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Research on University Students' Online Community Identity and Development: Postprint

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Abstract

Online communities have developed rapidly in recent years, and college students' activities in learning, living, socializing, leisure, and various other aspects are inseparable from online communities. When choosing online communities, college students primarily focus on types such as entertainment, information exchange, hobbies and interests, and class affairs, and exhibit relatively high identification with online communities' functions, believing that these platforms feature rich and convenient communication channels. Information quality, demand satisfaction, convenience, interaction quality, and member quality constitute the main attractive factors of online communities, and their identification with online community management is also relatively high. However, it cannot be denied that in the development process, online communities also face certain problems, such as excessive advertising, cyber violence, unhealthy discourse, and payment insecurity. Therefore, this article proposes recommendations including focusing on high-quality development, purifying the online environment, concentrating on core community functions, improving community management, and leveraging positive community energy, with the aim of providing reference for the better development of online communities for college students.

Full Text

Research on College Students' Identification with and Development of Online Communities

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Abstract: Online communities have developed rapidly in recent years, and college students now rely on them for virtually all aspects of life including learning, daily activities, socializing, and leisure. When selecting online communities, college students primarily choose those focused on entertainment, information

exchange, hobbies and interests, and class affairs, demonstrating high functional identification with these platforms. They recognize that online communities offer rich and convenient communication channels, with information quality, need satisfaction, convenience, interaction quality, and member quality serving as the main attraction factors. Students also show relatively high identification with community management. However, it must be acknowledged that problems exist in the development of online communities, such as excessive advertising, cyber violence, unhealthy discourse, and payment security issues. This article therefore proposes recommendations including focusing on high-quality development, purifying the online environment, concentrating on core community functions, improving community management, and leveraging positive community energy, aiming to provide reference for the better development of college student online communities.

Keywords: online community; identification; college students; internet; communication channels

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On February 3, 2021, the China Internet Network Information Center released the 47th "Statistical Report on Internet Development in China." The report indicated that by December 2020, China's internet user population had reached 989 million, an increase of 85.4 million since March 2020, with internet penetration rising to 70.4% (up 5.9 percentage points). Mobile internet users totaled 986 million, up 88.85 million since March 2020, with 99.7% of internet users accessing via mobile phones (up 0.4 percentage points). Among occupational groups, students represented the largest segment at 21%. Current college students are predominantly born after 1998 or 2000, having grown up during the rapid expansion of the internet. Consequently, the internet has played a crucial role throughout their development, profoundly shaping their learning, daily life, social interactions, and leisure activities. With continuous advances in internet technology and 4G/5G mobile communications in recent years, college students have formed or joined increasing numbers of online communities for purposes of study, interest-sharing, relaxation, and entertainment, making them not only beneficiaries but also a fundamental driving force in the development of online society.

As shown in Table 1, the surveyed college students were predominantly female, aged 18-28, covering all four undergraduate years with juniors representing the majority, and most were from Shanxi Province. Regarding internet usage history,

47.02% of respondents had 6-10 years of experience, 21.43% had 4-5 years, and 17.86% had over 10 years. Most students began using mobile phones in middle school, though 35.12% had less than 5 years of internet experience due to heavy academic pressure and parental restrictions, which aligns with actual mobile phone usage patterns among students. Investigation of current internet usage frequency revealed that 73.71% of students spent more than four hours online daily, indicating high internet demand among contemporary college students whose lives are deeply intertwined with the internet.

2.1 Type Identification

[Figure 1: see original paper]

College students engage with various types of online communities, with entertainment and leisure communities showing the highest participation rate at 70.83%. Current college students prefer entertainment-oriented internet usage, with chatting, watching dramas, gaming, reading novels, and online shopping being their primary online activities, which is reflected in their community preferences. Additionally, information exchange, hobby/interest, and class affairs communities are also popular, each accounting for approximately 67% of usage. College students' daily information exchange involves multiple forms of person-to-person and person-to-group communication, with daily message volumes reaching hundreds or even thousands, particularly among those with shared interests, explaining the high usage rates of information exchange and hobby/interest communities.

Many class affairs during college are handled through various online communities, whose comprehensive, efficient, and powerful functions enable traditional class management to be processed effectively in short timeframes, making class affairs communities essential for students. Influenced by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic since 2020, universities have intensified online course development, making knowledge-learning communities another indispensable option for students.

Among commonly used online communities, WeChat and QQ exceed 90% usage, with WeChat reaching 98.22%, demonstrating that these platforms satisfy communication needs across virtually all contexts and functions in daily interactions, further enhanced by their payment capabilities. Apps with 80%-89% usage include Weibo, Zhihu, and Meituan, which primarily meet students' daily entertainment, Q&A, and shopping needs, addressing person-to-organization communication. Apps with 70%-79% usage include Xuexitong, Taobao, DingTalk, and Alipay, serving shopping, learning, and payment needs. Other frequently used platforms include Douyin, Bilibili, Pinduoduo, Xuexi Qiangguo, and Tencent Video. In summary, when selecting online community apps, college students tend to choose platforms that satisfy their needs for daily interaction, entertainment, information acquisition, and learning/shopping.

2.2 Function Identification

Current online communities feature diverse types and comprehensive functions that generally meet students' various needs, which represents a primary factor attracting college students. Statistical data show that 8.88% of respondents believe online community system functions can fully satisfy their needs, 67.46% believe they basically can, and 22.49% consider them average, with these three categories totaling 98.83%. This indicates that college students are generally satisfied with current online community functions, which correlates strongly with the maturation of online communities in the 4G era. Online communities perform well in interface display, operability, information presentation, and backend services. Among their numerous functions, social interaction, communication, and transaction represent the three most important functions through which community value is realized. When online communities serve as primary connection channels between online and offline worlds, providing robust social platforms, information dissemination channels, and online-to-offline transaction functions for college students, their social value can be fully realized. Beyond core functions, features that promote community development should also be emphasized, such as online and offline activities—most students only occasionally participate, with 10% never participating. Community activity improvement depends on each individual member. Some users become “lurkers” or “zombie fans,” with certain communities even becoming one-person shows, which is detrimental to overall community development.

2.3 Channel Identification

The popularization of 4G networks and emergence of 5G have dramatically transformed people's lives, enriching online community communication channels through “guidance, attraction, and direction” to establish lasting connections, which aligns with questionnaire data. Regarding channel richness, 14.79% of students find online community communication channels very rich and accessible, 56.21% basically agree, and 25.44% consider them average, with positive identification reaching 96.44%. This indicates that current online community communication channels basically meet user needs. During dissemination, online communities primarily use internal channels such as official websites, Weibo, and WeChat public accounts, but also employ external channels including self-media platforms, marketing platforms, various forums, well-known communities, and even paid promotions across platforms, enabling college students to conveniently select and join communities matching their needs through various pathways.

2.4 Attraction Identification

[Figure 2: see original paper]

When selecting online communities, college students particularly value information quality, need satisfaction, convenience, interaction quality, and mem-

ber quality. Information quality primarily manifests in accurate sources, clear expression, factual consistency, and timeliness—factors that students especially prioritize. Need satisfaction refers to meeting students' different communication contexts, representing another major attraction point. Convenience is reflected in easy access, quick installation, and rapid updates, making such communities more popular. Additionally, interaction quality, member quality, and freedom of expression also represent important factors influencing community selection.

2.5 Management Identification

Regarding community management, 56.21% of students consider it basically reasonable, while 36.69% consider it average. Although overall identification with management is relatively high, only 2.37% consider it very reasonable, indicating substantial room for improvement. Key areas include: standardizing healthy and normalized online discourse, developing positive energy, improving member quality, increasing community activity, adding knowledge-based content, strengthening security supervision, purifying the community environment (especially regarding advertisements), increasing community practicality, strengthening network civilization management, and reducing cyber violence. Good management helps students feel organized and enables them to continuously obtain needed nutrients from the community.

2.6 Overall Identification

Survey results show that 10.65% of students believe online communities have a very significant impact on their lives, 39.64% consider the impact relatively large, 39.63% consider it average, and 10.06% consider it small or nonexistent. This demonstrates that the vast majority of college students use online communities and recognize their influence on learning, daily life, and leisure. Based on the above analysis, college students' identification with online communities concentrates at the basic identification level, indicating that existing communities can basically meet student needs. However, only about 10% selected the “very satisfied” option, which sets higher expectations for future community development.

3.1 Focus on High-Quality Development

College students show relatively high overall identification with online communities, but performance on the “very satisfied” option is not particularly strong. Therefore, we recommend that online communities conduct targeted improvements based on actual student needs. A genuine community manages relationships, organizations, and strategies, and only by establishing its own brand can it remain standing. High-quality communities should have systems, standards, quality, attraction, and value. Activity, a key criterion for high-quality communities, represents a weakness for many, as many college students are merely observers who only occasionally participate in online or offline activities. Therefore, communities should emphasize structure, output, and operations,

striving for continuous improvement to enhance quality, ensure activity, and pursue brand development. This involves clearly defining community goals, establishing entry barriers, formulating community regulations, cultivating core members, continuously producing value, and increasing ritualistic elements.

3.2 Purify the Network Environment

As more college students join various online communities, the environments these communities face become increasingly complex. Individuals with different personalities and needs use communities to obtain information, enjoy benefits, provide content, or realize value, demonstrating complexity in both internal and external environments. During the survey, many students repeatedly mentioned network environment issues, indicating that satisfaction with online communities is significantly affected by network environment quality. Problems such as excessive advertising, cyber violence, unhealthy discourse, and payment insecurity do exist, exposing students to negative information and potentially causing spiritual or economic losses for those with weaker cognition or unsteady values, while also creating difficulties for university network information management. In summary, online communities should increase technical investment to identify and intervene in potential hazards and harmful information that could pollute the network environment, restoring a clean online community environment for students.

3.3 Focus on Core Functions

When selecting online communities, students' evaluation of core functions serves as a critical factor in their decision to join. Any platform or industry must consider its core competitiveness and products. If online communities lack clear concepts about their services, this affects students' autonomous function selection. Typically, online communities reject cultures unrelated to their provided functions, as mixing multiple cultures can easily cause cultural conflicts and member repulsion. Therefore, clearly expressing community functions and operating/maintaining community members that align with their own culture is far more effective than broad, indiscriminate approaches.

3.4 Improve Community Management

Online communities can manage themselves according to their nature and service positioning. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the public has recognized the power of online communities and the importance of network marketing. Effective community management requires comprehensive planning across all aspects, including welcome messages for new members, membership benefits, atmosphere activation, scenario management, environment purification, activity development, and long-term maintenance. Communities can even utilize simple, low-cost, yet powerful management tools to guide members and enhance community attractiveness, easily achieving management goals.

3.5 Leverage Positive Community Energy

During operation, online communities should exert positive influence. Precisely because of online communities' enormous impact and important role in college students' daily lives, proper utilization can achieve excellent guidance effects. Therefore, party history education, values education, campus culture dissemination, school ideological management, and discipline construction can all be integrated with online community development to fully utilize community influence. This achieves multiple goals including student management, party spirit strengthening, knowledge enhancement, and cultural dissemination, while promoting the development of good information usage habits and positive information literacy among college students.

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

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