

Construction of the “Four Forces” Model for Enhancing Network Public Opinion Guidance Abilities of Vocational College Counselors

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Keywords: Vocational colleges, counselors, online public opinion guidance, "Four Forces" model

Abstract: As front-line workers in the ideological and political education and daily management of university students, enhancing the online public opinion guidance ability of counselors is an important measure to establish a mechanism for guiding online public opinion in universities in the new era, which is conducive to creating a clean online environment and consolidating the ideological front line of universities. Therefore, based on the laws of dissemination and development of online public opinion, and in conjunction with the educational functions of counselors, this paper explores how to avoid the negative impact of online public opinion, maximize its positive influence, and help university students establish a correct view of ideological security. This paper, from the perspective of counselors in online education, comprehensively uses research methods such as literature research, case analysis, and questionnaire survey to elucidate the essence and characteristics of online public opinion in vocational colleges, analyze the current situation and challenges of online public opinion guidance by counselors in vocational colleges, and explore the construction of the "Four Forces" model to enhance the online public opinion guidance ability of counselors in vocational colleges.

In the era of "everyone is a self-media" on the internet, the guidance of online public opinion faces unprecedented challenges. The Twentieth National Congress emphasized the need to "build a strong and leading socialist ideology" and stated that "ideological work is the work of setting the heart of the country and the soul of the nation." In the "Internet+" era, the influence of the internet has permeated into the shaping of the thinking of young university students, the formation of standards for value judgments, and all aspects of their learning life. The internet platform has become an important channel for ideological exchange and collision. Universities are the main battlefield for fostering virtue and talent, and they are in a sensitive area of online public opinion and at the forefront of ideological education. In the context of the new era, guiding online public opinion has become an important part of ideological security education in universities. In recent years, with the continuous expansion of enrollment in vocational colleges, the structure of their student sources has become more complex, and once a public opinion incident occurs, it can have serious consequences.

The 51st "Statistical Report on Internet Development in China" (hereinafter referred to as the "Report") shows that as of December 2022, the number of Internet users in China reached 1.067

billion, an increase of 35.49 million from December 2021, and the internet penetration rate reached 75.6%. Among them, the proportion of netizens aged 20-29 is 14.2%. College students are the "natives" of the internet age, and the internet has become the primary channel for contemporary college students to access information, vent emotions, and express opinions. On the one hand, as college students are in the stage of cognitive growth and development, with limited life experience and not yet having formed a rational and mature worldview and values, they find it difficult to effectively discern the complex online information. Therefore, using online public opinion guidance as a platform to carry out ideological and political education for college students not only meets the requirements of the new era's development but also serves as an important starting point for improving ideological education in universities.[1]

1. Connotation and Characteristics of Online Public Opinion in Vocational Colleges

In the context of the new era, the internet has become the primary battleground for ideological clashes and public opinion debates among university students in vocational colleges, leading to significant changes in the way teachers and students communicate and live. The use of the internet to publish and disseminate information, exchange ideas, and express opinions has become the norm.[2] The term "public opinion" first appeared in 1781 and is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "the collective opinion, sentiment, or attitude of the public." Concerning the connotation of online public opinion, most Western scholars consider it as an extension of traditional public opinion in society, with the internet providing a new medium for the public to express their views, opinions, and attitudes. Notable among Chinese scholars, Liu Yi (2010) defines online public opinion as the comprehensive expression and dissemination of various emotions, opinions, and sentiments through the internet. Wang Ying (2017) defines online public opinion in vocational colleges as the sum of all comments, opinions, and emotions related to college affairs posted by college students using new media platforms. In this study, online public opinion is defined as the collection of viewpoints and emotions expressed by vocational college students regarding specific hot topics or information through actions such as likes, shares, and comments on internet platforms. It encompasses the behavior of students in creating, disseminating, and consuming online public opinion.

Through literature research and questionnaires, it was found that the formation of online public opinion in vocational colleges can typically be classified into the following types based on the purpose of use:

The first type utilizes online platforms as an effective means to voice personal interests and expose flaws in campus management, especially when personal interests are harmed, and there are no formal channels for complaints. Students often choose to express their interests online, which can resonate with other students and easily develop into online public opinion.

The second type uses online platforms as a stage for self-expression. Vocational college students tend to showcase their personalities on the internet, seeking attention, and some even strive to become internet celebrities. Due to the diversity and inclusivity of internet users, this often leads to the creation of new public opinion hotspots.

The third type utilizes online platforms for entertainment and expanding social interactions. Many vocational college students, often without understanding the truth behind certain events or their causes and consequences, blindly share and comment on hot topics.[3] This can lead to the spread of misinformation and contribute to the occurrence of online public opinion.

On one hand, online public opinion in vocational colleges exhibits several distinct characteristics:

1.1. Diversity of Information Sources and Platform Preferences

The internet has become one of the most convenient and rapid channels for university students in

vocational colleges to access information. Various search engines, social media platforms, news websites, and other internet platforms have introduced a plethora of unfiltered and diversified information. A survey conducted by China Youth Network School Communication Agency in April 2022, involving 11,267 college students across the country, revealed that over 80% of college students frequently watch short videos, with nearly 30% spending 2-5 hours per day on this activity. Funny anecdotes, campus life, and current events are popular topics for college students, with over 90% watching short videos for entertainment and relaxation, and more than 70% admitting that watching short videos can be addictive. It is evident that college students have unique preferences and habits when it comes to internet use. To understand the specific usage patterns of vocational college students, a questionnaire survey was conducted on 1,000 students from a vocational college in Hunan for the 2023 academic year. The results showed that the most frequently used platforms for receiving information were, in order, Douyin (TikTok), Kuaishou (Kwai), WeChat, and Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book). In terms of expressing opinions and engaging in interactions on the internet, the preferred platforms were the campus network, Douyin, WeChat, Xiaohongshu, and Kuaishou. It is clear that vocational college students have relatively concentrated usage preferences for both receiving and publishing information, which provides a targeted direction for conducting online public opinion guidance.

1.2. Concentration of Focused Topics and Blindness of Content Dissemination

Through questionnaire analysis, it was found that vocational college students' focus on online public opinion mainly centers on three aspects: campus hot topics (such as teachers' ethics and the management of campuses), topics relevant to themselves (such as educational management, mental health), and current social events (such as hot topics and natural disasters). These topics are closely related to students' personal interests, including education, exams, life, psychology, and employment, often causing students to resonate with them. The openness of online platforms and the hidden nature of online opinions allow vocational college students to freely express their views, attitudes, and thoughts. Due to their limited ability to judge and discern information, coupled with the need to improve internet safety literacy, students often forward or comment on topics based on subjective judgment and transient interests. In the questionnaire survey, more than 90% of vocational college students stated that they found content interesting and shared it, or they didn't think too much about it at the time, and everyone else was doing it, so it shouldn't be a big deal. Looking at these aspects, the arbitrary and uncritical nature of students' online activities can lead to the spread of false information.

1.3. Diversity of Roles and High-Speed Dissemination

Post-2000-generation college students are agile thinkers with independent thoughts, distinctive personalities, and a fast acceptance of new things. They are adept at using mobile internet terminals. In various online public opinions, vocational college students play multiple roles, including creators, disseminators, and consumers. Once a hot topic of concern emerges, students will quickly engage by liking, sharing, and commenting, significantly accelerating the speed of online public opinion dissemination.

In summary, guiding online public opinion among vocational college students requires understanding various communication channels and fully grasping the possible sources of online public opinion. It is necessary to respond proactively, considering the usage preferences and characteristics of vocational college students. This approach involves not only observing the entire process of online public opinion, from its inception to its decline, but also adapting to the different stages and roles involved.

2. Current State and Challenges of Online Public Opinion Guidance by Vocational College Counselors

Due to the complex nature of online information and the diverse online environment, and considering that college students are in a crucial phase of forming their worldviews and values, strengthening online public opinion guidance has become an essential component of ideological and political education in higher education institutions. As key figures in the realm of ideological and political education for college students, vocational college counselors play a vital role in utilizing new media and technology to take the initiative in the field of online ideological and political education. However, the reality reveals that vocational college counselors face significant difficulties in their efforts to guide online public opinion. These challenges are primarily evident in the following aspects:

2.1. Lack of Awareness

Vocational college counselors are tasked with multiple responsibilities and typically place their primary focus on students' ideological education and daily management, as per traditional educational norms. Consequently, they often lack strong awareness of the need for monitoring and guiding online public opinion. They may not fully appreciate the importance of online ideological and political education. While counselors may use platforms like QQ and WeChat in their work, these tools are primarily used for disseminating announcements and as means for daily student management. As a result, they do not effectively connect these platforms with students' ideological and political education efforts. It is evident that there is a pressing need to enhance counselors' awareness and recognition of the importance of improving their digital media literacy, monitoring the development of online public opinion in higher education institutions, and staying abreast of students' ideological dynamics for timely correction and positive guidance.

2.2. Insufficient Resources

Vocational college counselors work on the frontlines of higher education, bearing responsibilities related to ideological guidance, academic support, and life counseling, among other roles that directly impact students. The multitude of daily tasks often leaves counselors stretched thin, making it challenging to dedicate time and effort to online public opinion guidance. In-depth interviews with vocational college counselors revealed that, in recent years, the increasing complexity of student demographics due to expanded enrollments has made educational management more challenging. The typical working status of counselors is one of exhaustion due to daily management demands. When asked about online public opinion guidance, the overwhelming majority admitted to only reacting passively after public opinion incidents had already occurred. They have little time or energy for in-depth research into the patterns of online public opinion propagation and the trends in students' use of the internet. Many counselors mentioned in interviews that they are constantly overwhelmed by daily tasks and do not have the time or energy for dedicated research into online public opinion. They typically become involved in crisis management at the college or institutional level only after being informed about the situation.

2.3. Insufficient Skills

The internet is evolving rapidly, and guiding online public opinion involves multidisciplinary knowledge, including communication, sociology, education, psychology, and other fields. In contrast, vocational college counselors often face professional limitations and a lack of specialized training in

internet technology. Consequently, they are ill-prepared to use contemporary internet technologies for information processing, predicting public opinion trends, and crisis management. Furthermore, since they usually show limited interest in online public opinion work, counselors rarely establish mechanisms for proactive communication and ideological guidance with students through online platforms. A minority of counselors, when faced with public opinion incidents, resort to restrictive measures such as banning discussions and deleting posts, without fully understanding students' ideological dynamics or addressing their real concerns. This approach often exacerbates students' dissatisfaction and results in severe negative repercussions.

In conclusion, guiding online public opinion among vocational college students is a complex task that requires enhancing counselors' awareness, allocating more resources, and developing the necessary skills to effectively manage this domain. Overcoming these challenges necessitates a concerted effort to raise awareness of the importance of online ideological and political education, streamline counselors' daily tasks, and provide them with the training and support required to navigate the dynamic world of online public opinion.

3. Construction of the "Four Abilities" Model for Enhancing Online Public Opinion Guidance Skills of Vocational College Counselors

Based on the principles of communication and the patterns and characteristics of online public opinion dissemination, typical online public opinion in vocational colleges usually goes through four stages: "emergence, escalation, fluctuation, and decline." To effectively engage in public opinion guidance, counselors should not only have a comprehensive understanding of the development patterns of public opinion but also grasp the distinct characteristics of public opinion dissemination in different stages. Furthermore, they should consider the unique features of students' online behavior and the specific traits displayed by students in various stages of public opinion development. To this end, counselors should strategically enhance four critical skills: "judgment, intervention, guidance, and review." This will allow them to serve as trusted advisors, gatekeepers, guides, and protectors in managing online public opinion in higher education institutions. Refer to Figure 1 for a visual representation.

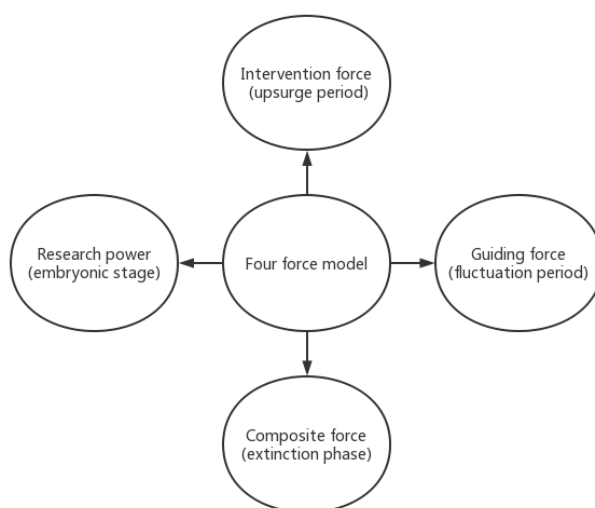


Figure 1: The "four forces" model of improving the network public opinion guidance ability of the counselors in higher vocational colleges

3.1. In the "Emergence" Stage, Enhancing Judgment Skills to Serve as Trusted Advisors

During the "Emergence" stage, online public opinion often exhibits identifiable characteristics. Vocational college students typically show a distinct focus on specific topics related to their own lives, such as campus activities and current social hot issues. As front-line personnel in higher education, counselors should leverage their position to proactively engage with students, parents, and student leaders. They can establish a four-level information collection network encompassing "family, class, student organizations, and dormitories." By conducting individual conversations, regular home visits, and meetings with student leaders, counselors should pay close attention to the topics that students are highly interested in. They should also be alert to key timeframes, such as public health emergencies, school policy announcements, notifications, and the start or end of semesters. Utilizing popular new media platforms like class WeChat groups, TikTok, and WeChat, counselors can gain insights into students' thoughts, viewpoints, and evolving sentiments. This allows them to make precise and timely judgments about emerging public opinions. Furthermore, counselors should establish efficient information-sharing mechanisms with campus security and public relations departments to enhance collaborative governance for online public opinion. By adhering to the "first response" principle, they can promptly identify the beginnings of public opinions and proactively guide students' emotions, enabling them to make informed judgments and manage issues in the "Emergence" stage.

3.2. In the "Escalation" Stage, Enhancing Intervention Skills to Act as Gatekeepers

Once public opinion enters the "Escalation" stage, vocational college students tend to engage in intense discussions and express their opinions, often leading to polarization due to herd mentality. During this phase, counselors should reclaim the initiative in online public opinion by positively addressing issues, setting topics, and guiding interactions using a variety of approaches both online and offline. They should strategically manage public opinion according to the nature of the event. In "red zones," counselors should adhere to their ideological beliefs, promptly share official announcements from the government and the school to debunk rumors, highlight positive role models, and promote core socialist values. In "black zones," they should take a firm stance and act as "opinion leaders," addressing issues head-on, creating positive narratives, and enhancing students' rational judgment and analysis skills. For "gray zones," counselors should seek to unite the majority, respond to students' concerns in a timely manner, clarify rumors, answer students' questions, and rectify improper ideological tendencies. It is essential to coordinate actions between the "online" and "offline" realms. What is addressed online should be resolved offline, fostering seamless connectivity between the two to harness the synergy of cooperative education.

3.3. In the "Fluctuation" Stage, Enhancing Guidance Skills to Serve as Guides

During the "Fluctuation" stage, students' thoughts and emotions remain unstable, and the possibility of public opinion resurgence persists. At this point, counselors should establish a three-way monitoring mechanism involving "families, schools, and classes." They should strengthen communication with parents, form class-level public opinion monitoring teams, and keep a vigilant eye on the dynamics of public opinion within classes. Counselors must be vigilant about identifying students who may exhibit extreme emotions or express extreme opinions and provide them with targeted one-on-one guidance. Counselors should also deal with a wide range of topics related to student recognition and recognition, following the principles of openness, fairness, and impartiality. Through online media channels, they should ensure transparent communication and use positive narratives. They should organize theme-based class meetings to stabilize students' thoughts and

emotions, preventing potential backlash.

3.4. In the "Decline" Stage, Enhancing Review Skills to Act as Protectors

During the "Decline" stage, as student interest in public opinion rapidly wanes, and negative emotions subside, counselors must remain vigilant and continue monitoring public opinion. There is a risk of a rebound in student thinking or the emergence of secondary public opinion crises. Simultaneously, counselors should prioritize students' emotional well-being and guide their thoughts to maintain a nurturing atmosphere. This involves conducting theme-based class meetings, organizing campus cultural activities, and setting up debates on specific topics. These activities help enhance students' online literacy and legal awareness while incorporating public opinion guidance into the overall political and ideological education of college students. This approach reinforces the accomplishments of public opinion guidance and safeguards a harmonious and stable campus environment.

4. Conclusion

In the era of new media, online public opinion profoundly influences the ideological beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, lifestyles, and value judgments of vocational college students. The guidance of online public opinion by vocational college counselors is a crucial aspect of conducting ideological and political education in higher education institutions. To address the four stages of public opinion development, namely "Emergence," "Escalation," "Fluctuation," and "Decline," and to construct a "Four Skills" enhancement model encompassing "Judgment Skills," "Intervention Skills," "Guidance Skills," and "Review Skills," is highly targeted and feasible. It effectively guides vocational college counselors in the smooth execution of online public opinion guidance and ideological and political education, which is pivotal to the ideological security and harmonious stability of campus life.

Acknowledgement

General research project of Hunan Network Ideological and Political Work Center of Colleges and Universities, "Four forces" model construction for the improvement of network public opinion guidance ability of counselors in higher vocational colleges, subject number: 2022SZ29.

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