

MBTI and Action Strategies: Why Does the Popularity of MBTI Persist?

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Abstract

In recent years, the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) has remained highly popular among young people and has become an important cultural symbol for social interaction and self-expression. Drawing on the concept of reflexive monitoring in Giddens's structuration theory, this article develops an analytical framework to examine why the popularity of MBTI persists despite widespread skepticism about its scientific validity. The findings show that MBTI users generally adopt a cautious and reflexive stance toward the instrument. Rather than being mutually exclusive, skepticism and use are integrated into the same logic of practice through distinct action strategies in response to skepticism arising at three different levels: monitoring of self-practice, monitoring of interactional norms, and monitoring of epistemic rules. The article further identifies three mechanisms through which these action strategies are sustained—instrumentalization, reconfiguration, and routinization. The article argues that the continued popularity of MBTI does not stem from young people's widespread belief in its scientific validity. Instead, it reflects a characteristic mode of engaging with cultural tools under reflexive modernity: individuals revise their practices through reflexivity, continue to use the tool through ongoing adjustment, and ultimately transform its use into routine social practice.

Keywords

MBTI; Reflexive Monitoring; Action Strategies; Youth.

1. Introduction

Contemporary Chinese society is undergoing profound structural transformations. Credential inflation driven by the expansion of higher education, persistent uncertainty in the labor market, and the rapid turnover of interpersonal relationships associated with urbanization have together produced a pervasive experience of social fluidity. Against this backdrop, questions of self-identification—concerning who one is and where one belongs—no longer receive stable institutional answers. Young people are therefore compelled to continually negotiate the boundaries of the self within a social environment characterized by expanding possibilities for choice. Meanwhile, the widespread diffusion of digital technologies and the ubiquity of social media have further intensified both the frequency and the pace of social interaction. As the costs of interaction in a society of strangers continue to rise, individuals increasingly seek symbolic tools that enable the rapid presentation of the self and the efficient recognition of others.

It is within this broader structural context that the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) has evolved from a marginal personality classification system into a widely circulating cultural language among young people. Whether in ice-breaking conversations between strangers or in navigating intimate relationships, its four-letter personality types appear to provide a concise framework for making sense of both the self and others. Existing research has primarily interpreted this phenomenon from two analytical perspectives. The first views MBTI as an

emerging resource for self-identification, arguing that young people reconstruct self-understanding and self-verification through its personality classifications and thereby achieve ontological security. The second treats MBTI as a tool for facilitating social interaction, arguing that it lowers cognitive barriers, provides shared conversational resources, and alleviates feelings of loneliness in an increasingly atomized society. Despite their differences, both perspectives rest on the same underlying assumption: the continued use of the MBTI classification system depends on users' acceptance and internalization of its personality classifications.

Yet at the very moment when MBTI has become increasingly popular, skepticism toward it is equally widespread. Claims that MBTI is "unscientific," "no different from astrology," or that "reducing people to sixteen personality types is overly simplistic" are commonplace and are often voiced by the very young people who use MBTI most frequently. This raises an important question: how do users maintain a balance between reflexivity and the continued use of the MBTI classification system in the face of such skepticism? What action strategies have they developed to manage this tension? And through what mechanisms are these action strategies sustained? To address these questions, this article focuses on young people's skepticism toward the MBTI classification system, their reflexivity, and the action strategies they develop in practice. It examines the mechanisms through which these action strategies are sustained. In doing so, it seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the logic underlying young people's engagement with classificatory discourse.

2. MBTI and the Construction of Self-Identification

Identification is a dynamic process that is continuously constructed and calibrated rather than a fixed essence given a priori [1]. Within existing research on MBTI and young people's identity formation, MBTI has been understood as an emerging resource for self-identification through which young people achieve self-understanding and self-verification. Specifically, previous studies identify three dimensions through which this mechanism operates. First, the mechanism of symbolic self-positioning. Under conditions of social acceleration and a society of strangers, young people need to accomplish self-presentation within limited time. MBTI has therefore been described as a "social calling card" for young people [2], as its concise and easily transmissible symbols enable it to function as a tool for rapid self-positioning. Second, the compensatory mechanism of ontological security. In the risk society, institutional reference points for identity, such as the former work-unit system and ties based on locality and kinship, have gradually weakened. Young people are compelled to become the architects of their own lives [3]. The definitive classification outcomes provided by MBTI can therefore alleviate existential anxiety arising from uncertainty, allowing individuals to establish a relatively stable anchor of the self amid fluid life circumstances. Third, the mechanism of identity consolidation through narrative. Chen Xinmin and Cao Chang (2024) argue that MBTI provides a typified narrative, and that its influence on young people's construction of self-identification extends beyond the cognitive level. Young people incorporate MBTI-based narratives into their everyday lives, through which these narratives reshape their patterns of action. Together, these three mechanisms point to a central assumption: self-identification precedes use. The continued use of MBTI stems from users' acceptance and internalization of its classification outcomes.[4]

While acknowledging the identity-construction function of MBTI, existing studies have also identified its potential adverse consequences, which can be summarized into three dimensions. The first concerns the risk of identity confusion. Young people simultaneously hold their actual identities and ideal identities constructed through symbolic systems such as MBTI. The discrepancy between these two forms of identity may undermine their self-identification [4,5].

The second concerns the simplification of self-identification. The labeling practices and categorical descriptions associated with MBTI may lead young people to overlook the diversity and complexity of the self, preventing them from accurately understanding their own personalities [4]. The third concerns the risk of diminished personal responsibility. In her discussion of divination practices, Xing Tingting argues that such classification systems tend to generate a pseudo-causal logic of explanation, thereby weakening individuals' sense of agency [6,7]. This argument also applies to MBTI. When classification outcomes are granted excessive explanatory power, individuals may use them to evade responsibility for their own development, attributing their behaviors to an external classification label that they did not personally choose [4].

3. MBTI and Social Interaction

Regarding MBTI and social interaction, existing research has primarily developed along two explanatory lines: efficiency and emotional connection. First, from the perspective of efficiency, interactional costs in an accelerated society are considered a primary motivation for young people to turn to symbolic tools such as MBTI. To lower interactional barriers and accelerate mutual recognition in a highly fluid society of strangers, young people use the personality cues provided by MBTI as a shortcut for quickly obtaining interpretive references, thereby reducing the costs of gradually testing and observing others over time [8]. This explanatory approach essentially extends the Goffmanian logic of impression management. MBTI constitutes a symbolic game of identity performance, through which participatory users employ its explicit social functions to engage in collective symbolic celebration [3]. Second, from the perspective of emotional connection, scholars emphasize the positive role of MBTI in alleviating loneliness within an increasingly atomized society. First, MBTI represents an active attempt by young people to relieve the pressures of fast-paced life and alleviate identity anxiety in digital and liquid societies [9]. Second, affinity-based communities formed around shared personality labels can generate emotional communities and provide alternative structures of social support for atomized individuals [9,10]. In summary, existing research suggests that the interactional functions of MBTI are grounded in shared meanings or collective identification. Whether through shared definitions of situations in impression management or emotional connections within affinity-based communities, the effectiveness of MBTI depends on the assumption that interacting parties share a certain degree of trust in and commitment to this classification system.

The potential adverse consequences of MBTI for social interaction have also received scholarly attention, with existing studies primarily identifying two concerns. First, the erosion of interactional quality through stereotyping. When classification outcomes are reduced to fixed labels, individuals may become subject to categorical judgments in social interactions. Label-based cognition inherently tends toward simplification and reification, potentially generating group-based prejudice and even status hierarchies among different personality types [11]. Second, the dilution of interactional authenticity through consumerism and algorithmic logic. Chen Aimei et al. argue that young internet users have developed skepticism and critical attitudes toward the artificial personas and narrative templates mass-produced by consumer society. [12] This suggests that MBTI-based symbolic interaction may itself become a superficial interactional template appropriated by capital and amplified by algorithms. Within this process, individuals are both users and subjects of disciplinary power. Ding Yanyan et al. further demonstrate through their discussion of the digital panopticon that while algorithms provide young people with convenient forms of symbolic expression, they also incorporate interactional behaviors into trajectories that are increasingly datafied and predictable, thereby undermining the autonomy of social interaction.[13]

4. Analytical Framework and Research Methods

4.1. Analytical Framework

Structuration theory seeks to transcend the traditional dualism between structure and agency in social theory. According to Giddens (1984), social structures are not external constraining forces independent of actors; rather, they consist of rules and resources that are continuously produced and reproduced through actors' ongoing practices. Therefore, social action is both constrained by structural conditions and capable of transforming and sustaining structures through ongoing practices. Giddens refers to this relationship as the duality of structure. [14]

Building on this theoretical foundation, Giddens further developed the concept of reflexive monitoring of action to explain how actors in modern society understand and regulate their own practices. Unlike traditional approaches that view action as a process directly determined by fixed norms, values, or external structures, Giddens argues that actors possess an ongoing practical consciousness through which they monitor their own conduct, evaluate their circumstances, and modify their courses of action in response to new information. In other words, action is not simply driven by pre-existing rules; rather, it unfolds through continuous self-monitoring and situational judgment.[15]

First, reflexive monitoring of action is manifested in actors' ongoing understanding of their own courses of action. Giddens argues that actors do not possess complete transparency regarding their own actions; rather, they possess practical consciousness, through which they understand what they are doing and why they are doing it in everyday life. This continuous awareness of their own practices enables actors to modify their courses of action based on experiential feedback while maintaining consistency in their conduct.

Second, reflexive monitoring of action involves actors' ongoing evaluation of interactional situations and social relations. Because modern society is characterized by high levels of fluidity and complexity, actors can no longer rely on fixed roles and stable relationships characteristic of traditional societies to organize their actions. Instead, they must continuously evaluate situational conditions, others' responses, and potential consequences. Consequently, action in modern society increasingly takes the form of situated adjustment, whereby actors reorganize their practices in response to changing social environments.

Finally, reflexive monitoring of action also involves actors' ongoing scrutiny of social knowledge and institutional rules. Giddens argues that a key feature of modernity is the reflexive circulation of knowledge. Social knowledge is continuously produced, disseminated, and incorporated into social practices, while simultaneously becoming an object through which actors reassess and adjust their own conduct. Rules and knowledge in modern society no longer possess the unquestioned authority characteristic of traditional societies; instead, they acquire practical efficacy through continuous use, evaluation, and revision.

4.2. Research Methods

This study adopts a case study approach, supplemented by netnographic participant observation. This study focuses on young people as its research population. As the population most actively exposed to emerging phenomena, young people encounter, discuss, and apply MBTI-related discourse more frequently than other age groups, making them a suitable population for obtaining sufficiently rich and typical empirical materials through interviews. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, resulting in a total of 20 interview participants. The participants were similar in age to the researcher, which facilitated the establishment of rapport during interviews and enabled the collection of deeper and less guarded accounts.

The selection of participants ensured that all 16 MBTI personality types were represented. The sample consisted of 10 male and 10 female participants, ranging in age from 19 to 26. Participants were either university students or young adults at the early stages of their careers. The purpose of this sampling design was to rule out a potential competing explanation: namely, that the coexistence of skepticism and use is merely a distinctive feature of certain personality types with cognitive preferences, rather than a pattern shared across personality types. By including all 16 personality types, this study demonstrates that the phenomenon is not concentrated within any personality subgroup but instead exhibits cross-type prevalence. Basic information about the participants is presented in Table 1.

Data were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 20 participants, with each interview lasting between one and two hours. Several participants were interviewed on multiple occasions, allowing important issues to be revisited through follow-up interviews after an interval of time.

Each interview began with questions about participants' life experiences and personal backgrounds to establish rapport and encourage more open communication. The interviews then proceeded to semi-structured questions concerning participants' understanding of MBTI and the contexts in which they used it. Follow-up probing questions were used to explore specific contexts of use, discursive expressions, and participants' subjective experiences in greater depth.

Table 1: Basic Information of Interview Participants

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Pseudonym	MBTI Type	Occupation
A1	23	Female	pyt	ENFP	Employee at an animation company
A2	24	Female	sxg	ISFJ	Operations staff at a media company
A3	24	Female	zfw	ISFP	Master's student in Social Policy
A4	24	Female	wc	INFP	Public-sector employee in a township government
A5	25	Female	slg	ESTJ	Public-sector employee at a museum
A6	22	Female	jyh	ISTP	Undergraduate student in Landscape Design
A7	26	Female	wxt	INTP	Physician in the Imaging Department
A8	23	Female	gsq	ENTJ	Master's student in Economic Statistics
A9	24	Female	zjr	ENFJ	Master's student in Food Engineering
A10	24	Female	yzx	ESFP	Master's student in Business Administration
A11	26	Male	wjj	ENTP	Chip Design Engineer
A12	26	Male	wyx	INTJ	Middle School Mathematics Teacher
A13	23	Male	zbs	INFJ	Chip Design Engineer
A14	27	Male	hql	ISTJ	Employee at an Insurance Company
A15	25	Male	zyz	INTP	Master's student in Electronic Information Engineering
A16	23	Male	jzy	ENFP	Master's student in Physics
A17	27	Male	lhj	ENTJ	PhD student in Biology
A18	22	Male	lyj	ENFJ	Master's student in Electronic Information Engineering

A19	20	Male	zkb	INFP	Undergraduate student in Mechanical Engineering Technology
A20	28	Male	lsj	ENTP	University Mathematics Lecturer

5. Three Action Strategies among MBTI Users

5.1. Self-Practice Monitoring

Within the context of late modernity described by Giddens, self-identification is no longer a fixed attribute conferred by structural positions such as kinship, locality, or occupation. Rather, it has become a reflexive project that individuals must continuously construct [15]. Giddens argues that the defining features of late modernity are the separation of time and space and the development of disembedding mechanisms. As the certainties of traditional society dissolve, individuals are compelled to negotiate the boundaries of the self within an open social environment characterized by an expanding range of choices. These structural transformations place young people in a distinctive predicament of self-identification. On the one hand, they seek a stable self-narrative to cope with the ontological anxiety generated by a fluid society. On the other hand, they are fully aware that no classification system can adequately capture the complexity of the self.

Against this backdrop, MBTI has entered young people's practices of self-identification as a new personality classification system. Compared with traditional classification systems such as zodiac signs and blood types, MBTI possesses three characteristics that make it appear more rational. First, it provides a structured cognitive framework that organizes complex personality traits into a system of four dimensions and sixteen personality types, thereby satisfying young people's need for intelligibility. Second, by drawing upon Jungian psychological typology, MBTI distinguishes itself from purely entertainment-oriented fortune-telling and presents an appearance of scientific legitimacy. Third, the concise four-letter format is highly shareable and well suited to the communicative logic of social media, making it an effective performative tool for young people's self-expression.

However, MBTI's incorporation into young people's self-identification practices is not a process of unidirectional acceptance, but one accompanied by ongoing skepticism and reflexivity. This skepticism originates from everyday experiential judgments—an intuitive questioning of whether this personality classification system accurately describes oneself. This skepticism is primarily directed toward two dimensions.

First, skepticism concerns the stability of MBTI, specifically whether test results vary across situations. This is reflected in young people's conscious monitoring of the variability of their test results. As one participant explained:

"I think it changes quite easily because it can vary depending on your environment or your current state. If I believed MBTI too strongly, I would think that, as an extrovert, I have to gain energy through socializing. But sometimes I simply prefer to be alone." (A10)

Another participant similarly remarked:

"I think it's perfectly normal for my MBTI type to change. If I'm going through a difficult period, I may become an introvert. That only reflects my current state—it doesn't mean that I've always been an introvert." (A5)

These accounts indicate that users possess a reflexive awareness of MBTI test results. They not only recognize that the results may change, but also become aware of the constraining implications that these results may have for interpreting their own behavior. Such reflexivity prevents users from treating MBTI as a prescriptive framework that constrains their sense of self.

Second, skepticism concerns the accuracy of MBTI, specifically whether personality type descriptions are sufficiently accurate to encompass the multiple dimensions of the self. As one participant noted:

"I know another ENFJ, but we're completely different. That's when I realized the test isn't that accurate. I wouldn't use it to fully explain who I am." (A9)

The substantial heterogeneity observed within the same personality type calls the explanatory power of personality labels into question.

Even so, young people do not withdraw from MBTI-related discourse. Instead, they develop an action strategy of self-practice monitoring. This strategy motivates a deeper and more nuanced engagement with MBTI. As one participant explained:

"I read online posts analyzing my personality type because I think they're a useful way to understand myself. But if I only relied on those descriptions, they would definitely miss some aspects of who I am. Many sides of myself can only be understood through lived experience, so I would never let those analyses limit me." (A9)

Skepticism about the accuracy and stability of MBTI generates an ongoing question that remains to be verified: whether its descriptions adequately capture the self in its entirety. Users repeatedly return to the personality type descriptions to distinguish which aspects are accurate and which are not, while also reassessing whether their personality type has changed across different stages of life. This ongoing process of evaluation is itself a form of use, through which reflexivity becomes incorporated into the practice of using MBTI. Rather than passively accepting the classification results, actors continuously evaluate and adjust their own actions according to the degree of correspondence between MBTI test results and their lived experiences. Through selectively appropriating personality type descriptions, young people treat MBTI as a flexible set of descriptive resources that can be drawn upon when needed. What they use is no longer the MBTI classification system as a whole, but those elements that they extract from it and find consistent with their own experiences. Their own experiences, in turn, become the basis for a reflexive interpretation of the classification system itself, rather than leading them to accept MBTI's descriptions as unquestionable truths.

5.2. Interactional Norm Monitoring

Whereas reflexivity at the level of self-practice monitoring centers on whether MBTI accurately describes oneself, interactional norm monitoring raises a more explicit normative question: whether one is justified in using MBTI to classify and anticipate others. This form of reflexivity is rooted in the inherent tendency of the MBTI classification system to produce labels.

From the perspective of social cognitive psychology, stereotypes are relatively stable cognitive schemas through which people form preconceived understandings of others on the basis of their existing knowledge, beliefs, and expectations. Myers argues that inaccurate and persistent stereotypes generate negative preconceptions about others, which may in turn give rise to prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviors. Prejudice and discrimination thus emerge as affective and behavioral biases rooted in such cognitive distortions [16].

The popularity of MBTI provides a readily available cognitive script for the formation of such stereotypes. As young people use MBTI test results to label themselves, they simultaneously use them to label others, stabilizing and stereotyping their perceptions of others through MBTI categories. For example, a young person who strongly embraces MBTI may meet someone identified as an INFP and, guided by prevailing stereotypes, immediately assume that the person is an "overthinker" who is overly sensitive or prone to rumination. Such assumptions may lead to prejudice even before any meaningful interaction has taken place. In essence, this labeling practice functions as a strategy for reducing cognitive costs. By relying on a four-letter code, individuals rapidly categorize others, thereby reducing the informational burden associated with social cognition.

When confronted with the normative risks embedded in MBTI labeling, young people display reflexivity regarding the legitimacy of how they use MBTI. This reflexivity is often expressed through explicit moral self-criticism, embedded directly within their accounts of how they use MBTI.

For users, however, reflexivity about the legitimacy of MBTI and its continued use do not constitute a contradiction that must be resolved. Instead, the two are maintained in a state of dynamic balance. As one participant explained:

"If you assume what someone is like simply because you know their MBTI type, it feels a bit like bullying." (A15)

Another participant remarked:

"First impressions can make you immediately associate certain MBTI types with either positive or negative characteristics. You end up drawing conclusions about someone before really getting to know them, and I think that's irresponsible. But when I meet someone new, I still find myself guessing their MBTI type because I think it helps us build rapport more quickly." (A8)

From Giddens's perspective, actors monitor not only the content of their actions but also their moral positioning within the normative order. They recognize the potential symbolic violence involved in classifying others through MBTI and therefore accompany its use with explicit disclaimers. This combination of use and self-disclaimer transforms skepticism about the legitimacy of MBTI from an obstacle into a resource for legitimizing its use, allowing users to regard their own practices as normatively acceptable. Moral self-criticism does not function to terminate use; rather, it establishes discursive boundaries within which continued use becomes acceptable. Once actors acknowledge that "this may not be entirely appropriate," the moral costs are symbolically accounted for. This enables them to continue using MBTI in social interaction while simultaneously preserving both its practical utility and a self-image of reflexivity.

As another participant reflected:

"One of my colleagues is an INFP, and we get along really well, so I've come to like that personality type. But another colleague in the emergency department is an ISFJ, and he's probably my least favorite person. Even so, when I meet someone who's also an ISFJ, I still remind myself to spend more time getting to know them instead of immediately assuming I won't like them." (A7)

5.3. Knowledge-Rule Monitoring

At the level of knowledge-rule monitoring, reflexivity is directed toward the validity of the MBTI classification system itself. Specifically, users question whether the overarching framework of classifying people into sixteen personality types is valid. This form of skepticism appears in highly standardized expressions, typically articulated through phrases such as "too simplistic," "too crude," or "unscientific." As one participant remarked, "This way of classifying people is actually quite absolute." (A4) Another participant similarly noted, "There are 1.4 billion people in this world. How could sixteen personality types possibly capture all of them?" (A3)

However, skepticism about the system does not lead users to withdraw from MBTI-related discourse. Instead, it encourages users to shift from relying on the sixteen personality types as a complete system to selectively extracting and using dimensions of the framework. As one participant explained:

"Dimensions like I versus E or P versus J are quite clear. I don't think there's any problem with using those dimensions on their own to describe myself—they actually help other people understand my habits more quickly. I'm grateful that MBTI separates out these dimensions because they reduce the costs of communication. But I wouldn't voluntarily tell people my full personality type, nor would I ask others about theirs. I just don't think that's necessary." (A20)

Through the affirmative extraction of specific dimensions (I/E and P/J) and the suspension of the overall system, users explicitly redefine what they are using. What users engage with, therefore, is no longer the MBTI classification system itself, but rather the binary descriptions extracted from it that closely resemble everyday language. Actors actively reduce the precision of classification by breaking down the sixteen-type system into coarser-grained and more flexible combinations of dimensions, thereby bypassing rather than resolving skepticism toward the overall system. Users actively redefine the object of use. MBTI is transformed from a complete typology into a set of flexible descriptive labels that can be selectively invoked.

Notably, within this practice, the I/E (introversion/extroversion) dimension becomes the most widely used dimension independently. This dimension is prioritized because it closely corresponds to everyday language. Introversion and extroversion are already familiar everyday descriptions in social interaction, and MBTI merely provides them with a letter-based coding format. When young people say, "I am an I-person" or "acting as an E for an I," they are no longer using MBTI typological discourse itself, but rather an everyday social language repackaged through MBTI. Compared with the terms introversion and extroversion themselves, the binary discourse of I/E is more neutral and carries fewer value judgments. The extraction of this discursive feature allows MBTI to remain suspended at the systemic level while becoming more deeply embedded at the discursive level. MBTI is no longer a system that requires belief, but a tool that can be used.

"Because the meanings represented by the different letters in MBTI have become very popular, they are something that most people already understand. There is almost no barrier to using them in communication. So sometimes, if I want to express that I have some tendencies toward social anxiety and naturally avoid social situations that I do not want to face, I will simply say that I am an I-person, or that this is truly an 'I-person hell,' to express how I feel." (A4)

6. Mechanisms Sustaining Action Strategies

6.1. Instrumentalization

In traditional societies, individuals' understanding of others was derived from long-term and stable interactions within communities. Whether referring to acquaintances in rural communities or members of traditional occupational guilds, identity recognition relied on diachronic and comprehensive personalized interactions, through which others were understood as whole persons rather than fragmented social roles. However, the fundamental transformation of modern urban life lies in the dramatic increase in interactional density and the continuous overload of sensory stimulation. Simmel argues in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* that, in order to maintain the tolerability of their mental life, urban individuals must objectify and typify the continuous influx of external stimuli. By adopting the blasé attitude as a psychological defense mechanism, they reduce interactional partners from whole personalities to social types, thereby enabling interaction without exhausting cognitive resources.

Therefore, MBTI is used by actors in social life as a cultural tool. Swidler challenges the traditional model that views culture as shaping action through ultimate values. She argues that culture is better understood as a tool kit composed of habits, skills, and styles, from which actors select elements to construct action strategies for responding to specific situations. Culture, therefore, does not need to function as a belief system fully embraced by actors; rather, it only needs to serve as an available resource that can be readily accessed in practice [17].

"I am an INFP, but sometimes I become an ENFP. Except among people who already know me, I do not really want to leave strangers with a first impression of being an INFP. Many videos online portray INFPs as weak and emotionally vulnerable. I do not want others to attach this label to me, so when interacting with people outside my close circle, I would rather describe

myself as an ENFP. After getting to know someone more deeply, my internal I traits are still dominant. It is only in external social interactions that I tend to present myself more like an ENFP." (A1)

This demonstrates that actors instrumentalize MBTI by selectively invoking it in different situations to facilitate their action strategies.

Compared with existing classification resources such as astrology, blood types, and zodiac signs, MBTI functions as an objectifying tool for urban interaction that possesses greater formal advantages in modern society. First, the procedure of completing the questionnaire provides MBTI with a form of scientific legitimacy that can be self-verified without specialized knowledge, making it easier than astrology for strangers to accept it as a shared topic of conversation. Second, the four-dimensional, sixteen-type structure of MBTI is inherently decomposable, allowing users to flexibly employ one or two dimensions (such as I/E) while suspending the remaining dimensions according to their needs. Compared with astrological classifications, which tend to require either complete acceptance or complete rejection, MBTI is more adaptable to different levels of interaction, ranging from initial ice-breaking conversations to deeper exchanges. MBTI therefore becomes particularly advantageous among various available classification resources, becoming an especially useful tool in the cultural tool kit of contemporary youth in Swidler's sense.

6.2. Reconstruction

According to Giddens and Beck, modern society is fundamentally reflexive in nature. Knowledge is continuously produced and disseminated, while simultaneously being subjected to ongoing scrutiny and destabilized by disagreements within expert systems [18]. Accordingly, individuals' self-identification is no longer something given once and for all or established permanently through traditional authority. Instead, it must be continuously reinterpreted and maintained through reflexive monitoring.

As the group most intensively exposed to newly emerging knowledge systems and critical discourses, young people's reservations toward MBTI should not be understood as a specific distrust of this testing tool. Rather, such reservations represent a normal response that individuals in reflexive modernity develop when engaging with any newly acquired knowledge. However, reflexive monitoring is not a force that overturns self-identification or existing knowledge practices; rather, it is precisely the mechanism that sustains their continued operation within constantly changing contexts. Self-identification persists precisely because it is continuously examined, revised, and partially adjusted, rather than completely dissolving amid the rapid transformations of modernity. The three strategies adopted by users discussed above are not isolated expedient responses to specific forms of skepticism. Rather, they represent the continuous readaptation of a cultural tool by rational young actors under the conditions of reflexive modernity.

Self-practice monitoring enables MBTI to remain usable by reducing its application to a smaller level of granularity when facing challenges regarding the "inaccuracy" of test results. Interactional norm monitoring allows MBTI to obtain moral tolerance for continued use when facing challenges regarding the "immorality" of categorizing others. Knowledge-rule monitoring enables MBTI to respond to challenges regarding the "unscientific" nature of the entire system by suspending skepticism toward the overall framework while selectively extracting usable elements for continued circulation.

The three strategies target different objects of skepticism but follow the same underlying logic: whenever skepticism challenges existing modes of use, users adjust the scope of applicability of the tool rather than terminate its use itself. This precisely demonstrates the mechanism through which reflexive monitoring, in Giddens's sense, sustains rather than destroys established practices.

Therefore, the role played by skepticism in the process of MBTI's social circulation is not that of an erosive force but rather resembles a mechanism of repair and readaptation. Skepticism does not undermine the usability of this classification tool. Rather, it is the continuous adjustments driven by skepticism that enable MBTI to be repeatedly transferred into new contexts. From an ice-breaking topic in initial encounters, to an interpretive framework for behaviors among acquaintances, and further to a strategy for managing intimate relationships, MBTI reaffirms its usability through each transfer across contexts.

6.3. Routinization

From the temporal dimension, modern society is characterized by an emphasis on efficiency and the precise regulation and segmentation of time, and this pursuit of efficiency has similarly permeated the domain of social interaction. From the spatial dimension, the external environment of social interaction has shifted from the traditional acquaintance society to a stranger society, making the reconstruction of interpersonal relationships inevitable [19]. In such a stranger society, where individuals lack long-term acquaintance-based understanding yet must make numerous social judgments within limited time [21], participants in social interaction particularly require a set of shared recognition symbols that can be directly invoked by both sides without additional explanation, thereby reducing the time costs of mutual recognition. The MBTI discourse precisely fits this structural need.

"I think MBTI is similar to a label. Giving yourself such a label allows others to quickly understand roughly what kind of person you are and helps you quickly find people who share similar interests. At the same time, I can use the same approach to understand and judge others." (A5)

Specifically, MBTI is transformed into a group routine through processes of habitualization and typification. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that the objectivity of social reality does not exist naturally but is produced through a process that moves from habitualization, to reciprocal typification, and ultimately to institutionalization [20]. Individuals pattern recurring actions into routines to conserve decision-making energy, thereby forming habits. When multiple actors repeatedly interact around the same situations and develop mutual expectations regarding each other's responses, these habits become reciprocally typified as roles and scripts. When these scripts are transmitted to new participants and become detached from the specific individuals who originally created them, they acquire historicity and objectivity, leading actors to perceive them as simply the way things are done.

The diffusion of MBTI labels among young people represents precisely the manifestation of this process within an efficiency-oriented stranger society. Individuals initially invoke expressions such as "I am an I-person" and "he is a P-person" repeatedly in specific situations driven by instrumental motivations. Such invocation is itself mutually confirmed and replicated through group interaction, gradually sedimenting into a common language that requires no further explanation and can be directly invoked by both parties. For this reason, when young people today say "I am an I-person" in social settings, they no longer need to explain what I represents or where this classification originates. This is precisely the result of reciprocal typification having been completed at the group level. It is also the process through which the structural need of an efficiency-oriented stranger society for such a shared symbolic system is ultimately transformed into a concrete routine.

However, it should be noted that this process of routinization of MBTI labels remains at a semi-institutionalized stage and has not achieved full institutionalization in the sense described by Berger and Luckmann. The completion of institutionalization depends on scripts being transmitted to subsequent generations and becoming detached from the original actors who created them, thereby acquiring historicity. In contrast, MBTI labels continue to rely on sustained and active reciprocal invocation among contemporaries to maintain their

recognizability; once separated from such continuous social repetition, their efficacy becomes difficult to sustain independently.

Therefore, the social efficacy of MBTI does not depend on coercive empowerment from institutional authority, nor does it depend on users' continuous belief commitment. Rather, it relies precisely on the cycle of shared discourse and use itself. It is precisely because the continuous and mutually visible invocation among group members continually provides legitimacy for subsequent invocation that use, in turn, reinforces the recognizability and usability of this common language within the group. Through this repeated process, a cycle of social efficacy emerges that does not depend on beliefs in its authenticity yet is capable of self-reproduction. Meanwhile, the efficiency-oriented structure of stranger society provides the practical conditions for the continued existence of such a low-commitment and ready-to-use common language, allowing it to remain particularly stable even while being subject to skepticism.

7. Conclusion and Discussion

Why does the popularity of MBTI persist? Drawing on in-depth interviews with 20 young MBTI users, this article provides an alternative explanatory pathway to the conventional argument that identity leads to use. The findings show that the continued popularity of MBTI does not result from young people's widespread belief in its scientific validity or explanatory power. Rather, it emerges from the adaptive practice strategies developed by users through ongoing skepticism and reflection.

When confronting the limitations of MBTI in explaining the self, users adopt a selective appropriation strategy, transforming it from a complete personality type system into a descriptive resource aligned with their own experiences. When confronting the normative risks of using MBTI to categorize others, users adopt a boundary-oriented use strategy by incorporating moral self-monitoring while invoking type labels, thereby maintaining the legitimacy of classification practices. When confronting epistemic doubts regarding the validity of MBTI's overall classification framework, users adopt a dimensional decomposition strategy, moving from the sixteen-type system back to more everyday meaningful dimensional descriptions. Through this process, MBTI is transformed from a theoretical system that requires belief into a communicative tool that can be invoked.

The three strategies respond to different dimensions of reflexive challenges, yet they follow the same underlying logic: users do not sustain MBTI use by eliminating skepticism. Instead, they adjust their modes of use and reconstruct the boundaries of the tool, thereby making skepticism itself a condition for MBTI's continued embeddedness in everyday practices.

Furthermore, this article explains how these strategies collectively produce the social efficacy of MBTI through three dimensions: instrumentalization, reconstruction, and routinization. At the level of instrumentalization, users transform MBTI from a typology that requires belief into an objectified identification tool that can be flexibly invoked, allowing it to accommodate the efficiency-oriented interactional demands of stranger society. At the level of reconstruction, the spirit of skepticism generated by reflexive modernity does not undermine the usability of MBTI. Instead, it becomes the mechanism driving its continuous readaptation. Skepticism encourages users to continuously adjust their modes of invocation, enabling MBTI to repeatedly demonstrate its usability across different contexts, from initial ice-breaking conversations to deeper interactions. At the level of routinization, through the mutually visible continuous invocation among group members, MBTI discourse gradually sediments into a common language that requires no further explanation and can be directly invoked by both parties, forming a cycle of social efficacy that does not depend on belief in authenticity yet is capable of self-reproduction.

This article reveals a typical pattern of cultural tool use in reflexive modernity. Actors do not need to fully believe in a particular cultural tool. Instead, through continuous reflexive monitoring, they only need to engage in partial appropriation, moral exemption, and adjustment of precision, thereby maintaining its use while preserving a rational self-image. This finding extends beyond MBTI and provides an analytical reference for understanding the continued circulation of similar cultural phenomena, such as astrology and tarot, among contemporary youth.

However, it should be noted that the process of routinization of MBTI labels remains at a semi-institutionalized stage. Its social efficacy does not depend on coercive empowerment from institutional authority, nor does it depend on users' continuous belief commitment. Rather, it relies on the cycle of shared discourse and use among contemporaries itself. Once such continuous social repetition weakens, its efficacy becomes difficult to sustain independently.

This means that the popularity of MBTI is both a product of the ethic of efficiency and the structural demands of stranger society, and a collective practice through which young people seek certainty amid uncertainty, sustain use amid skepticism, and generate routines through use. For young people, the crucial issue may not be whether to use MBTI, but whether they can maintain a necessary reflexive distance between instrumentalization and autonomy, avoiding the possibility that a combination of four letters ultimately replaces the continuous exploration of the complexity of human nature.

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