

Exploring Youth Value Confusion from the Perspective of Participatory Action Research

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Abstract: With the rapid development of new media environments, the issue of value confusion among youth cannot be ignored. Current educational approaches often position young people as passive recipients, failing to fully leverage their subjectivity. Based on this, and guided by Participatory Action Research (PAR) theory, this paper explores the influence mechanism of youth autonomous participation on value confusion and verifies the mediating role of subjectivity. Through a quantitative analysis of survey data from 309 university students at a university in western China, the study reveals that: (1) Youth autonomous participation has a significant positive impact on subjectivity; (2) Subjectivity has a significant negative impact on the degree of value confusion; (3) Youth autonomous participation has a significant negative impact on the degree of value confusion; (4) Subjectivity partially mediates the relationship between autonomous participation and value confusion. This paper enriches the theoretical framework of youth value cultivation, emphasizes the importance of autonomous participation and subjectivity, and provides new perspectives and methods for ideological and political education practice.

1. Introduction

With the rapid advancement of information technology, the value systems of contemporary youth are facing diverse impacts and challenges. The widespread use of new media, social networks, and digital technologies has provided a fertile cultural environment for the multifaceted and complex value conflicts and divergences among young people^[1]. Youth are the future of the nation and the hope of the people. Strengthening ideological and political work among the youth and reinforcing correct values is not only related to the growth of individual young people but also to the long-term development of the country.

Despite clear policy directions provided at the national level, educational practice still faces numerous challenges. The value confusion caused by the diverse backgrounds and multiple pressures faced by the youth has become an issue that cannot be ignored. Current research indicates that the cultivation of youth values mainly relies on classroom teaching^[2], cultural dissemination^[3], and improvements in algorithmic recommendations on information platforms^[4]. However, these approaches position young people as passive subjects, treating them as objects to be studied and molded. Humans possess subjective initiative, and solely relying on passive indoctrination is insufficient to truly resolve the problem of value confusion. Therefore, it is particularly important to explore a value cultivation path that can stimulate the subjectivity of youth and promote their active participation. Participatory Action Research (PAR) theory emphasizes the subjectivity of research participants and advocates for researchers and participants to jointly engage in the research process to achieve collaboration and co-creation^[5]. However, existing PAR research mainly focuses on the exploration of practical paths and lacks in-depth study on the internal mechanisms of how autonomous participation specifically affects value systems. Understanding this mechanism is of great significance for the effective cultivation of youth values.

Based on this, guided by PAR theory, this paper investigates the current state of youth active participation in practice and deeply explores the mechanism by which autonomous participation reduces the degree of value confusion. It aims to reveal how autonomous participation enhances subjectivity and promotes deep learning to foster the cultivation of correct values.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Current Research on Youth Value Confusion

In addressing the issue of youth value confusion, scholars have conducted in-depth studies focusing on the manifestations, causes, influencing factors, and solutions related to values.

With the advancement of information technology, the prevalence of online emotional consumerism has led to the alienation of young people's spiritual lives, individualization of value concepts, and nihilism in spiritual pursuits^[6]. Internet subcultures have resulted in the diminishment of youths' spiritual aspirations and the loss of value identity^[4]. Adjustments in social structures have caused identity ambiguity and changes in social moral guidance, contributing to the chaos in youth values^[7]. Survey data indicate that there are internal divisions in value recognition among youth groups; factors such as education level, occupation, and income—reflecting social and economic status—lead to differences in value recognition^[8]. The "filter bubble" phenomenon narrows the information received by youth, resulting in homogeneous resonance, which leads to group polarization and extremism in value concepts^[9]. Therefore, it is increasingly important to strengthen education on ideals and beliefs, leverage the permeating function of mainstream culture, improve internet laws and regulations, and guide youth to establish correct values^[10].

2.2 Autonomous Participation and Youth Values

The role of youth autonomous participation in the cultivation of values has gained widespread attention in academic circles. By introducing the educational concept of "subject-participation" into the cultivation of socialist core values among university students, and emphasizing the approaches of "student-centered" and "participation-oriented"^[11], students' correct values can be reinforced. Some scholars have incorporated virtual practical teaching into the teaching of ideological and political theory courses in higher education, enhancing students' autonomous participation^[12]. This helps students establish correct values and reduces value confusion. Participatory culture emphasizes autonomous participation and group interaction, assisting youth in finding their own positioning amid diverse values and decreasing the occurrence of value confusion.

2.3 Application of Participatory Action Research (PAR)

As a research method that emphasizes the subjectivity of research participants and collaborative participation, Participatory Action Research (PAR) has been widely applied in various fields in recent years. Scholars have explored the practice of PAR in community development, social work, rural revitalization, and other areas, but its application in the field of education—especially concerning the issue of youth value confusion—is relatively limited.

When introduced into teaching practice, the PAR method mainly focuses on skill development and the enhancement of teaching effectiveness. Some scholars have applied Participatory Action Research in courses like "Exhibition Practice," emphasizing a teaching approach that combines theory and practice to improve students' practical abilities^[13]. Others have explored strategies for using PAR methods in volunteer activities to enhance media literacy education among left-behind children, thereby promoting the improvement of their media literacy^[13].

In summary, although scholars have discussed youth value confusion, autonomous participation, and the application of Participatory Action Research (PAR), there are still two main shortcomings:

First, there is a lack of in-depth research on the role of youth subjectivity. Although some scholars have proposed the educational concept of "subject-participation," there is insufficient exploration of how youth autonomous participation specifically affects value confusion and thereby promotes the establishment of correct values.

Second, the application of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in addressing youth value confusion is limited. Existing research focuses more on the application of PAR in teaching practice and skill development but lacks sufficient research on how it can alleviate value confusion among youth groups and promote the establishment of correct values.

Therefore, this paper attempts to introduce the Participatory Action Research (PAR) method into the study of youth value confusion, deeply exploring the mechanism by which youth autonomous

participation influences value confusion. This aims to enrich the relevant theory and provide valuable guidance for practice.

3. Theoretical Review and Research Hypotheses

3.1 Overview of Participatory Action Research (PAR) Theory

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a research method that emphasizes participation and collaboration; it is also an educational tool and a mode of action^[14]. The core concept of PAR is to achieve the production of knowledge and social change through the joint participation of researchers and research subjects. PAR highlights the integration of "participation," "action," and "research," and through a cyclical process of "planning—reflection—documentation—action," it facilitates the enhancement of participants' awareness and the improvement of social practice^[14].

3.2 Mechanisms by Which Autonomous Participation Alleviates Value Confusion

According to Participatory Action Research theory, youth can alleviate value confusion through the following key mechanisms during the process of autonomous participation:

(1)Enhancing Subjectivity and Sense of Responsibility. One significant reason for value confusion among youth is the lack of subjectivity and a clear understanding of self and society. Autonomous participation transforms youth from passive recipients into active participants, enhancing their sense of subjectivity and responsibility.

(2)Promoting Deep Reflection and Critical Thinking. Value confusion is often accompanied by bewilderment regarding social phenomena and one's own circumstances. During autonomous participation, youth need to actively think, discuss, and solve practical problems. This process promotes their deep reflection and critical thinking abilities.

(3)Enhancing Self-Efficacy. Youth experiencing value confusion often doubt their own abilities and worth. Through autonomous participation, they gain a sense of achievement and self-efficacy by solving problems and achieving goals. This positive self-evaluation helps them affirm their own value, enhance self-confidence, and actively explore and establish personal values.

3.3 Research Hypotheses

Based on the above theoretical review and analysis, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Youth autonomous participation has a significant positive impact on subjectivity.

According to Participatory Action Research (PAR) theory, autonomous participation transforms youth from passive recipients into active participants, enhancing their sense of subjectivity and responsibility^[13]. During the process of autonomous participation, young people engage in discussion and practice, improving their awareness of their own roles, which helps them re-evaluate their self-identity and alleviate value confusion.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Subjectivity has a significant negative impact on the degree of value confusion.

The enhancement of subjectivity enables youth to better discern and choose values^[15], which to some extent reduces the occurrence of value confusion.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Youth autonomous participation has a significant negative impact on the degree of value confusion.

Autonomous participation provides youth with opportunities to directly engage with and practice values, facilitating the internalization of values. Through autonomous participation, young people enhance their self-efficacy, which helps alleviate value confusion among the youth.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Subjectivity plays a mediating role between youth autonomous participation and value confusion.

Autonomous participation influences the degree of value confusion by enhancing subjectivity, with subjectivity acting as a mediator in this relationship. This means that autonomous participation not only reduces value confusion directly but also indirectly affects values by improving

subjectivity.

3.4 Theoretical Model

Based on the above hypotheses, this paper constructs the following theoretical model:

- **Independent Variable (X):** Youth Autonomous Participation
- **Mediating Variable (M):** Subjectivity
- **Dependent Variable (Y):** Degree of Value Confusion

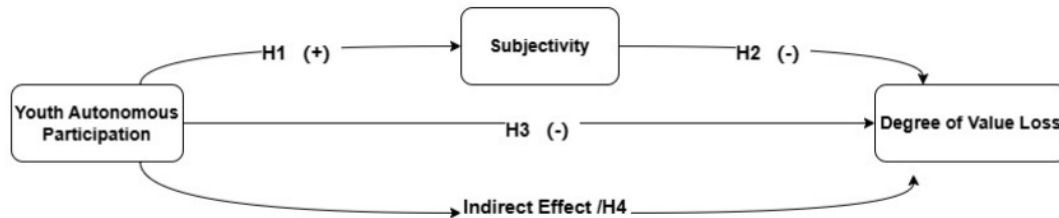


Figure 1. Theoretical Model of the Influence of Youth Autonomous Participation on Value Confusion

As shown in Figure 1, the relationships among the variables are depicted as follows: autonomous participation (X) positively influences subjectivity (M); subjectivity (M) negatively influences the degree of value confusion (Y); autonomous participation (X) negatively influences the degree of value confusion (Y); and subjectivity (M) mediates the relationship between autonomous participation (X) and the degree of value confusion (Y).

4. Research Design and Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research approach, analyzing questionnaire data collected from university students at a university in western China. The aim is to explore the influence mechanism of youth autonomous participation on value confusion and to examine the mediating role of subjectivity. To test hypotheses H1 through H4, standardized measurement scales were incorporated into the questionnaire to quantitatively measure youth autonomous participation, subjectivity, and the degree of value confusion. Statistical analysis of the quantitative data was conducted to verify the relationships among the variables.

4.2 Data Description

Data were collected through a questionnaire survey of university students at a university in western China, with a total of 309 valid responses. The questionnaire included scales for youth autonomous participation, subjectivity, and the degree of value confusion, all derived from existing standardized measurement tools to ensure reliability and validity. The questionnaire content covered multiple dimensions of the relevant variables:

(1) Autonomous Participation Scale: This scale includes three dimensions—self-decision-making, active participation, and collaborative communication—with three items for each dimension, totaling 15 items. Sample items include: "When participating in activities, I set my own goals and plans.", "I actively participate in various activities organized by my college or university, and even community organizations.", "I am willing to share my ideas and listen to others' opinions".

(2) Subjectivity Scale: This scale encompasses self-awareness, sense of responsibility, and autonomy, with a total of 15 items. Sample items include: "I take responsibility for my actions and do not shirk responsibility even if I make mistakes.", "I am confident in my abilities.", "I rely on my own judgment when making decisions".

(3) Degree of Value Confusion Scale: This scale includes value confusion, difficulty in value judgment, and behavioral deviation, totaling 15 items. Sample items include: "When you have a disagreement with your best friend over an issue, do you give up your own views for fear of losing

the friendship?", "After making a decision, if others question or oppose it, do you change your mind to avoid conflict?", "Do you sometimes violate your own principles to avoid conflict?"

4.3 Data Analysis Methods

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS 26.0 software. First, reliability and validity tests were performed to ensure the measurement scales' consistency and accuracy. Descriptive statistics were then calculated to obtain the means and standard deviations of each variable. Subsequently, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between variables and understand the degree of association among them. Finally, multiple regression analysis and mediation effect testing were employed to test hypotheses H1 through H4.

5. Research Results

5.1 Reliability and Validity Tests

After collecting the questionnaire data, reliability and validity tests were conducted to ensure the scales' reliability and construct validity. In the reliability analysis, Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were used to assess the internal consistency of each scale. The results showed that the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for the three scales ranged between 0.85 and 0.92, indicating high internal consistency; thus, the scales reliably measure their respective constructs. In the validity analysis, Bartlett's test of sphericity and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) were performed. The results indicated: **(1) Youth Autonomous Participation Scale:** The Bartlett's test statistic was 302.65 with a p-value < 0.001, suggesting significant correlations among items. The first three factors explained 68.7% of the total variance, aligning with theoretical expectations. **(2) Subjectivity Scale:** The Bartlett's test statistic was 278.12 with a p-value < 0.001, confirming significant item correlations. The first three factors explained 64.3% of the total variance, demonstrating good construct validity. **(3) Degree of Value Confusion Scale:** The Bartlett's test statistic was 117.73 with a p-value < 0.001, indicating significant item correlations. The first three factors explained 56.8%, 16.5%, and 7.8% of the total variance, respectively, verifying the rationality of the contextualized item design.

5.2 Descriptive Statistics

As shown in Table 1, the data on youth autonomous participation indicate that respondents exhibit a high level of autonomous participation, with scores relatively concentrated. The subjectivity data reveal a high degree of consistency among respondents. In contrast, the data on the degree of value confusion reflect significant individual differences among respondents, providing an initial basis for testing the research hypotheses.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Youth Autonomous Participation, Subjectivity, and Degree of Value Confusion

Variable	Mean	Variance
Youth Autonomous Participation	3.42	0.69
Subjectivity	3.55	0.58
Degree of Value Confusion	2.78	0.99

5.3 Correlation Analysis

The results of the Pearson correlation analysis indicate that there is a significant positive correlation between youth autonomous participation and subjectivity ($r = 0.76$, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis H1—that higher levels of autonomous participation are associated with stronger subjectivity. There is a significant negative correlation between subjectivity and the degree of value confusion ($r = -0.27$, $p < 0.05$), supporting Hypothesis H2—that stronger subjectivity corresponds to lower levels of value confusion. Additionally, youth autonomous participation and the degree of value confusion are significantly negatively correlated ($r = -0.40$, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis H3—that higher levels of autonomous participation are linked to lower

levels of value confusion (See Table 2).

Table 2. Results of Pearson Correlation Analysis

Variables	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Significance (p)
Youth Autonomous Participation and Subjectivity	0.76	<0.001
Subjectivity and Degree of Value Confusion	-0.27	<0.05
Youth Autonomous Participation and Value Confusion Degree	-0.40	<0.001

5.4 Regression Analysis and Mediation Effect Testing

Using Baron and Kenny's four-step method, regression analysis was conducted to examine the influence mechanism of youth autonomous participation on the degree of value confusion, verifying the mediating effect of subjectivity. As shown in Table 3, youth autonomous participation has a significant positive impact on subjectivity (path a, $\beta = 0.501$, $p < 0.05$), supporting Hypothesis H1—that higher autonomous participation leads to stronger subjectivity. Subjectivity has a significant negative impact on the degree of value confusion (path b, $\beta = -0.312$, $p < 0.05$), supporting Hypothesis H2—that stronger subjectivity reduces value confusion. Youth autonomous participation also has a significant negative impact on the degree of value confusion (path c, $\beta = -0.350$, $p < 0.05$), supporting Hypothesis H3—that higher autonomous participation reduces value confusion. After controlling for subjectivity, the effect of youth autonomous participation on value confusion significantly weakens (path c', $\beta = -0.200$, $p = 0.047$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that subjectivity partially mediates the relationship between autonomous participation and value confusion, supporting Hypothesis H4.

Table 3. Results of Regression Analysis and Mediation Effect Testing

Regression Model	Independent Variable	Regression Coefficient (β)	Significance (p)	R ²
Model 1: Youth Autonomous Participation → Value Confusion Degree	Youth Autonomous Participation	-0.350	<0.05	0.159
Model 2: Youth Autonomous Participation → Subjectivity	Youth Autonomous Participation	0.501	<0.05	
Model 3: Youth Autonomous Participation + Subjectivity → Value Confusion Degree	Youth Autonomous Participation	-0.200	0.047	
	Subjectivity	-0.312	<0.05	

6. Participatory Action Research for Youth Value Alignment: Emphasizing Autonomous Participation and Subjectivity

Based on Participatory Action Research (PAR) theory, this study explored the influence mechanism of youth autonomous participation on value confusion and verified the mediating role of subjectivity. Through questionnaire surveys and data analysis of 309 university students from a university in western China, the following main conclusions were drawn:

(1) Youth autonomous participation has a significant positive impact on subjectivity. The research results indicate that when youth actively participate in various social practices and activities, their self-awareness and sense of responsibility are enhanced, leading to increased subjectivity. This supports Hypothesis H1, demonstrating the important role of autonomous

participation in cultivating youth subjectivity.

(2) Subjectivity has a significant negative impact on the degree of value confusion. Youth with enhanced subjectivity are better able to make firm value judgments, reducing reliance on negative external influences and thereby decreasing the likelihood of value confusion. This supports Hypothesis H2, highlighting the critical role of subjectivity in value cultivation.

(3) Youth autonomous participation has a significant negative impact on the degree of value confusion. Autonomous participation provides youth with opportunities to practice and internalize correct values, helping them maintain value steadfastness in complex social environments and reducing value confusion. This supports Hypothesis H3, emphasizing the positive role of autonomous participation in alleviating value confusion among youth.

(4) Subjectivity plays a partial mediating role between youth autonomous participation and value confusion. Autonomous participation not only directly influences the degree of value confusion but also indirectly affects value confusion by enhancing subjectivity. This supports Hypothesis H4, revealing the internal mechanism by which autonomous participation influences value internalization through subjectivity.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide new insights into alleviating the problem of value confusion among youth, emphasizing the importance of youth autonomous participation. By enhancing subjectivity, youth can better internalize correct values and maintain value steadfastness in complex social environments, becoming a new generation capable of shouldering the great responsibility of national rejuvenation.

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