles, and extended comment threads. Users who favored it tended to describe their engagement as cumulative. P01 said: “There are people on Bilibili who actually explain Capital. After watching, I go find the original text.” The bullet-screen feature also creates a sense of real-time community, even on older videos. Together, these features support something closer to what Jenkins called genuine participation-where members believe their contributions have value [1]. The compensation here is durable. It accumulates over time.

Douyin is built differently. Short videos, rapid scrolling, comment sections that reset with each clip. Left-wing content on Douyin tends to be emotional and brief. P03 said: “Douyin is more about venting. You watch a few things, feel something, and then it’s gone.” The chain comments documented in T26-“Niuma No.1 here,” “Niuma No.2 present”-show how quickly solidarity can form and dissolve on the platform. Low barrier to entry. Short shelf life.

Censorship responses also differed. On Douyin, getting content removed was treated as routine. Users switched accounts, used homophones, or replaced sensitive words with emoji (T28, T32). Little was at stake with any single account. On

Bilibili, users were more cautious. P07 (male, 31) said: "I've built up followers there. I can't just replace that." So the risk calculus was different, and the expressive strategies were more careful. In short, Bilibili produces slower, more rooted identity formation. Douyin provides immediate release. Most participants used both, in different ways and for different purposes.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that online leftist identity is not primarily about politics, at least not in the conventional sense. No participant described a moment of ideological conversion. What they described instead was a gradual process of finding a language for their frustration and finding people who shared it.

This has implications for how we apply Jenkins's framework. Participatory culture was developed in relatively open media environments. This study shows that its core logic-membership, shared knowledge, collective expression-can survive under censorship. It just looks different. The shared references become more coded. The expression becomes more ironic. The community becomes more internal. This "constrained participation" deserves its own analytical vocabulary.

The concept of discursive compensation addresses a specific dynamic: people achieving psychological relief through talking about a problem rather than acting on it. That is not the same as false consciousness or passive resignation. Participants were aware that venting online did not change their material conditions. They used it anyway, because it helped. The question worth asking is whether this kind of compensation displaces other forms of engagement or simply coexists with them. This study cannot answer that. But it is the right question for future research.

Several limitations apply. The sample is small and skewed toward students and urban residents. Workers in manufacturing or rural areas may have different experiences. Deleted content is invisible to the researcher, which means the most censored voices are absent from the data. The study is also cross-sectional. How these identities change over time remains unknown.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to understand how online

leftist identity forms on Douyin and Bilibili, and what psychological work it does for the people who hold it.

The main findings are as follows. Identity begins with learning a covert symbolic code, not with declaring beliefs. Left-wing discourse serves as psychological compensation by shifting blame for personal hardship to structural causes, and by wrapping anger in irony that makes it expressible. The two platforms support different modes of this: Bilibili enables slower, knowledge-based belonging; Douyin provides quick emotional release.

"Online leftism" in China is not simply political radicalization. It is a social and psychological practice. People use it to make sense of difficult circumstances and to feel less alone. Whether that translates into anything beyond the screen is an open question. It is one worth taking seriously.

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