

Analysis of the “Buddy” Social Model among Youth: From the Perspective of Instrumental Rationality

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Keywords: “Buddy” social interaction; instrumental rationality; Max Weber; rationality

Abstract: This paper explores the “buddy” social model that has emerged among modern youth groups from the perspective of Max Weber's instrumental rationality. With the rapid development of modernization and the popularity of social media, traditional “strong relationship” social interaction has gradually given way to lightweight and instant “light” social interaction. This model is characterized by efficiency and low cost, reflecting the application of instrumental rationality in interpersonal communication. This paper analyzes how “buddy” social interaction embodies efficient information utilization, low-cost benefits, and the pursuit of common values, while pointing out the alienation of interpersonal relationships it brings. The article aims to reflect on the changes in interpersonal relationships in modern society and calls for the emphasis on deep and sincere interpersonal connections to overcome the fragility and perishability of “light” relationships.

1. Introduction

With the evolution of modernization and the rise of social media, the social model of young people is undergoing a profound change. Traditional social methods are being replaced by a new type of “buddy” social model, whose characteristics of lightness, flexibility and immediacy provide modern youth with a new social concept. The concepts of instrumental rationality and value rationality proposed by Max Weber provide a powerful analytical framework for understanding the internal logic of “buddy” social interaction. This article will focus on the rise of the “buddy” social phenomenon, explore the social dynamics and cultural significance behind it from the perspective of instrumental rationality and value rationality, and how to achieve game and balance under the interweaving of dual rationality, and explore the significance of this balance for modern youth individuals and society as a whole.

2. Theoretical Origin

The historical origin of the concept of rationality can be traced back to the early stage of ancient Greek civilization. It developed from the concept of “logos” and later underwent the catalysis of three major historical trends of thought: the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment, thus forming the complete outline of the modern concept of rationality. Hegel's view of rationality believes that rationality is the essence and internal regularity of things. German political sociologist Max Weber further deepened and expanded on this basis, transforming the original philosophical concept

of "reason" into the concept of "rationality" in the scope of sociology. In his book "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", he defined two types of rationality: "instrumental rationality", which focuses on the efficiency relationship between means and ends; and "substantive rationality", which focuses on the value orientation and moral considerations of behavior. Through this conceptual fine division, Weber completed the decomposition of the concept of "rationality", endowed it with the function of explaining social phenomena, and provided the possibility for the derivative and in-depth study of rationality.

2.1 The meaning of instrumental rationality and value rationality

Max Weber believed that instrumental rationality is "through the expectation of the external situation and the behavior of other people, and using this expectation as a 'condition' or a 'means', in order to achieve the purpose that one rationally strives for and considers as an outcome" [1]. Dong Lisheng combined Weber's thoughts and the generally accepted definition of instrumental rationality in China and defined instrumental rationality as: through the expectation of the external situation and the behavior of other people, and using this expectation as a condition or a means, in order to achieve the purpose that one rationally strives for and considers as an outcome. Value rationality is "through conscious belief in the unconditional inherent value of a particular behavior - ethical, aesthetic, religious or any other interpretation - regardless of whether it is achieved" [2].

Weber believed that the development of modernity is essentially an evolutionary process in which value rationality continues to shrink and instrumental rationality continues to expand.

2.2 The difference between instrumental rationality and value rationality

From the perspective of value, instrumental rationality advocates factual judgment, follows logical reasoning based on facts, and focuses on the "actual" state of things. It is an objective description of the "actual existence" of things, that is, the question of "what is". Value rationality, on the other hand, focuses on value judgment, follows value logic, pursues "goodness" as its goal, and focuses on the "ought" state of things, that is, the ideal value relationship, that is, what things "should be".

From a methodological perspective, instrumental rationality emphasizes the importance of procedures, conditions, and processes, and the possibility of achieving specific goals through procedural, precise, calculable, and operational means, reflecting a value system oriented toward efficiency and technology. Value rationality introduces value judgments, focuses on purpose, substance, and results, and emphasizes whether the means or actions to achieve the goal are consistent with absolute values. Value rationality takes value ideals as its ultimate pursuit, reflecting values oriented toward ideas, goodness, and beauty.

From the perspective of development, instrumental rationality focuses on maximizing efficiency, pursuing formal rationality, and taking impersonalization as its main feature. Bureaucracy, bureaucracy, and human alienation are all inevitable results of instrumental rationality. In contrast, value rationality emphasizes mission pursuit, takes personalization as its main feature, attaches importance to humanistic exploration, pays attention to people's emotions and value pursuits, and the deep value and meaning behind their behaviors. Value rationality advocates the development path of perfecting human nature and emphasizes the pursuit of perfection.

3. The “light” transformation of the social model of young people - “buddy” social interaction

3.1 “Strong Relationships” in the Context of Traditional Chinese Society

Mark Granovetter believes that social relations between people can be divided into two types,

"strong relations" and "weak relations", according to the strength of the relationship. Fei Xiaotong stated in Rural China that China's traditional society is based on blood and geographical relations. Relationships between relatives and neighbors constitute a stable, secure and low-mobility "strong relationship" network, which is often presented in the form of "groups".

3.1.1 The relationship dimension is long-term

The "strong relationship" network has brought two problems to people in traditional society, which are reflected in land and family. First, land is the foundation passed down from generation to generation by the Chinese people. While maintaining the continuity of the family, it also limits the mobility and life choices of individuals outside the family. Second, as the organizational unit of production and life, the family needs to maintain a "happy" family atmosphere.

In order to balance the requirements of these two aspects, social relations often value "long-term". Therefore, unlike individuals in Western culture who tend to seek self-realization in a changing network of relationships, individuals in the context of traditional Chinese society must try to understand themselves in a fixed and lasting relationship and cannot "go their own way". This can be seen from many language expressions in Chinese culture, such as "there is a long way to go" and "a day of marriage is a hundred days of grace". In addition, this emphasis on "long-term" not only affects the social relationship network, but also easily forms anxiety and depression about the world and self-cognition. For example, most people believe that there are many "key points" and "watersheds" in a person's life. If the expected standards are not met in college entrance examinations, job hunting, marriage, etc., they will have pessimistic emotions such as "one misstep will lead to eternal regret" and "this life is over".

3.1.2 Lack of “rationality” caused by lack of selectivity

Backward productivity and a social structure based on blood and geography determine people's social scope, which means "closedness". Therefore, Chinese people's social circles are often non-selective. Relationships are often limited to a common living environment rather than the fit of personal interests, values or ambitions. This mode of communication ensures social stability and continuity to a certain extent and reduces the possibility of conflict.

However, such stability also brings limitations. On the one hand, it limits the rationality of interpersonal communication, and emotional factors are increased. For example, the Chinese system is often "flexible". People do not like to talk about reason purely, but strive to achieve "unity of emotion and reason" or even "morality first". On the other hand, it limits the development of individual self-awareness. Many behaviors between people do not come from self-will and rationality, but from "necessity" and the need for "courtesy" and "face". Therefore, human relations, face and "relationships" have become direct projections in the Chinese context.

3.2 The transform from “strong ties” to “weak ties”

Compared to the high frequency of interaction, deep emotions, close intimacy and significant reciprocity inherent in "strong relationships", "weak relationships" show more alienated and shallow characteristics (Granovetter, 1973). The advent of reform and opening up has led to an unprecedented wave of urbanization and a surge in population mobility in Chinese society. The introduction of the market economy has reconstructed the boundaries between the state and the market. As a result, China is gradually transitioning from a traditional acquaintance society to a contemporary stranger society [2]. Individuals are "disembedded" from groups, and the unit of social reproduction has also changed from the previous "group" to the "individual" [3].

In recent years, the rapid development of new media technology has further strengthened the

advantages of "weak ties", and the dominant position of "strong ties" in interpersonal networks has gradually been marginalized. Digital platforms provide individuals with new ways to establish connections across geographical boundaries, promoting the rise of new non-blood or geographical social models, especially the young generation of Generation Z. They are more inclined to use social media to build extensive but relatively shallow interpersonal networks, which scholars call "light social" behavior. "Light social" not only reflects the individual's pursuit of social flexibility and immediacy, but also reflects the fragmented characteristics of interpersonal relationships in the digital age.

3.3 “Buddy” social: a new social model

A partner refers to a precise companionship between people with the same or similar interests, needs, and goals in a certain vertical segment [4]. The relationship between partners is between that between strangers and acquaintances, with the characteristics of low emotional investment and responsibility. Both parties only need to achieve a kind of support and companionship based on "mutual benefit" in a specific situation, such as postgraduate entrance examination partners, dining partners, sports partners, etc. According to the data jointly released by DT Finance and DT Research Institute in 2023, more than half of young people have partners, and among the 31% of young people who do not have partners, more than half still want to have a partner [5].

4. The manifestation of instrumental rationality in social interaction

4.1 Information utilization and efficiency first

In an era where everything is media, interpersonal communication patterns are deeply influenced by media technology. On the one hand, digital technology has reshaped the geographical boundaries of social relations and achieved a leapfrog expansion of social networks, and the saying "the world is as close as a neighbor" has been vividly reflected in modern society. On the other hand, digital technology has promoted broader connectivity in the digital field, enabling all individuals, including those on the margins and in isolation, to find a sense of belonging and participation in the virtual space. Among them, recommendation algorithms, as one of the core technologies of the digital age, can accurately capture the preferences and behavior patterns of young people, build personalized "user portraits", and thus achieve efficient matching of information and people. Therefore, the formation of "buddy", a manifestation of the high degree of mediatization of society, is also a natural extension of modern communication relationships from virtual to real space.

The formation mechanism of "partners" is essentially a highly efficient social model based on the rapid integration of resources. In an environment where "involution" among individuals is intensifying and time is highly compressed, the younger generation seeks "fast food" social interaction and adopts a more flexible and immediate way to establish connections in order to maximize social benefits with limited time and resources. For example, invitation information such as "Script killing is missing one person" and "weekend travel group order" on social platforms such as Xiaohongshu and WeChat Moments is intended to gather like-minded people in a short period of time to quickly respond and participate in a variety of social scenarios, so as to achieve rapid integration and optimal allocation of resources.

4.2 Low-cost benefit analysis

From a material perspective, China's traditional culture of affection has always emphasized the principle of "reciprocity", that is, paying attention to giving and giving back in "human relationships"

rather than "breaking" the exchanges, in order to maintain the stability and harmony of the relationship. "Partners" are a "light" relationship based on the principle of voluntariness, which reduces the economic exchanges between the two parties. For example, both parties in a "partner" can easily propose the "AA system", which not only reduces the financial burden, but also avoids the complex emotional entanglements that may be caused by financial exchanges, and simplifies the cost of maintaining interpersonal relationships.

From a spiritual perspective, since individuals are in short-term contact based on immediate needs rather than long-term emotional dependence, this short-term relationship structure allows participants to enjoy the fun of socializing and meet specific emotional needs without taking on too much psychological burden. Compared with traditional deep relationships, "buddy" socializing reduces the consumption of personal emotional resources, allowing individuals to obtain diverse experience spaces and social satisfaction at a lower spiritual cost in their busy lives.

4.3 Common values and interests

In postmodern society, the refinement of division of labor makes collaboration between individuals indispensable. The construction of the "Daizi" social network is based on common values and interests, daily life companionship, common interests and hobbies, similar personalities, and compatible world views. The core lies in: the precise matching of at least one common element.

"Buddy" social interaction is a manifestation of the segmentation of the emotional market. In this market, the relationship between "finding" and "being found" is similar to commodity trading. Both parties are matched based on specific emotional needs, which are usually similar and temporary, and both parties have clear "tasks". Unlike traditional kinship and geographical social relationships, "buddy" relationships do not require in-depth understanding of the other party's background, but are quickly established due to common interests and needs. This relationship is concise and flexible, adapting to the fast-paced lifestyle of modern people.

"Hitchhiking" requires both parties to use "precise companionship" as the contractual basis, maintain a strict sense of boundaries, and satisfy the desire of contemporary youth for light social interaction. This way of communication focuses on efficiency and purposefulness, and the boundaries of communication and exchange are clearly regulated to ensure that the interaction between the two parties can achieve the expected results. Once the behavior exceeds the set boundaries, the "hitchhiking" relationship may find it difficult to achieve the expected effect of "hitchhiking".

4.4 Alienation of interpersonal relationships

In his book *The Birth of the New Alienation*, Rosa, based on Marx's "alienated labor", cited Lael Jaeger's view that "alienation is a relationship without relationship" and took this "defective relationship" as the core connotation of "new alienation", examining the relationship between people and the world in an accelerated society.

Although "buddy social networking" attracts a large number of participants with its low cost, high efficiency and clear purpose, its inherent "short-term" and utilitarian nature makes it difficult to meet individuals' needs for long-term emotional companionship and deep spiritual resonance. Once the goal is achieved or the interest is shifted, participants may quickly disband, lacking long-term commitment and deep connection. Under the appearance of "accelerated communication", people seem to be pursuing burden-free happiness and pure interpersonal connection. However, due to the collapse of commitment and trust and the universalization of cost considerations, the time and space of communication are filled with an emotional void that is difficult to make up. Behind the prosperous scenes of "buddy social networking" and "buddy economy" is actually the deep emptiness of interpersonal relationships.

In this "McDonald's" interaction model, immediate responses and satisfaction are limited to the surface level of individual needs. In essence, it is just a repetition and confirmation of self-awareness, and fails to touch the deeper emotional communication and spiritual resonance. To overcome the fragility and perishability of such "light" relationships and establish deep and sincere connections with others, it is necessary to reflect on the erosion of interpersonal relationships by the "efficiency first" concept in modern society and re-evaluate the value and significance of connections between people.

5. Conclusion

Contemporary young people reject the sense of restraint brought by traditional sticky social relationships in social interactions, but at the same time they crave companionship. As Bauman said, people in a liquid society "just need to be tied loosely, so that they can be untied again when the situation changes."

As a new social form, the "dating" social model not only reflects the expansion of instrumental rationality in the process of modernization, but also reflects the pursuit of immediacy and flexibility by young people. However, this "fast food" social model also exposes the superficiality of interpersonal relationships and the fragility of emotional connections, suggesting the retreat of value rationality in modern life. Although "dating" social networking provides social convenience for contemporary youth and meets immediate needs, it also prompts us to think about how to find a balance between efficiency and depth, instrumental rationality and value rationality, so as to build a healthier and more meaningful interpersonal network. Future research should continue to focus on the long-term impact of "dating" social networking on individual emotional development, social cohesion and cultural change, and strive to explore effective ways to promote interpersonal harmony and social progress in digital transformation. In this process, we should not only give play to the advantages of instrumental rationality, but also regain the importance of value rationality to achieve the comprehensive and healthy development of social relations.

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