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Trends in gender role attitudes and gender awareness among Generation Z college students in China

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Abstract: In the current context of multicultural collision, online information is impacting traditional gender values. To analyze the changes in gender role attitudes and gender awareness among Chinese Generation Z college students under the influence of various social factors, the study focuses on Generation Z college students and explores the impact of cultural, media, educational, and family factors on gender role attitudes and gender awareness among Chinese Generation Z college students through questionnaire surveys and quantitative analysis methods. The research results show that Generation Z college students exhibit extremely favorable gender perspectives, with the proportion of bisexual gender roles approaching 38%, surpassing the number of students with traditional understanding of single sex gender roles. At the same time, in school gender awareness education, research has found that the proportion of bisexual gender roles is the highest among students who accept open mindedness, at 46.6%. In family gender awareness education, students who receive parental gender awareness sharing education have the highest proportion of bisexual gender roles, accounting for 48.5%. Therefore, the current gender education for the new Generation of students in China needs to abandon traditional avoidance-based teaching methods and adopt an open and supportive attitude to guide students' gender values.

Keywords: gender role attitude; gender awareness; Generation Z of China; college students in China

1. Introduction

Gender roles affect students' growth and spirit, therefore, understanding the development and cultivation of gender roles is crucial for the cognitive development and psychological cultivation of college students. In China, the modernization of society and the integration of traditional culture have influenced the gender roles and concepts of Generation Z college students. Chan et al. conducted a survey on the fertility awareness of Hong Kong university students and found that 92% of students underestimated the decline in fertility rate with age, and 66% overestimated the success rate of fertility treatment (Chan et al., 2015). Bryant used national university student data from 1996 and 2000 to evaluate the longitudinal changes in gender role traditionalism over four years of college through an input-environment-outcome model and block stepwise regression analysis. The results showed that students' traditional gender thinking declined during their university years, with women being more inclined towards egalitarianism than men. At the same time, women's studies courses and diversity experiences were significantly correlated with students' attitudes towards gender roles (Bryant, 2003). Chen explored the views of different genders and age groups on gender equality through online questionnaires and found that gender equality was beneficial for both men and women, but some men were concerned that

it may violate their rights. Men may hold stereotypes about feminism and gender equality, which can affect their participation in the process of gender equality (Chen, 2023). Obviously, there is a vacuum in existing research regarding how media, education, and family influence Generation Z college students' perceptions of China. Therefore, the study identifies how culture, media, education, and family influence the gender roles and attitudes of Chinese Generation Z college students. The research aims to explore the impact of different educational models and family upbringing methods on gender awareness among Chinese Generation Z college students through questionnaire surveys and quantitative analysis. Moreover, the research analyzes the evaluation of gender concepts in current social culture and online media by Chinese Generation Z college students.

2. The influencing factors of gender awareness changes among Chinese Generation Z college students

2.1. Cultural background factors

Generation Z in China refers to the Generation born between 1995 and 2009, whose birth and growth were accompanied by the popularization and rapid development of network technology. Therefore, in the process of growing up, Generation Z has been influenced by the multicultural information carried by online media. The majority of Generation Z students currently in university were born between 2000 and 2007. Generation Z college students exhibit unique personalities and creativity in terms of consumption concepts, cultural interests, and psychological experiences. In terms of cultivating gender role attitudes and gender awareness, Generation Z college students have also been influenced by various online cultural media.

The current attitudes towards gender roles and gender awareness among college students are primarily influenced by feminist cultural trends. In traditional Chinese attitudes towards gender roles, there exists opposition and inequality between men and women. However, with the development of feminist culture, current Z era college students have a basic understanding of independent gender roles, and have a concept of eliminating inequality in women's work and daily life. In addition to the influence of feminist culture, the collision of diverse cultures and cultural changes worldwide have also had an impact on the gender role attitudes and gender awareness of Generation Z college students (Gui, 2020). Specifically, in the current gender consciousness of Generation Z college students, their understanding of gender role boundaries is gradually fading. The cyberspace has to some extent blurred the gender requirements of traditional jobs, and now a large number of job positions that are traditionally only available to men or women have removed gender restrictions. That is to say, the division of labor between men and women in the current society is gradually blurring, and the awareness of equality between men and women is basically accepted by Generation Z college students.

2.2. Educational factors

In education at all levels of primary, secondary, and tertiary education in China, gender role education is still relatively traditional. The tradition in education does not negate the abilities of women or define the scope of work for men. Instead, it simply demands traditional personality traits from both men and women (Iskra, 2023). For example, in the current stage of primary and secondary education, teachers and teaching materials believe that men should possess qualities such as strength, perseverance, integrity, and courage, while women should have personality traits such as diligence, quietness, simplicity, and knowledge. The constraints of this traditional personality requirement on male and female students vary depending on the teacher themselves or the region in which they are located (Kaufman, 2005). Generally speaking, education in rural areas has stronger constraints on gender roles, and older teachers also have higher requirements for male and female behavior and morality. In addition to gender-based behavior and personality differentiation, there is a lack of guidance in Chinese education towards opposite sex socialization, and a lack of attention to students' gender awareness and literacy (Si, 2022). Therefore, although students' gender awareness is influenced by educational factors, this influence tends to be traditional. Generation Z college students generally spontaneously acquire gender related cognition and form their own gender role attitudes from the surrounding environment and online media. However, education does not pay attention to the spontaneous cognitive behavior of such students, resulting in a lack of gender psychological health awareness cultivation among them.

2.3. Family factors

Family factors have the strongest constraint on gender role attitudes among Generation Z college students. Generally speaking, the power patterns of parents in the family and the parenting methods within the family are the core influencing factors in the family. There are different ways of operation, division of labor among members, and power structures within each family. In the family power structure, if the father is the main breadwinner and the mother is the homemaker, children living in it generally have more traditional attitudes towards gender roles (Nam and Kim, 2005). If the mother is the main breadwinner and the father takes on the responsibility of raising the child, then children generally do not attach importance to traditional gender division of labor and may be more independent and equal in terms of gender consciousness. In family upbringing, if parents are absent for a long time during a child's growth, it may lead to confusion in the child's understanding of gender roles (Yang, 2020). The parenting style of the family may lead to a mismatch between the shaping of children's gender and the interaction of social relationships, such as excessive indulgence or neglect of children by parents, which can easily lead to incorrect gender perceptions in children.

2.4. Media factors

Mass media is the main channel for current Generation Z college students to receive cultural ideas and diverse values. Generation Z college students are immersed in the cyberspace and have a basic understanding of social and legal norms, gender

behavior, and the environment (Zhao et al., 2020). Therefore, the gender role attitudes and gender awareness of Generation Z college students are also influenced by media factors. Specifically, to gain attention and benefits in the current development competition, mass media often introduces celebrity images that differ from traditional gender roles, or public figures with a clear characteristic of neutrality. This differentiated gender role, under the extensive publicity of the media, has a high popularity and exposure rate, thus triggering the pursuit of some Generation Z college students (Perrotte et al, 2018). Generally speaking, the negative impact of multicultural factors on students' attitudes and awareness of gender roles is exacerbated by media factors, leading to confusion in the understanding of gender roles among Generation Z. In addition to the obvious effects in the media, the social media provided by mass media to a large number of online users also has an impact on the gender roles and gender awareness of Generation Z college students (Guastello and Guastello, 2003). Currently, various gender values are mainly disseminated through online social media. To gain attention, online users provoke disputes by using untrue statements and content. However, to increase traffic, the media has strengthened the public's acceptance of untrue information, resulting in various gender related perceptions being distorted. This uncontrolled media activity has also had a negative impact on the gender values of Generation Z college students.

3. Quantitative study on gender role attitudes and gender awareness of Generation Z college students in China

3.1. Research design and research methods

The study mainly adopts a questionnaire survey method to explore the impact mechanism of four social factors, namely culture, education, family, and media, on the gender role attitudes and gender awareness of Chinese Generation Z college students. The first research question is the impact of cultural and media factors on the gender role attitudes and gender awareness of Chinese Generation Z college students. Secondly, the study explores the impact mechanism of different educational models and family upbringing methods on gender awareness among college students.

The research mainly adopts a questionnaire survey method. Firstly, four questions including male and female workplace work, innate abilities, marriage concepts, and gender division of labor are designed as keywords for the current multicultural society. Four questions are designed to obtain different students' evaluations of gender culture, analyze the gender role attitudes of college students with different understandings of gender culture, and thus obtain the connection between gender culture and students' gender role concepts (Williams, 1993). Secondly, the study uses the GooSeeker crawling tool to collect feature vocabulary related to gender roles on social media in June 2024. The vocabulary is cleaned using the JIEBA (Chinese Word Segmentation Tool), and a total of 10,974 valid data samples are collected. Then, Excel software is used to perform frequency statistics on the vocabulary. In the questionnaire, the top five keywords are selected based on the frequency ranking of male and female gender role characteristics. Questionnaire questions related to keywords are designed, the gender role attitudes of students with

different levels of recognition of gender characteristic keywords are analyzed, and the relationship between media gender characteristics and students' gender role concepts is discovered. In addition, the study mainly uses Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0 and Microsoft Excel as quantitative data analysis tools.

When exploring the impact of students' educational and family upbringing methods on the gender role attitudes of Chinese Generation Z college students, a questionnaire survey is conducted among students to divide the gender aware teaching modes they receive into three categories: open, avoidance, and strategic. After analyzing the gender aware teaching modes that students have experienced, the proportion of students' gender roles under different teaching modes is explored (Chia et al., 1994). Similarly, the parenting methods experienced by students can be divided into four types: supportive, serious, avoidant, and sharing methods where the mother or father is the dominant authority. The gender role differences that arise among students in different methods of family gender awareness education is explored.

3.2. Research object and data processing

The study surveys students from a certain university and distributed 700 questionnaires to them through random sampling. 680 questionnaires are collected, and 662 valid questionnaires are collected. Currently, the age range of college students in universities is generally between 17–29 years old, so it can be ensured that the student population is all born into Generation Z. In the questionnaire, the keywords for workplace work, innate abilities, marriage concepts, and cultural factors of gender division of labor are as follows: 1) Men perform better than women in most workplace jobs. 2) Men are naturally more capable than women. 3) Women's marriage choices should be more cautious than men's. 4) Men prioritize their careers, while women prioritize their families. The gender characteristic keywords obtained from the media are: male: responsible, brave, handsome, strong, mature; Women: gentle, optimistic, confident, quiet, and caring. In the questionnaire, the Likert five point rating system is used to collect students' recognition of the above questions and gender keywords. Score 1 indicates strongly disagree, score 2 indicates disagree, score 3 indicates indifferent, score 4 indicates agree, and score 5 indicates strongly agree.

3.3. Instrument

The study mainly uses the College Students' Sex-Role Inventory: 50 items (CSRI-50) to analyze students' attitudes towards gender roles. CSRI-50 consists of 50 items, divided into three subscales: masculinization (16 items), feminization (16 items), and neutralization (18 items). The masculinization scale covers four aspects: leadership, masculinity, rationality, and magnanimity. The feminization scale includes three aspects: empathy, femininity, and diligence. Neutrality encompasses all seven aspects of both males and females. The scale divides gender role types into four categories: masculine, feminine, bisexual, and undifferentiated, by evaluating individuals' scores on masculine and feminine items (Katsurada and Sugihara, 1999).

Generally speaking, masculine gender roles possess traditional male traits such as leadership, decisiveness, independence, and competitiveness. Male individuals tend to display strength, confidence, and a desire for control.

Feminization showcases traditional feminine traits such as empathy, tenderness, care, and cooperation. Feminized individuals are more likely to exhibit affinity, sensitivity, and support.

Bisexuality possesses both masculine and feminine traits, allowing for flexible application of these traits in different contexts. Bisexuality individuals typically have higher levels of adaptability and mental health (Korcuska and Thombs, 2003).

In undifferentiated gender roles, both masculine and feminine traits are not obvious, and there may be a lack of clear gender role identity.

4. Result analysis

4.1. Gender role attitudes of college students

The study first used CSRI-50 to analyze the gender role attitudes of 662 Z-Generation college students, and the specific results are shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Gender role attitudes of Generation Z college students in China.

| Population variable | Specific projects | Masculine (n = 95) | Feminization (n = 79) | Bisexuality (n = 251) | Undifferentiation (n = 237) |
|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Gender | Male (382) | 68 | 61 | 145 | 108 |
| | Female (280) | 27 | 18 | 106 | 129 |
| Age | <18 (31) | 5 | 4 | 9 | 13 |
| | 18–25 (551) | 80 | 69 | 201 | 201 |
| | >25(80) | 10 | 6 | 41 | 23 |
| Only child | Yes (315) | 54 | 35 | 108 | 117 |
| | No (347) | 41 | 44 | 143 | 120 |

From **Table 1**, the current proportion of single sex (including masculinity and femininity), bisexual, and undifferentiated college students was roughly one-third each. It is worth noting that in gender differentiation, male and female students tended to be dominated by traditional single sex gender roles, with a basic bias towards masculinity. There were 68 male students with masculinity and 61 male students with femininity in the table. There were 27 male female students and 18 female students. It can be seen that students who hold traditional gender role attitudes, regardless of gender, had a male dominated gender role cognition. In terms of age differentiation, the older the students were, the lower the proportion of students with undifferentiated gender role attitudes. Among students under the age of 18, 72.2% had undifferentiated gender roles, while among 80 students over the age of 25, only 28.8% had undifferentiated gender roles.

4.2. Gender role differences in understanding gender culture

The study selected four issues related to workplace work, innate abilities, marriage concepts, and gender division of labor as the focus of discussion on gender issues in social culture. The evaluation attitudes of Generation Z college students of different genders and gender roles towards the four issues are shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2. The evaluation attitudes of Generation Z universities with different genders and gender roles towards four issues.

| Classification | Project | Workplace | Innate ability | Marriage concept | Gender division of labor |
|----------------|------------------|-----------|----------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| Gender | Male | 3.1 | 2.6 | 4.1 | 3.9 |
| | Female | 1.6 | 1.1 | 3.5 | 2.4 |
| Gender roles | Masculinization | 3.7 | 3.3 | 4.6 | 4.1 |
| | Feminization | 2.5 | 2.3 | 3.9 | 3.2 |
| | Bisexuality | 1.4 | 1.6 | 2.4 | 2.1 |
| | Undifferentiated | 2.1 | 1.7 | 3.1 | 3.1 |

From **Table 2**, due to the fact that all four questions are from traditional gender perspectives, students with a single masculine gender role characteristic were the most likely to recognize the four viewpoints. The average evaluations of students with masculine gender role characteristics for workplace work, innate abilities, marriage concepts, and gender division of labor were 3.7, 3.3, 4.6, and 4.1, respectively. Students with bisexual gender role characteristics were the most resistant to workplace work, innate abilities, marriage concepts, and gender division of labor. The table showed that the average evaluation results of the four viewpoints were 1.4, 1.6, 2.4, and 2.1, respectively. In addition, the evaluation of workplace work and innate abilities was generally below 3, but the evaluation of marriage concepts and gender division of labor was generally above 3. The discriminatory ideas about workplace and innate abilities between men and women in the current social culture were basically not recognized among the current Generation Z college students. However, traditional ideas about marriage and gender division of labor still had influence in social culture.

4.3. The role differences of gender characteristics in the media

The study selected the most frequently occurring gender characteristic keywords in online social media and analyzed the views of Generation Z college students on mainstream gender characteristics in the media through a questionnaire survey. The specific results are shown in **Figure 1**.

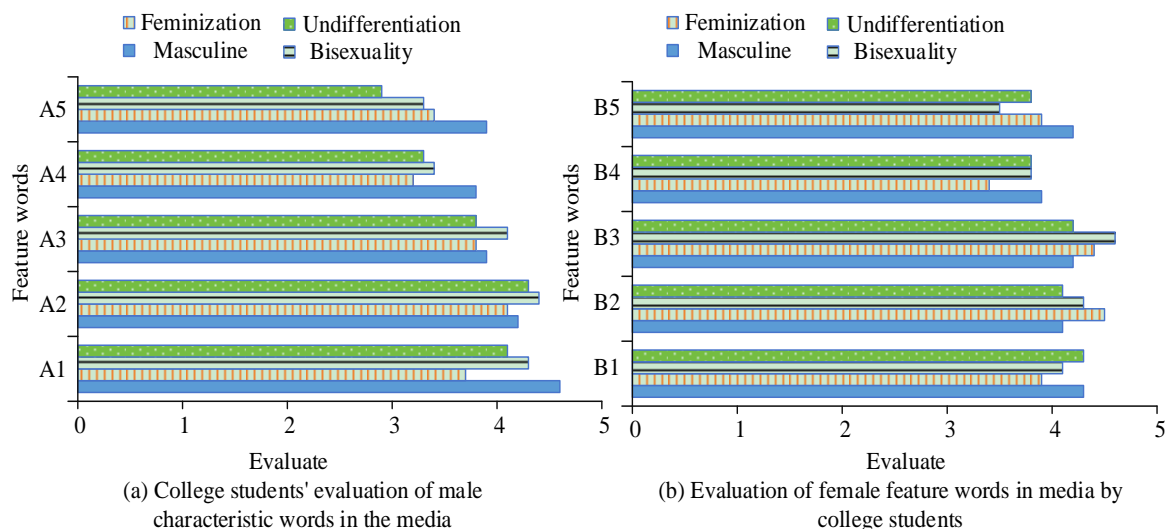


Figure 1. Evaluation of mainstream gender characteristic keywords in the media by Generation Z college students.

In **Figure 1**, A1–A5 respectively represent male gender characteristic keywords, such as sense of responsibility, bravery, handsomeness, strength, and maturity. B1–B5 respectively represent female gender characteristic keywords, gentle, optimistic, confident, quiet, and caring. It can be seen that traditional single sex college students were more accepting of mainstream gender characteristics in the media, while undifferentiated and bisexual student groups tended to consider the two most frequently appearing, and their recognition of the other three was not high. The average evaluations of single sex students in the male student population for sense of responsibility, bravery, handsomeness, strength, and maturity were 4.6, 4.2, 3.9, 3.8, and 3.9, respectively. The recognition and evaluation of each keyword by the male bisexual group were 4.3, 4.4, 4.1, 3.4, and 3.3, respectively. Compared to men, women had a lower level of recognition for mainstream gender specific keywords in the media. The evaluations of female students who were single sex towards gentleness, optimism, confidence, quietness, and compassion were 4.3, 4.1, 4.2, 3.9, and 4.2, respectively. The evaluation of keywords by the female bisexual group was 4.1, 4.3, 4.6, 3.8, and 3.5, respectively. It can be inferred that media factors have a greater impact on men than women, and the mainstream gender characteristic keywords in current media are more common, which can be recognized by both traditional single sex students and modern bisexual students. The current Generation Z college students generally recognize the mainstream gender characteristic keywords in online media, indicating a convergence between gender concepts in online media and gender awareness among college students.

4.4. The impact mechanism of educational models

The study analyzed the impact of three educational models in modern education that focus on gender values and gender awareness on students’ gender roles. The specific results are shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3. The impact of different gender awareness education models on students’ gender roles.

| Gender | Educational Model | Masculine (%) | Feminization (%) | Bisexuality (%) | Undifferentiation (%) |
|--------|------------------------|---------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Male | Open type (14.2%) | 14.1 | 10.9 | 46.6 | 28.4 |
| | Avoidant type (64.95%) | 21.5 | 18.3 | 28.1 | 32.1 |
| | Strategic (20.85%) | 16.8 | 15.8 | 37.6 | 29.8 |
| Female | Open type (9.06%) | 11.6 | 7.6 | 43.5 | 37.3 |
| | Avoidant type (79.31%) | 5.1 | 18.4 | 31.1 | 45.4 |
| | Strategic (11.63%) | 9.2 | 7.5 | 41.3 | 42 |

From **Table 3**, only 14.2% of male students received open education, 64.95% received avoidance education, and 20.85% received strategic education. 46.6% of students receiving open education had bisexual gender roles, which was the highest proportion in the teaching mode. In the avoidance-based teaching mode, only 28.1% of male students had bisexual gender roles, while the proportion of male gender roles was as high as 21.5%. In the strategic teaching mode, the proportion of bisexual male students was 37.6%, and the proportion of masculine gender roles was 16.8%. For the

male population, it was best to adopt an open gender awareness education model in modern education, followed by a strategic teaching model. Among female students, 9.06% received open education, 79.31% received avoidance education, and 11.63% received strategic education. Meanwhile, in open education, the proportion of bisexual gender roles for women was 43.5%, while in strategic education, the proportion of bisexual roles was 41.3%. In avoidant education, bisexuality accounted for 31.1%, while feminization accounted for as high as 18.4%. Therefore, gender awareness education for women, both open and strategic approaches, can help cultivate modern gender role attitudes among women.

4.5. The influence mechanism of family parenting methods

Finally, the study analyzed the impact of different family power structures and parenting methods on students' gender roles in modern education in China. The specific results are shown in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Impact of different family power structures and parenting methods on students' gender roles.

| Rights structure | Parenting methods | Masculine (%) | Feminization (%) | Bisexuality (%) | Undifferentiation (%) |
|------------------|--------------------------|---------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Father (91.25%) | Supporting type (12.54%) | 15.5 | 7.3 | 42.6 | 34.6 |
| | Serious type (24.47%) | 21.8 | 17.8 | 27.3 | 33.1 |
| | Avoidant type (56.04%) | 22.3 | 19.2 | 24.1 | 34.4 |
| | Sharing type (6.95%) | 11.6 | 10.3 | 48.5 | 29.6 |
| Mother (8.75%) | Supporting type (13.44%) | 12.6 | 16.3 | 45.3 | 25.8 |
| | Serious type (18.43%) | 18.3 | 21.2 | 24.5 | 36 |
| | Avoidant type (61.33%) | 15.3 | 18.4 | 28.2 | 38.1 |
| | Sharing type (6.8%) | 9.8 | 12.1 | 46.3 | 31.2 |

From **Table 4**, the current Chinese family was mainly dominated by the father as the power leader, while the avoidance type was the main method of gender awareness education. In families where the father was the main power dominant structure, adopting supportive and sharing oriented families could promote students' modern gender role development, with the proportion of bisexual gender characteristics among students being 42.6% and 48.5%, respectively. The use of serious and avoidant gender education methods led to students' single sex gender characteristics. In families where the mother was the main power structure, both supportive and sharing educational methods had a positive impact on students' bisexual development. The proportion of bisexual students was 45.3% and 46.3% respectively.

5. Conclusion

Through questionnaire surveys and quantitative analysis methods, the study gained a deep understanding of the gender role attitudes of Chinese Generation Z college students. Among the current gender roles of Generation Z college students in China, single sex (male and female) accounted for 26.2% of the 662 surveyed subjects, while bisexuality accounted for 38% and undifferentiated accounted for 35.8%. In terms of cultural factors, Generation Z college students largely rejected the current societal notion of gender differences in work and innate abilities, but were still

influenced by traditional cultural beliefs about marriage and gender division of labor. In addition, in terms of educational methods, 46.6% and 37.6% of male students who accept open and strategic approaches exhibited bisexual gender roles, while 43.5% and 41.3% of female students who accept open and strategic approaches exhibited bisexual gender roles, respectively. In family upbringing, using supportive and sharing gender aware parenting methods, the proportion of students with bisexual gender roles was 42.6% and 48.5%, respectively. The practical enlightenment of the research was that in current gender awareness education, it is necessary to actively adopt open and strategic gender awareness teaching models, and abandon traditional avoidance teaching models. In family life, parents should have a supportive and sharing attitude towards their children's gender roles, to promote the healthy development of students' gender psychology. The limitation of the research is that most of the factors influencing the gender roles of Generation Z students due to multiculturalism cannot be analyzed quantitatively. Therefore, the study transformed cultural factors into students' evaluations of certain cultural ideas. In future research directions, it will consider using the theory of cultural dynamic construction to attempt to develop a quantitative table of cultural influencing factors.

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