

Postprint: Research on Guiding Collective Negative Emotions among University Students during Major Public Health Emergencies

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Abstract

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, various topics and rumors related to the epidemic have emerged incessantly. As the primary force on social network platforms, college student groups continuously participate in and guide various related online events under the influence of collective emotions, wherein rational and irrational viewpoints coexist. Therefore, timely monitoring, guidance, and alleviation of collective negative emotions among college student groups is conducive to correctly guiding online public opinion during major public health events. This paper will commence from the broad context of the COVID-19 pandemic to investigate the characteristics and triggers of collective emotion propagation among college student groups during major public health events. By employing research methods such as literature review and case analysis, this study will summarize corresponding guidance strategies through analytical synthesis, aiming to exert a positive influence on the collective emotions of college student groups during major public health events and contribute to the guidance of online public opinion.

Full Text

Research on Guiding Negative Group Emotions Among College Students During Major Public Health Events

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Abstract

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, various pandemic-related topics and rumors have emerged incessantly. As the main force on social network platforms, college students continuously participate in and guide various related online events

under the influence of group emotions, where rational and irrational viewpoints coexist. Therefore, timely monitoring, guiding, and alleviating negative group emotions among college students is crucial for correctly guiding online public opinion during major public health events. This paper examines the characteristics and triggers of group emotional transmission among college students during major public health events, using the COVID-19 pandemic as the broader context. Through literature review and case analysis, this study summarizes corresponding guidance strategies to positively influence group emotions among college students and contribute to the guidance of online public opinion during such crises.

COVID-19 represents the second major public health emergency in China since the 2003 SARS outbreak, posing severe threats to people's lives and physical safety. During the pandemic prevention and control period, the internet served as the primary channel for Chinese college students to obtain pandemic information, participate in discussions, and express personal opinions. However, the online information landscape was mixed with truth and falsehood. As the main online cohort, college students' emotional expression both promoted the positive development of certain pandemic-related events and generated negative impacts through irrational emotions. Analyzing the transmission characteristics of group emotions and the diverse triggers of negative emotions among college students during major public health events can help guide their emotional expression when speaking online, eliminate the negative impacts of online public opinion, and foster a clean and upright cyberspace.

Keywords: COVID-19, Group Emotion, Public Opinion Guidance

1. Characteristics of College Students' Emotional Transmission During Major Public Health Events

1.1 First Stage: Observation and Discussion in Private Domains

During the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, pandemic-related public opinion events shared certain commonalities with later developments, mostly concerning government prevention measures, medical resource conditions, public official conduct, and epidemic control methods. However, these initially attracted only minority attention, with most college students having limited understanding of the specific pandemic situation and still learning about related information. Consequently, when faced with pandemic-related public opinion events, the majority remained in an observation and assessment phase, refraining from making rash statements online.

College students' attention to the pandemic followed a clear "proximity principle," focusing on local transmission situations, shortages of protective supplies like masks and alcohol, issues related to returning home during the pandemic, and aid events in Wuhan and other epidemic areas. Their online communication was primarily directed toward family members and friends within private

domains, resulting in a relatively small scope of emotional transmission. Even when commenting on certain online public opinion events, they could make rational judgments and post relatively positive and constructive comments.

Therefore, during this initial stage, college students' emotional expression online tended to be positive, demonstrating trust in the national government, concern for people in Wuhan and epidemic areas, and respect for frontline workers. Overall, college students' emotions during this first stage were relatively rational, stable, and positive, though a small minority expressed concerns about potential pandemic expansion or personal impact.

1.2 Second Stage: Forwarding and Heated Discussion on Social Platforms

As COVID-19 spread nationwide and local outbreaks waxed and waned with increasing severity, various pandemic-induced public opinion events continuously emerged, and college students' group emotional expression online began to surge. Public opinion incidents such as “concealing the epidemic,” “excessive prevention and control,” “public official inaction,” and “severe shortage of medical resources” continuously stimulated college students' group emotions, shifting their focus from concern about epidemic areas, the pandemic situation, and prevention efforts to supervision and criticism of the government and public officials. Their group emotions began to shift from initial rational positivity toward irrationality and emotionalization.

Specific examples include the specific whereabouts of Red Cross supplies during the Wuhan lockdown, issues of delayed medical treatment due to excessive community control during the Shanghai lockdown, the bus crash while transporting quarantined individuals during the Guizhou pandemic, and the fire casualties in a Urumqi residential community during the Xinjiang pandemic. During the pandemic, such public opinion events quickly attracted college students' attention. Out of sympathy and compassion for victims, irrational emotional expression initially dominated, characterized by anger, panic, and other emotional biases that rapidly spread on social platforms, creating a responsive public opinion situation.

As these public opinion events developed and the truth emerged, the group's emotions exhibited a mixed trajectory containing worry, tension, panic, gratitude, urgency, and encouragement. During this stage, pandemic-induced public opinion events clearly outnumbered positive events, and college students' group emotions were predominantly negative, manifesting as anger, urgency, panic, and anxiety. However, under the guidance of mainstream media, emotions of respect and tribute to frontline medical staff and volunteers were also frequently transmitted, presenting a counterbalance to negative emotions.

2. Causes of Negative Emotions Among College Students During Major Public Health Events

2.1 Malicious Guidance by Online Rumors and Cyber Terrorism

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, various internet rumors related to the pandemic have been endless. During the early pandemic period, numerous rumors erupted simultaneously, including claims of unhandled bodies in a Wuhan hospital, Zhong Nanshan being infected, airplanes spraying disinfectant, and the removal of the Wuhan Party Secretary. The rumors in pandemic-related public opinion events were countless and difficult to distinguish from truth.

Certain Western right-wing elements have employed various means to create conspiracy theories and publish anti-government rhetoric. For instance, at the beginning of the pandemic, they vigorously promoted online that the novel coronavirus originated from China, causing numerous netizens to question Wuhan's virus laboratory and forcing the government to dispatch a special investigation team for clarification. As the pandemic progressed, whenever a public opinion event attracted significant attention, various radical and sharp comments would emerge, attempting to provoke social conflicts, spread social panic, and take the opportunity to import Western values.

Faced with these fierce online rumors and the malicious guidance orchestrated by cyber terrorists, college students often find it difficult to see through them immediately, resulting in the arousal of negative emotions and triggering public opinion incidents.

2.2 College Students' Media Literacy Requires Improvement

Although college students receive certain media literacy education in universities, they lack social experience, leading to simplistic judgment and susceptibility to emotional manipulation. When major public health events occur, unsafe emotions spread throughout society, and college students easily lose rationality and cry out loudly when facing public opinion events, becoming promoters or even creators of rumors.

Meanwhile, internet anonymity can lead college students to disregard the truthfulness and reliability of their statements when expressing opinions or demands under the influence of negative emotions. Their weak awareness of cyber laws also causes them to ignore the potential impacts and consequences of their statements when posting online.

Survey data indicates that some college students have unclear value cognition regarding public opinion information and online opinions. During major public health events, online public opinion incidents triggered by college students' low internet literacy are common.

2.3 Insufficient Guidance Measures in Universities

Currently, most guidance work for college students' group emotions and public opinion in Chinese universities is undertaken by counselors or class advisors, without establishing professional group emotion or public opinion guidance mechanisms. When public opinion events occur, university administrators cannot monitor changes in college students' group emotions in real-time, let alone provide timely alleviation and correct guidance. They often conduct related tracking investigations and rumor-refuting only after college students' group emotions have fermented to a certain degree and triggered public debate.

Furthermore, universities have not established joint group emotion guidance and monitoring measures, and working in isolation can easily trigger secondary incidents, leading to large-scale group emotion outbreaks among college students nationwide.

3. Strategies for Guiding Negative Emotions Among College Students During Major Public Health Events

3.1 Establish Professional Group Emotion Monitoring Mechanisms

Universities should promptly establish professional and comprehensive group emotion monitoring mechanisms for college students, equip them with specialized personnel for guiding and alleviating negative group emotions, provide communication platforms between college students and school administrators, and timely release public opinion events that may attract college students' attention to guide them in correctly expressing opinions and emotions.

When public opinion events occur, universities should achieve timely awareness and real-time monitoring of college students' group emotions and provide communication, guidance, and correct direction at different stages of group emotion development. Simultaneously, they should coordinate with other universities to understand existing negative group emotions elsewhere, conduct preventive work, or collaborate with campus online opinion leaders to take preemptive action and correctly guide potential negative group emotions. Universities should also summarize experiences and conduct analysis on resolved group negative emotions, assess potential secondary public opinion incidents, and implement early warning measures.

3.2 Strengthen Media Literacy and Cyber Law Education for College Students

As one of the most active groups on the internet, universities should place greater emphasis on college students' media literacy education and cyber ethics education to cultivate their self-discipline and rule awareness. Universities should require college students to leverage the motivational role of moral models and exemplary figures when participating in online discussions about major public health events, thereby achieving positive publicity and education.

Additionally, universities should help college students establish correct legal concepts. As lawful citizens of China, they must fulfill relevant obligations while enjoying legitimate rights when participating in online public opinion events. They should take maintaining social stability, ethnic unity, and national security as basic principles, publish comments conducive to the positive development of public opinion events, and effectively constrain their own online speech and behavior.

3.3 Enhance National Culture Construction on Internet Platforms

When major public health events occur, mainstream media should, on the one hand, promptly clarify and refute online rumors, and on the other hand, intensify the promotion of socialist values. When facing malicious guidance from Western hostile forces and cyber terrorism, college students may experience wavering and value instability.

Strengthening the promotion of socialist values, increasing positive publicity about the government and nation, enhancing online national culture construction, and exposing the conspiracies of Western hostile elements can help college students recognize the situation and adopt the correct stance. This enables them to express emotions correctly when facing online public opinion events and not be swayed by Western values.

This paper has studied and analyzed the transmission characteristics of group emotions and the causes of negative emotions among college students when facing major public health events, and provided corresponding guidance strategies. College students play an important role in responding to such events, and establishing effective guidance measures has positive significance for calming social public opinion and promoting the positive development of public opinion incidents.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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