Implications of Sudden Online Public Opinion Incidents for Student Management in Universities

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Abstract: The convenience, invisibility and freedom of online expression have attracted university students to use the Internet as the main platform for expressing their demands, which has also given rise to the special type of public opinion of university students. Understanding the causes of university students' online public opinion can provide guidance for dealing with the corresponding emergencies. This paper adopts a case study method to analyse the causes of current university students' online public opinion and its implications for university student management based on an unexpected university student online public opinion incident. Finally, it puts forward three suggestions for the optimization of university student management, including opening up offline proposal channels, strengthening ideological and political education for students, strengthening the university's supervision of online public opinion, and enhancing the response to unexpected public opinion.

1. Background: Sudden Online Public Opinion Brings Crisis in Student Management

On 7 December 2022, the State Council issued ten measures to further optimize the implementation of the prevention and control of the Corona Virus Disease 2019(COVID-19) epidemic, marking the gradual liberalisation of the control of COVID-19 outbreak in China. In the following days, the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 rose rapidly across the country, and experts successively studied the timing of the first peak infection in different regions. Universities in various cities adjusted decisively according to the changes in external policies and the social environment, combined with the infection situation of internal staff and students, and successively advanced the winter holiday time. At this time, an intense online public opinion brewed due to the different winter holiday times. From December 9 onwards, the online super-talking communities of universities that had not yet gone on holiday began to buzz with students expressing their fear of being infected, their fear of infecting their families, and their need to go home as soon as possible, and this voice intensified in the following days, with emotions becoming more and more intense, language becoming more and more rude, and even verbally attacking school leaders. In the meantime, the university's online super-talk has become an alternative forum for university students, who are hoping to gain the attention of the university and the whole country by getting on the

popular microblogging search list, testing the boundaries of student management in universities.

The development of the internet has made it easier for individuals to make their voices heard, speeding up the speed of information sharing and making the various voices gathered more powerful. When university students choose to express their demands through public online platforms rather than directly to the associated schools, it is a side reflection that the official proposal channels do not have the ability to effectively solve problems in the minds of students. It can be seen that the essence of university students' online public opinion is the "deviated" expression of students' demands. Clarifying and grasping the problems of university students' management reflected behind university students' online public opinion events can provide optimal ideas for future student management.

2. Analysis: Concept and Characteristics of University Students' online Public Opinion

"Public opinion" is a kind of simple public opinion. In modern society, "public opinion" is more often summarized as the sum of people's attitudes, emotions and opinions [1]. Wang Laihua defines public opinion as the socio-political attitudes generated and held by the public as the subject towards the social manager as the object and its political orientation around the occurrence, development and changes of social events in a certain social space, which is the sum of the beliefs, attitudes, opinions and emotions expressed by a larger number of people about various phenomena and issues in society [2]. Zhang Kesheng, on the other hand, believes that public opinion refers to the objective social situation and the subjective will of the public, and that online public opinion is the presentation of public opinion on the Internet [3]. Liu Yi believes that online public opinion is the sum of various emotions, attitudes and opinions of the public on various public affairs closely related to their personal interests in the Internet space [4]. Zhang Lihong believes that Internet public opinion is the subjective attitudes, opinions and views of Internet users on the occurrence, development and evolution of things within a specific network space, and uses the Internet as a comprehensive way to express their views, opinions and comments [5]. Integrating the views of various scholars and the author's own understanding, this paper defines the concept of university students' online public opinion as the opinions and emotions generated by university students' groups in the Internet media in response to specific social issues or phenomena.

Understanding and grasping the characteristics of university students' online public opinion is of great significance to building a socialist harmonious society and improving the level of student management in universities. Compared with general and traditional public opinion, university students' online public opinion is a fusion of the personality characteristics of university students and the characteristics of the Internet era, and presents new characteristics in terms of willingness to express and communication environment, which can be roughly summarized as the following four points:

(1) The invisibility of the subject. The internet is inherently virtual, and even with a real-name system, users can express their opinions and publish information under a virtual "vest", which greatly reduces the constraints of public order and morality in the online environment.

(2) Spontaneity of expression. The spontaneity of expression can be further divided into the spontaneity of individual opinion expression and the spontaneity of group opinion expression. The former means that university students can express their opinions through the Internet as long as they have the desire to express themselves about a certain event. The latter means that when an event touches the general sentiment of the university students, their collision of opinions can set off the climax of online public opinion.

(3) Contagiousness of emotions. When university student netizens are stimulated by a public event, they tend to express their attitudes and positions in the communication behaviors of

retweeting and sharing, and may even use radical and exaggerated words to draw more attention to themselves [6].

(4) Periodicity of development. The evolution of university students' online public opinion follows the development principle of life cycle theory, and can be divided into four stages: the observation period, the development period, the highland period and the fading period, as illustrated in Figure 1. During the observation period, college students' online "opinion leaders" are the most active subjects, and most of them silently watch the subsequent development of the incident and the attitude of handling it behind the network. During the development period, influenced by the "opinion leaders" on the Internet and their own emotional fluctuations, some of the university students who were previously on the sidelines also joined the team to express their opinions and demanded more and more responses to their demands, and the scale of public opinion on the Internet developed rapidly. During the highland period, the number of university students willing to express their opinions tends to saturate, and the scale of online public opinion reaches its peak and gradually stabilizes, while the pressure of online public opinion also reaches its peak. During the receding period, influenced by the outcome of the situation, the online opinions and demands of university students are responded to or satisfied, and the scale of public opinion decreases rapidly.
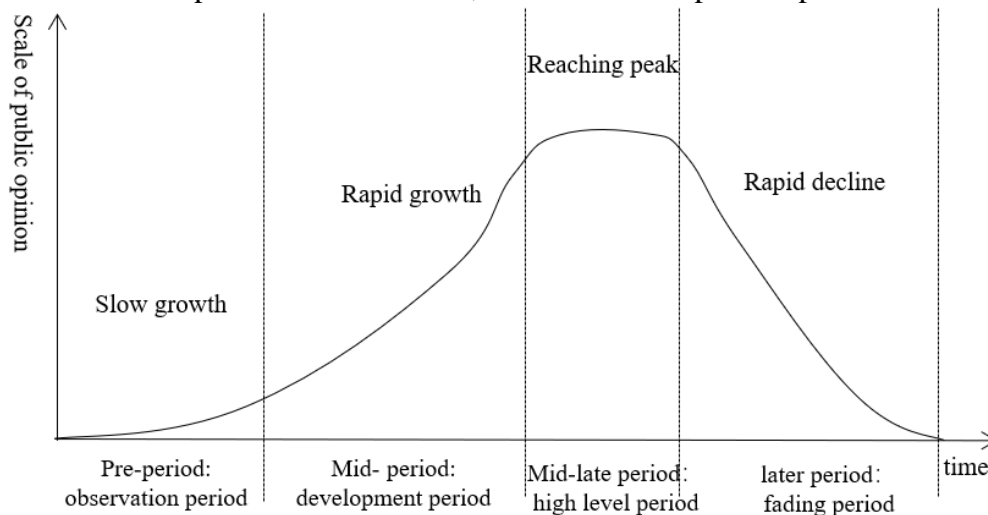

Figure 1: The cycle of online opinion development among university students.

3. Reflection: the Causes and Revelations of Online Public Opinion among University Students

Doing a good job of online public opinion is a long-term task, we should innovate and improve online propaganda, use the laws of network communication, promote the main theme, stimulate positive energy, vigorously cultivate and practice socialist core values, grasp the timing, degree and effectiveness of online consultation and guidance, so that cyberspace can be clear. This is also the compass for colleges and universities to deal with the online public opinion events of college students. Only by reflecting deeply and learning from experience in different online public opinion incidents can we continuously improve online public opinion work and optimize student management. The occurrence of online public opinion incidents among university students can be attributed to the following three reasons:

(1)There is no effective offline proposal channel, and "real name" and "real name" are prevalent. At present, the more common suggestion channels in universities include the president's mailbox and campus network platform. On the one hand, these channels do not have clear feedback time and processing progress, so students may be anxiously waiting for a response to their suggestions and

become frustrated over time. On the other hand, some of these channels require anonymous suggestions, and most students refuse to use these channels for fear of being 'talked to' after making a suggestion, making the anonymous suggestion channel often less effective. Another part of the anonymous proposal channel may be traced back to the proposer after the school receives the proposal, making the anonymous student 'named' again, shifting the focus of the issue itself to the individual proposing the issue, reducing the representativeness of the proposed issue to an individual problem and making the elimination of the student's problem the standard outcome of the issue, weakening both psychological safety of the student and the effectiveness of the solution. In such cases, students' confidence in solving their problems through offline channels is greatly diminished, and they look to more anonymous public online platforms to build momentum through the group effect.

(2)Students are incited by online "opinion leaders" and lack the ability to make rational judgments. College students are still in the stage of building and maturing their values, outlook on life and worldview, and are not completely stable in their ideology, and their emotions are easily influenced by the surrounding environment. Some university students are influenced by the herd mentality and the "spiral of silence", and gradually join the opinion team of online "opinion leaders" without sufficient independent thinking ability and rational judgement.

(3)Schools are passive in public opinion events and the public opinion supervision system is not sound. In the face of sudden public opinion on the Internet, the relevant departments of the school lack experience in collecting, analyzing and judging public opinion on the Internet, and are ad hoc and contingent in handling public opinion events. When multiple departments coordinate, their rights and responsibilities are unclear, the overall linkage is not strong enough, and the handling process is not highly standardized. The first response measures are still based on forceful measures such as blocking and deleting, which easily leads to confrontation with students and misses the best stage to calm down public opinion [7].

The analysis of the causes of online public opinion among university students brings several insights into how to reduce large-scale sudden online public opinion incidents:

(1) Provide effective offline proposal channels and ensure students' psychological security. Universities should not only set up special feedback channels, but also arrange for dedicated staff to receive and feedback information on a regular basis, informing the proposer of important processing progress when necessary, while fully respecting the privacy protection of the proposer and focusing on dealing with the issue rather than the "person who raised the issue" to give students a full sense of psychological security. Pay attention to decisions or work deployments that raise concerns for students and respond in a timely and targeted manner to enhance the effectiveness of the interaction.

(2) Strengthen ideological education and improve students' rational judgement. Pay attention to network safety and public opinion propaganda, management and guidance, enhance students' network public opinion literacy, improve students' ability to screen false information and not to spread or forward undesirable comments, etc. Help students find accurate interpretations at the ideological level among a large amount of information, and guide them in the correct understanding and scientific treatment of hot events and social issues [8].

(3) Strengthen the supervision of online public opinion and enhance the reaction power of unexpected public opinion. Using the advantages of big data analysis to build a platform for collecting and analyzing online public opinion, schools should have a certain sense of advancement, and should judge the development trend in time when a small portion of public opinion begins to emerge and carry out effective supervision and treatment. At the same time, it should formulate corresponding emergency plans for sudden campus network public opinion, provide professional training to staff of the public opinion management department to make them familiar with the process of handling public opinion, and organize regular drills of emergency plans for public

opinion for relevant departments to improve the fluency of collaboration among them.

4. Conclusion

Although the occurrence of online public opinion among college students cannot be prevented artificially, if we know the causes of its occurrence, we can take measures to reduce the possibility of its occurrence or take effective measures to deal with it. In this paper, we believe that there are several reasons for the occurrence of public opinion: (1) There is no effective offline channels for proposals, and "real names" and "being real names" are prevalent; (2) students are incited by online "opinion leaders" and lack rational judgment. (3) The school is passive in public opinion incidents and the public opinion monitoring system is not sound. In response, the recommendations made in this paper are: (1) Provide effective offline proposal channels and ensure students' psychological security; (2) Strengthen ideological and political education and improve students' rational judgement; (3) Upgrade the supervision of online public opinion and enhance the response to unexpected public opinion.

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