



Research on the Characteristics and Guiding Strategies of College Students' Stratified Online Social Circles

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the in-depth popularization of mobile internet and algorithm recommendation technologies, college students' online social interactions have exhibited prominent characteristics of stratified social circles. Online social circles bonded by shared interests, majors and values have become the primary venues for contemporary college students to conduct daily socializing, acquire information and express emotions. Drawing on theories including the Differential Mode of Association, Information Cocoons, Group Polarization and Uses and Gratifications, this paper systematically sorts out the external characteristics and formation logic of stratified online social circles among college students, and focuses on analyzing the dual developmental impacts brought by stratified social circles on young students. From four dimensions—universities, online platforms, society and families, and students themselves—it integrates and proposes systematic guiding strategies, aiming to resolve practical problems such as cognitive limitations, social barriers and value deviations caused by closed social circles. This research strives to promote college students to build an open, inclusive, rational and healthy integrated online-offline social model, and provides theoretical references and practical ideas for the innovation of online ideological and political education in universities.

Keywords: College Students; Online Social Interaction; Stratified Social Circles; Information Cocoons; Media Literacy

1. Introduction

Overseas research on online communities and virtual stratified circles started at an earlier stage, with research perspectives mainly focusing on the shaping of group social forms by algorithmic mechanisms, group polarization behaviors within social circles, and the construction of online identity recognition, forming a complete set of theoretical achievements in communication studies and social psychology. Domestic research is closely combined with the education scenarios of Chinese universities, focusing on the generative logic of online stratified circles, the impacts of circle culture on youth values, and response paths for ideological and political education. However, existing research fails to conduct in-depth hierarchical discussion on the positive and negative effects of stratified social circles, the proposed guiding measures are fragmented, and the multi-party collaborative governance system lacks detailed elaboration.

Adopting a combination of literature research, logical analysis and case induction, this paper takes college students' social interactions in online stratified circles as the core research object, sequentially defines relevant concepts, sorts out typical characteristics of stratified circles, conducts in-depth analysis of dual impacts, and constructs an all-round guidance system. Rooted in the actual ideological and political work of universities, this study highlights the operability and integrity of countermeasures. Nevertheless, the research lacks support from large-scale questionnaire empirical investigations, and relevant conclusions remain to be further tested and improved combined with campus practices.

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2. Core Concepts and Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Definition of Stratified Online Social Circles

Stratified online social circles represent a new social form derived from the digital era. It refers to small-scale social groups spontaneously formed by netizens on online spaces such as short video platforms, social software and forum communities, bound by shared interests, value positions, professional backgrounds, identity labels and other conditions, featuring frequent internal interactions, clear group boundaries and exclusive discourse systems.

Distinct from ordinary social stratified circles in society, those formed by college students bear distinct youth-oriented, interest-based and fluid characteristics. They serve not only as online extensions of offline classes and club socializing, but also as new social relationships reconstructed based on spiritual resonance, free from the constraints of real-life identities. The internal cohesion of stratified circles is maintained through shared symbols, exclusive jargon and unified value perceptions, creating natural barriers against outsiders. Members may freely enter or exit stratified circles with academic changes and interest shifts, resulting in an overall flexible and variable structure.

2.2. Theoretical Support

The Differential Mode of Association Theory provides a fundamental perspective for interpreting hierarchical relations within online stratified circles. Centered on themselves, college students divide online social circles by intimacy and recognition, replicating the traditional social structure of distinct kinship proximity. The Information Cocoon Theory reveals cognitive limitations brought by algorithms and closed stratified circles: platforms push homogeneous content in a targeted manner, and the circular reinforcement of single viewpoints within stratified circles continuously narrows students' scope of information reception. The Group Polarization Theory explains the risks of extremization within stratified circles: long-term internal communication among homogeneous groups continuously amplifies extreme opinions and suppresses dissenting voices, easily breeding irrational cognition. The Uses and Gratifications Theory elaborates the internal psychological motivation for the formation of stratified circles: college students participate in various online stratified circles essentially to meet multi-level psychological demands including emotional companionship, interest communication, individual expression and academic mutual assistance.

3. Main Characteristics of College Students' Stratified Online Social Circles

3.1. Formative and Structural Characteristics of Stratified Circles

Different from traditional social ties centered on blood ties, geographical connections or class groups, shared interests act as the primary driving force for constructing college students' online stratified circles. Segmented fields including postgraduate entrance examination preparation, e-sports, film and television fandom, volunteer services and niche hobbies all spawn corresponding exclusive communities. Meanwhile, platform algorithms continuously capture users' browsing, interaction and follow data, matching users with similar preferences and homogeneous content, accelerating the solidification of stratified circles and forming a cycle of "algorithm matching – homogeneous aggregation – circle closure".

Structurally, all stratified circles carry strong exclusivity, with exclusive terminology, behavioral norms and evaluation criteria that make it difficult for outsiders to integrate rapidly. Members within each stratified circle share highly convergent ages, cognition and life experiences. Homogeneous aggregation greatly reduces communication costs yet weakens the group's inclusiveness of diversity.

3.2. Behavioral and Developmental Characteristics of Stratified Circles

In terms of daily interactive behaviors, college students engage in high-frequency communication and deep emotional investment within stratified circles. Niche stratified circles provide students with recognition and understanding rarely accessible offline, effectively alleviating the widespread loneliness among young people. However, the inherent closed nature of stratified circles leads to scarce cross-circle communication. Students confined to fixed social groups exhibit a polarization of being active inside circles yet silent outside them.

From a long-term developmental perspective, college students' stratified circles are markedly fluid. As students advance academically, graduate or shift interests, members will voluntarily leave original stratified circles and join new social groups, with no permanently fixed circles. Furthermore, the impacts of stratified social circles are two-sided. Healthy

learning and public welfare stratified circles facilitate students' growth, while vulgar and extreme circles continuously erode students' cognition and values, intertwining positive and negative influences.

4. Dual Impacts of Stratified Online Social Circles on College Students

4.1. Positive Effects of Stratified Circles on College Students' Growth

Online stratified circles effectively relieve loneliness and social anxiety caused by college students studying far away from home. Young people are in a critical stage of self-identity construction and prone to emotional emptiness after leaving their families. Online stratified circles offer a low-pressure, highly inclusive space for expression, where members comfort and support one another, establishing a stable online emotional support system to relieve negative emotions.

Stratified circles centered on majors, further education and skill learning deliver prominent educational value. Students within these circles spontaneously share review materials, discuss professional difficulties and team up to complete practical projects, forming a mutually supportive learning atmosphere that effectively compensates for limitations in classroom teaching resources. Cultural and entertainment, as well as public welfare stratified circles enrich after-school life, encourage students to delve into personal hobbies, tap their strengths and broaden their spiritual horizons.

Online stratified circles break temporal and spatial constraints. Students can quickly connect with like-minded peers without expending excessive energy screening social contacts, improving social efficiency. Niche enthusiasts and industry seniors inaccessible offline can communicate online, expanding the overall scope of their social networks. In addition, online stratified circles weaken real identity constraints, allowing students to freely voice opinions and display their authentic personalities. Through group recognition, they complete self-positioning, establish clear and stable identity awareness, and enhance self-confidence and self-acceptance.

4.2. Negative Risks of Stratified Circles to College Students' Development

The closure of stratified circles coupled with targeted algorithmic recommendations traps students in an environment of homogeneous information, forming typical information cocoons. Long-term exposure only to content aligning with personal preferences deprives students of access to diverse perspectives and objective information with different stances. Their thinking patterns gradually solidify, hindering their ability to view complex social events dialectically and weakening their comprehensive cognitive capacity.

Homogeneous communication within stratified circles triggers the echo chamber effect, where identical viewpoints are reinforced repeatedly, while a small number of objective and neutral dissenting voices are rejected and suppressed by the group, ultimately inducing group polarization. Extreme remarks and one-sided ideological trends spread rapidly in some stratified circles. College students, whose values are not fully mature and who possess limited discrimination capacity, easily develop extreme thinking and engage in impulsive, irrational words and deeds.

Excessive immersion in online stratified social circles leads to degradation of real-life social skills. Accustomed to communicating through text and emojis online, students avoid face-to-face offline interactions. Long-term lack of real interpersonal practice results in social phobia, rigid communication and poor empathy, hindering their adaptation to workplace and interpersonal environments after graduation.

Numerous underregulated niche stratified circles are flooded with vulgar jokes, comparison culture, historical nihilism and other erroneous content, continuously infiltrating students' minds and causing confusion in value cognition and declining moral standards. Meanwhile, the concealment and rapid dissemination within stratified circles enable negative viewpoints and false rumors to ferment quickly inside groups, easily triggering online public opinions on campus and increasing management pressure on universities. Obvious cognitive gaps and discourse barriers exist between different stratified circles, giving rise to stratified circle pecking orders. Students tend to judge other groups by the standards of their own circles, lacking the mindset to respect differences and embrace diversity, aggravating group opposition and undermining harmonious campus atmospheres.

5. Guiding Strategies for College Students' Stratified Online Social Circles

5.1. Comprehensive Educational Guidance at the University Level

As the main front for ideological and political education of young people, universities need to integrate educational resources and build a complete guidance system. Schools integrate media literacy education into general education courses, current affairs and policy courses, and freshman orientation education, systematically explaining the operational logic of stratified circles, potential drawbacks of algorithms and methods for information identification. This guides students to view online stratified social interactions objectively, cultivate independent thinking awareness, and take the initiative to break cognitive cocoons.

Campus offline and official online platforms simultaneously create carriers for cross-circle communication, regularly organizing interdisciplinary academic salons, multi-theme cultural activities and campus volunteer service programs to break social barriers stemming from interests, grades and majors. Students are encouraged to actively interact with people from different stratified circles and develop an inclusive and open social mindset.

Ideological and political workers take the initiative to integrate into mainstream online stratified circles of students, grasping their ideological dynamics, hot topics of concern and value confusion. They infiltrate mainstream values and positive cases into community communication scenarios using accessible student-friendly language, realizing targeted implicit ideological and political education.

Universities establish a normalized campus online public opinion monitoring mechanism covering mainstream social software and forum communities, promptly capturing false remarks, extreme viewpoints and negative trends within stratified circles. Frontal guidance is carried out in a timely manner, and security risks brought by problematic stratified circles are addressed immediately to purify the online social environment on campus.

5.2. Collaborative Governance by Online Platforms and Society

Major social and short video platforms shall take the initiative to fulfill primary responsibilities, optimizing existing algorithm recommendation mechanisms. Instead of merely catering to user preferences, platforms balance personalized recommendations with equal push of multi-perspective, authoritative, objective and positive energy content, actively broadening students' information access channels and mitigating information cocoon issues from a technical perspective.

Platforms improve the management system for community stratified circles, establishing a hierarchical review mechanism to conduct regular inspections of illegal stratified circles that advocate extreme ideologies, vulgar culture and group opposition, with rectification or shutdown of non-compliant communities. Meanwhile, platforms support positive energy stratified circles focusing on academia, public welfare, traditional culture and popular science, setting benchmarks for high-quality online communities and fostering a healthy stratified circle ecosystem.

Mainstream media and publicity departments continuously advance national online civilization development, popularizing norms of online behavior through short videos, campus publicity and offline lectures, and consistently disseminate core socialist values to cultivate a rational, friendly and inclusive overall online social atmosphere. From the external environment, this weakens the breeding ground for stratified circle opposition and extremism.

5.3. Family Collaboration and Individual Self-Management of Students

Parents maintain regular in-depth communication with their children at university, proactively caring about their online social lives, objectively explaining potential hidden dangers of stratified social circles, and guiding students to balance online entertainment and academic study while reasonably controlling the duration of interactions within online stratified circles, forming a joint guidance force between schools and families.

College students themselves need to strengthen self-management capabilities, take the initiative to step out of comfortable stratified circles, consciously browse objective information with diverse stances, participate in offline collective activities and social practices to exercise real communication skills, and balance virtual online socializing and real offline interpersonal interactions.

Students shall take the initiative to study legal knowledge and mainstream value theories to improve their judgment. They maintain a clear cognition in the face of extreme remarks and vulgar customs within stratified circles, refuse to follow group opinions blindly, abide by legal and moral bottom lines, uphold independent thinking, view groups with

different interests and concepts with an open and inclusive mindset, and voluntarily eliminate estrangement and opposing prejudices between stratified circles.

5.4. Long-Term Mechanism for Multi-Party Coordination and Linkage

A normalized collaborative mechanism covering universities, online platforms, social publicity departments and student families shall be constructed, clarifying the core responsibilities of each party and establishing information exchange channels. Universities regularly feedback negative online public opinions within campus stratified circles and prominent student social issues to platforms, enabling platforms to carry out targeted content control. The society continuously outputs positive online cultural resources to provide material support for ideological and political education in universities. Families conduct daily ideological guidance to make up for deficiencies in off-campus education.

The four parties work in the same direction and share resources to avoid fragmented governance caused by insufficient guidance and control from a single subject. A complete closed-loop guidance system covering online and offline, on-campus and off-campus spheres is formed to systematically resolve various negative problems brought by stratified social circles and fully release the positive educational value of high-quality stratified circles.

6. Conclusion and Prospect

Stratified online social circles are an inevitable social form spawned jointly by the development of digital technology and young people's psychological demands, which cannot be simply banned or controlled with a one-size-fits-all approach. This phenomenon exerts two-way impacts on college students' growth and development. Benign online stratified circles can satisfy students' emotional needs, boost academic progress and enrich their spiritual lives. Nevertheless, the inherent closed attributes of stratified circles easily trigger multiple practical problems including narrow cognition, extremist thinking, weakened real social skills and value confusion, posing brand-new challenges to educational work in universities.

To address the complex impacts of stratified social circles, we must abandon the simple control mindset and adhere to the governance logic of combining persuasion and restriction with multi-party collaboration. Universities play a core educational role to comprehensively enhance students' media literacy and build diverse communication platforms. Online platforms optimize algorithms and strengthen community governance to improve the basic environment of online socializing. Families provide daily communication and guidance, while students strengthen self-discipline. Relying on the long-term mechanism of four-party linkage to gather governance synergy, we guide young people to break cognitive barriers between stratified circles and establish a rational and inclusive outlook on online social interaction.

This research only conducts theoretical analysis based on existing literature and campus phenomena, without acquiring first-hand data through field questionnaire surveys, resulting in insufficient detailed analysis of behavioral differences in stratified social circles among students of different majors and grades. Follow-up research can carry out large-scale empirical investigations, subdivide the differential impacts of various types of stratified circles, optimize targeted hierarchical guidance schemes, continuously improve the online ideological and political education system in universities, and help contemporary college students achieve physical and mental health as well as comprehensive and balanced development.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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