

Research on the Guidance of Online Public Opinions among College Students

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Abstract: Focusing on the ideological and political education of college students, this paper studies the characteristics and laws of college students' participation in network public opinions in the current Internet environment from the perspective of communication science. The emergence of campus network public opinions is influenced not only by the mechanism of the Internet media platform, but also by the media literacy of college students themselves. There is a management vacuum in campus communication, which leads to the emergence of campus public opinions. In order to minimize the impact of public opinions on campus, different entities need to play an active role, understand the triggering factors and process, observe the characteristics of public opinion fermentation in universities, timely prevent and resolve risks from the origins, and ensure a healthy environment for students. Following the law of resolving public opinion, early prevention, early detection, and early resolution, educators attach great importance to the ideological and political education of college students, and maintain the clarity of the campus network environment.

Keywords: Ideological and political education; Public opinion; University management

Online publication: August 12, 2025

1. Introduction

The Internet has become an important distribution center for information dissemination. In recent years, frequent online public opinion incidents in colleges and universities, especially topics such as teachers' ethics and academic fraud, have often been discussed in social searches, posing great challenges to campus management. As institutions that cultivate national high-level talents, universities should not only "impart knowledge and skills" but also "cultivate virtue and nurture people." Online speech is an external manifestation of students' inner thoughts, and it is necessary to attach great importance to the ideological and political education of college students, follow the rules of handling online public opinion, and maintain the cleanliness of the campus network environment^[1].

Handling public opinion is a scientifically based task that requires grasping internal laws. The three key core elements are timing, moderation, and efficiency. The level of control over the three elements is the yardstick

for testing the level of public opinion work. When dealing with online public opinion incidents, colleges and universities should coordinate the efforts of various units on campus, form a joint force to respond to public opinion incidents, and run through the all-round concept of prevention, resolution, and improvement after the event, and continuously strengthen the guidance for college students' daily ideological and political education as well as that on line, and help college students establish correct views of the Internet.

2. Research background

The 55th Statistical Report on the Development of Internet in China, released by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) on January 17, 2025, pointed out that by 2024, the number of Internet users in China had reached 1.108 billion, and the Internet penetration rate had reached 78.6%^[2]. Among them, those aged 20–29 account for a relatively high proportion, which is the main group using the Internet. The birth year of this group is 1996–2005, which is basically in the undergraduate and graduate stages. It can be seen that as a group of network aborigines, they have become considerable users of the Internet.

As network natives, college students rely more on the use of new media technology and have a higher usage rate. In the relatively limited space of the campus, frequent human-machine interaction amplifies the attention of the social hot events on the network platform. For events closely related to students' own interests, it is easy to trigger their online public opinions^[3]. This poses a great risk to the normal development of ideological and political work in colleges and universities.

The president of the CPC pointed out at the 2018 National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work that “We must firmly grasp the correct direction of public opinion, sing the main melody, enhance positive energy, and expand and strengthen mainstream ideological and public opinions.” The Internet is not a lawless place, and the convenience of the Internet is not an engine for promoting inappropriate speech. Colleges and universities should firmly adhere to the fundamental task of “cultivating virtue and nurturing people”, follow the dissemination laws of online public opinions, prevent, detect, and resolve incidents early, and avoid offline harmful incidents caused by online public opinions^[4].

3. Current situation of online public opinion dissemination in colleges and universities

According to Pierre Bourdieu's “Field Theory”, any action of a person is influenced by the field environment in which the action occurs. The field is not only the physical environment, but also includes the behavior of others in the environment and other factors connected to it. The dissemination chain of online public opinions in colleges and universities is influenced by the campus environment and has its unique forms of expression^[5].

3.1. Characteristics of online public opinion in colleges and universities

3.1.1. Diversification of platforms

On various online media platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, QQ, Douyin, Bilibili, Zhihu, Xiaohongshu, and Campus Confession Wall, college students are releasing information while obtaining information. Although each platform has a background audit mechanism, there is a lack of “gatekeepers” for the authenticity of information. Short videos, live broadcasts, and other straightforward communication methods speed up the dissemination of information. The comment and forwarding functions of various online platforms often reprocess the contents of dissemination, exacerbating the phenomenon of information distortion. When students do not understand the full

picture of the situation and obtain one-sided information, they are prone to making statements that do not match the facts, which can have a negative impact.

3.1.2. Virtualization of modes

The dissemination of information on the Internet has revolutionized the traditional mode of communication^[6]. Information is no longer cold words or monotonous sounds. Information is displayed in the form of texts, images, GIFs, audio, video, AI, etc. The content penetrates more strongly, and the identity of the information publisher is no longer a concern. The social backgrounds, such as people's names, gender, ethnicity, and occupation, are replaced by screen names and avatars. Through privacy settings or the activation of anonymity functions, it is completely possible to create a virtual account on the Internet that is completely different from real life to express opinions. Online accounts get rid of real interpersonal relationships, and information publication is greatly reduced by the social order and good customs. The cost of releasing information on Internet platforms is also greatly reduced.

3.1.3. Low age users

As a large group of internet users, college students are clearly characterized by their younger identities. First, the age of Internet access is getting lower and lower. According to the survey, the average age of post-95 college students using the Internet for the first time is about 7 years old, and the average age of post-00 college students using the Internet for the first time is 4 years earlier. The earlier the contact time, the earlier the influence of Internet thinking on students. The second is the low average age. The average age of college students using the Internet is 21.5 years, which is 16 years older than the average age of Chinese Internet users of 37.8 years. This will inevitably lead to cognitive asymmetry caused by the age differences, resulting in intergenerational communication barriers^[7].

3.2. Weaknesses in online public opinion in colleges and universities

The dissemination of online public opinions in colleges and universities is a branch of social public opinion dissemination in a specific environment. It has not only the commonality of online public opinion dissemination, but also is affected by many factors such as disseminators, receivers, and management methods of online communication in colleges and universities, and has its unique characteristics.

3.2.1. Irrational expression

College internet users often lack rational thinking when expressing their opinions because their minds have not yet been integrated with society^[8]. In the process of expressing opinions on events of concern, they often only consider their own positions, excessively incorporate their own emotions, hold biased and one-sided attitudes, and even use means such as insults and even abuse to express personal ideas. Especially for sensitive topics, the irrational speeches of college students are prominent on social media platforms, including Weibo and Xiaohongshu, gradually forming a trend of group polarization.

3.2.2. Fast speed of public dissemination

The emergence of online platforms has greatly accelerated the speed of information dissemination, with no time difference and unaffected by distance. The two-way interactive communication mechanism has driven the high-speed flow of information, but the resulting lack of "gatekeepers" has also provided a fast and convenient channel for the generation and dissemination of public opinions in colleges and universities^[9]. On any online platform,

users are independent individuals who can become information sources by posting any message. By setting keywords, buying hot searches, or using other methods, a group of users with common attention can be quickly attracted under the big data push mechanism. Through such functions as forwarding and commenting, personalized content can be exposed to the public in a short period of time.

3.2.3. Delayed handling of campus public opinions

The fermentation of public opinions is rapid, while the form of the internet is also fleeting. The dissemination of information by college students is a bottom-up form of communication. Generally speaking, when public opinions are formed, the number of disseminators and attention involved has reached a certain level. The privacy of Internet users is protected by relevant laws and cannot be disclosed to any unit or individual. When public opinions arise, the relevant departments responsible for maintaining campus information security are in chaos due to a lack of pre-prepared emergency plans, and may not know how to deal with these public opinions, making it difficult to effectively find the sources of information and then resolve risks. Often, it is necessary to search for information sources from top to bottom through human efforts and other methods, understand the authenticity of posting events, understand the reasons for posting, and further develop corresponding solutions. In this process, the longer the time, the more false information will be generated, and even secondary public opinions may arise. Due to the strong virtuality and high degree of concealment of online communication, the difficulty of resolving public opinions has become unexpectedly deeper^[10].

4. Building a network public opinion processing mechanism in colleges and universities

The president of the CPC emphasized at the party's symposium on news and public opinion work: "Doing a good job in online public opinion work is a long-term task. We must innovate and improve online propaganda, use the laws of online communication, carry forward the main theme, and stimulate positive energy." Colleges and universities implement the principal responsibility system under the leadership of the party committee. Colleges and universities are an important part of society. According to the common characteristics of public opinions when they occur, combined with the actual situation of each school, grasp the characteristics and laws of campus public opinions, optimize the combination of resolving public opinion risks inside and outside the school, and prevent, detect, and solve them as soon as possible.

4.1. At the school level

4.1.1. Strengthen the monitoring of online public opinions

The People's Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Room proposed the concept of "golden 4 hours" for handling public opinions. Within 4 hours, it is necessary to clarify the facts and develop practical measures to solve potential disputes or debates and quickly release the truth of the matter to the public to achieve the goal of resolving public opinions. In the era of all media, the management mode also needs internet thinking.

One is to establish a three-dimensional monitoring system. Through collaborating with professional third-party online public opinion processing agencies, the risk of public opinion outbreaks will be confined within a controllable range. By setting up keyword bars, key attention lists, and together with other methods, the public opinion information detection work ought to be carried out before, during, and after the event, especially at critical time nodes, especially at critical time nodes. The network platform is monitored all day long, and the monitoring

data is analyzed and judged irregularly to grasp the occurring patterns of school public opinions ^[11]. Meanwhile, the other is to enhance the level of modern network technology. In the Internet environment, technology plays an important role. If we only rely on “civil air defense”, the work efficiency will be reduced. Only when “technical defense” and “civil air defense” work together can people grasp the trend of public opinions in a timely manner and purposefully address public opinions on campus.

4.1.2. Strengthening the top-level design of the campus

The occurrence of online public opinions is the result of the interaction of multiple factors, and it is difficult to solve them with a single force. Close cooperation between all links is required to prevent the occurrence of campus public opinions. The cost of prevention is always lower than that of processing. The occurrence of public opinions is often due to the fact that demands are not paid attention to and resolved, and eventually accumulate in the form of public opinions ^[12]. Firstly, schools should strengthen their “communication” measures, such as setting up principal mailboxes and student opinion boxes, to improve channels for expressing students’ demands, safeguard students’ rights to know, participate, express, and supervise, and provide serious and positive responses to issues that students are concerned about. This can help students understand the situation, gain their understanding, and solve the root causes of the outbreak of public opinions. Secondly, schools need to enhance their credibility. The occurrence of public opinions is often due to a lack of trust in existing solutions. By seeking support from other channels through online platforms, schools can establish measures such as student reception days and transaction lists to make the processing procedure transparent and continuously improve the credibility of the school, forming a virtuous cycle of students trusting the schools and expressing their demands through reasonable channels.

4.2. At the level of teachers

4.2.1. Exploring the potential of the curriculum’s ideological and political “three-complete education”

Teachers in colleges and universities should give full play to their teaching initiatives, and educate people in a whole way throughout the whole process and in an all-around way. While teaching professional courses well, they also need to explore the ideological and political elements in the classroom, including theoretical knowledge, values, spiritual pursuit, etc., and go in the same direction as the ideological and political courses. Moisturizing things silently has an impact on cultivating students’ consciousness and character, and enhancing the effect of “cultivating virtue and nurturing people.” According to the characteristics of different disciplines, subtly influencing students with the ideological and political elements in the curriculum turns out to be crucial. Moreover, it is essential to enhance classroom innovation awareness, develop new ideas with new concepts, and promote new methods with new ideas among students ^[13].

4.2.2. Giving full play to the role of ideological and political courses

Ideological and political teachers should leverage their professional advantages, change the “cramming” teaching methods through strong political qualities and solid professional skills, and integrate the media and historical values that are suitable for the course contents into the teaching process through equal communications with students. They should consolidate their value consensus with students, form a value synergy, and jointly resist negative online speeches. Ideological and political teachers should collaborate with counselors as well, play a leading role as models, actively fight against negative online public opinions, clarify their identities, take action, and actively promote positive energy. Counselors, Youth League secretaries, and related teachers ought to

cooperate, communicate and actively play the role of extracurricular education, creating short reviews, videos, and other interesting media that young students enjoy, which may trigger emotional resonance among students, guide them to establish correct value and enhance the mainstream ideology of positive and healthy campus^[14].

4.3. At the level of students

4.3.1. Enhancing the media literacy

In the information age, students' ability to screen and identify complex information is higher than before. Media literacy has become a basic requirement of society for Internet users. College students should not only enjoy the convenience brought by media, but also recognize that media is a double-edged sword. The low threshold for expressing opinions on the internet determines that online information lacks authenticity, the verification of auth, especially online public opinions, which is a second stage of public opinions where "everyone has a microphone", and the release of public opinions carries a certain interest bias. People may turn to dialectical thinking and draw objective conclusions through dialectical analysis of various statements in public opinions, which aims to avoid blindly following trends, not believing rumors, and not spreading them. To actively enhance students' own positions, it turns out to be fairly significant for them to arm themselves with firm ideals and beliefs, strengthen legal thinking, improve self-discipline, practice social morality, cultivate good media literacy, and establish a correct view of the internet^[15].

4.3.2. Exercising subjective initiative

There are many Communist Youth League members among college students, and there are also Communist Party members in higher grades. There are quite a few clubs and student organizations on campus, and we need to play a "peer role" to mobilize students' enthusiasm and actively participate in the struggle against erroneous public opinions. It seems urgent to organize new media lecture activities through platforms such as clubs and student unions to clarify the formation, influence, and harm of online public opinions, cultivate positive "opinion leaders" among student groups, and guide the online environment to be transparent and upright^[16]. At the same time, information monitors should be employed among the student population to pay more attention to key groups of students. Starting from the needs of students, activities that are enjoyable and entertaining should be carried out, such as collecting lively works such as themed posters, photos, comics, and micro videos, which can encourage students to actively participate, deeply integrate, consolidate ideological consensus in cultural creation, and continuously enhance the appeal of campus network public opinion guidance.

To sum up, the information dissemination in the internet era is more convenient and faster, but it is also accompanied by more potential hazards. College students' ability to distinguish information on the internet is not yet fully mature. Due to the characteristics of online public opinions, college students may be easily influenced by those public opinions when they get ready to express their ideas. If not handled properly, what students express can have irreversible and negative impacts on themselves or the schools. Campus online public opinions have their particular, and colleges and universities need to coordinate with a global way of thinking. All in all, it is meaningful to give full play to the initiatives of various entities on campus and coordinate wisely to avoid negative consequences caused by public opinions.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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