Social Media and Its Impact on College Students' Identity

Jiayi Song[1,a,*]

[1]*School of Journalism and Communication, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510275, China*
a. songjy27@mail2.sysu.edu.cn
*corresponding author

Abstract: Social media has brought about the diffusion and communication of various ideological trend by strengthening the interaction between people. The diversity and complexity of interaction undoubtedly aggravate the identity crisis. For contemporary college students in China, the recognition of the identity of "college student" will have an important impact on their future development into the society. This research explores the impact of social media use (frequency of use, information acquisition mode, motivation for use, information acquisition channel) on the identity (its cognitive, evaluation, and emotional dimensions) of Chinese college students by using a questionnaire survey. The findings demonstrate Chinese college students have a high degree of identification with "college students", and the use of social media plays a significant part in shaping their identity. In addition, access to information is the primary motivation for using social media. Positive information acquisition mode affects their identity positively, while how often college students used social media had no such effect, and the motivation of obtaining information and the domestic official media can promote college students' identity. Therefore, the domestic official media should make full use of its high reliability and high authority, meet the demand of college students in terms of communication content as well as improve the quality of content.

Keywords: social media, identity, college students

1. Introduction

University is an important social place for identity formation, which means that college students must choose between a variety of values and ideas, and strive to find the coherence between personal identity (self-recognition) and social identity (belonging to others), so as to construct a sense of identity from one stage (student) to another stage (social person) [1]. However, contemporary college students also face multiple difficulties, conflicting requirements and ideas. For some individuals, the acceptance and confirmation of the identity of "college student" still seems to be confusing. At the same time, the public have expectations for college students, but they also question why some college students have not shown the meaning that the identity of "college students" should carry. Although these doubts about the identity of college students are not unrelated to the amplification effect of social media, they also reflect a certain crisis in the identity of college students.

The widespread use of the Internet leads to the fact that social media is becoming one of the main communication tools for people around the world and is changing the social norms, values and culture

[2]. Among college students, this effect is particularly obvious [3]. The 51st China Internet Development Statistical Report released (as of December 2022) suggested that there were 1,067 billion Chinese netizens, of which netizen aged 20-29 account for 14.2% [4]. On the basis of QuestMobile, the Mobile Video, Mobile Social Networking and Mobile Gaming industries are the three industries that have the highest proportions of Gen Z total usage time., and the percentages are all superior to the mean level. This age group constitutes the main group of college students. In this process, social media has extensively participated in shaping the identity of college students: social media provides a platform for diversity of opinion and expression, and although the expressions are virtual, they are also influenced by real life (such as values, cultural norms, etc.), and will affect individual attitudes and behaviors in reality.

The research focuses on exploring the identity status of contemporary college students through a questionnaire survey and explores how social media use affects college students' identity. The research will not only help to better understand how social media influence identity, but also provide inspiration for the practice of improving the identity of contemporary college students.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Identity and Dimensions

"Identity" focuses on the connection between the self and interpersonal meaning in social situations, which is different from the overall description of the self as a psychological state [5]. Identity is defined differently in fields such as psychology, sociology, and social psychology. For research purposes, identity is defined as a person's perception of which group they belong to, the degree to which they recognize and accept the characteristics of that group. Therefore, the identity of a college student is the acceptance and confirmation of an individual's identity as a "college student".

The theory of social identity maintains that individuals are defined regarding personal and social dimensions [6]. Individual identity is a specific self-description of a person, including personal characteristics and abilities; while social identity is a self-description which is part of a person's concept of self and which comes from all members of a social category, including the value and emotional significance associated with these members [7,8]. This generally accepted definition identifies three necessary components of identification of someone to a group: (a) the cognitive dimension, which involves self-categorization process, where individuals assign themselves to a group and acknowledge this identity; (b) the evaluative dimension, which involves group self-esteem; and (c)the emotional dimension is an emotional attachment to the group and the feelings associated with membership. Therefore, according to the definition of the three dimensions of social identity, the research seeks to explore to what extent and how are college students' identities and dimensions influenced by social media.

2.2. How Social Media Affects Identity

Previous studies have been conducted research from the perspectives of religious identity, cultural identity, political identity, national identity and gender identity, showing that social media is conducive to the construction of individual social identity. Social media have profoundly altered the environment of traditional social identity by broadening social reach, fostering information sharing, providing a forum for expression, by enabling the protection of personal information and offering multi-choices [9]. Therefore, college students can participate in social discussions by posting, commenting, sharing pictures and videos, and constantly form and confirm their own values, ideas and opinions. At the same time, people are increasingly relying on the "pseudo-environment" created by mass media, including social media, to understand the reality around them. It seems to many people that college students have responsibilities, actively face the society, value social practice, have

courage to start their own businesses and pursue positive energy, but they also show the common bad root as utilitarianism, contempt for theoretical study, extravagant life, poor self-care ability and so on [10]. Public identity evaluation for college students is fed back to college students through social media, thus affecting their acceptance, evaluation and emotional engagement of the identity of "college students".

2.2.1. Frequency with Social Media Usage

One of the commonly used predictor variables in research on the effects of social media is how frequently social media is used. Social media has been instrumental in promoting the educational development of college students., improving their knowledge, constructing emotional connections with society and finding their own social identity. Data show that 33.54% of college students believe that social media information has affected self-awareness [11]. Social media is a popular tool among college students. The higher the frequency of use, the more obvious its role in constructing and consolidating the identity of college students. Therefore, hypotheses are put forward:

H1a: College students who use social media more often would have a higher identity.

H1b-d: College students who use social media more often would have a higher cognitive/evaluative/emotional dimension of identity.

2.2.2. Information Acquisition Mode

In terms of information acquisition, the information acquisition mode is divided into active acquisition and passive acquisition (information encounter). Different social media information acquisition behaviors have different influences on the identity of college students. College students with a higher level of interest are more inclined to seek out relevant information actively based on interests and information needs. This kind of active and purposeful information is generally consistent with the cognition of college students themselves; college students who do not pay much attention to college students' related topics are more likely to "encounter" information through Weibo, Xiaohongshu and other social media platforms, and the information obtained by accident may divert individual interests and preferences, leading to multiple thinking and understanding of the identity of college students. Therefore, hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: The more active college students were in accessing information on social media, the higher their level of identity.

H2b-d: The more positive social media way of access to information, the higher the score of college students' identity in cognitive/evaluative/emotional dimension.

2.2.3. Motivation of Use

Motivation is generated by demand, so to investigate users' social media use motivation, it is necessary to start from users' demand for information. According to the current research on motivation of social media use, this study summarizes the use motivation for use in the following 3 points: (a) information acquisition motivation, which refers to the motivation to obtain information through social media when users generate information needs; (b) entertainment motivation, namely the user the grounds of relaxation and entertainment; (c) social motivation means the user's motivation to meet the needs of communicating with others. At present, the mechanism of how social media use motivation influences college students' identity is not clear, and users' motivations for using social media are usually multiple, so the question is raised:

Q1: How does social media use motivation affect college students' identity?

2.2.4. Information Acquisition Channel

The theory of media richness argued that the influence of the media on individuals is different, as the richness of information presented by different media is different [12]. This study divides information acquisition channels on social media into domestic official media, domestic unofficial media, domestic We-Media bloggers, foreign official media and foreign We-Media bloggers ("domestic" refers to "domestic China"). Therefore, the following questions are raised regarding the relationship between college students' identity and different information acquisition channels:

Q2: What types of social media affect college students' identity?

3. Method

3.1. Sampling and Data Collection

The research adopted the online questionnaire to obtain data. Specifically, the questionnaire was produced through the "Tencent Questionnaire" platform, and then distributed on multiple social media. Since the research objects of this study are Chinese college students (including junior college students, undergraduate students, postgraduate students and doctoral students), the respondents are screened according to "whether you are a college student" at the beginning of the questionnaire.

A total of 181 questionnaires were collected, including 173 valid samples. According to the results, the majority of respondents were 19-23 years old; 53.8% were women and were men; undergraduate students made up 76.3% of the respondents, 17.3% are postgraduate students and the rest are junior college students and doctoral students; about 90% of them are studying in mainland China.

The research carried out a small-scale pilot test before the official distribution of the questionnaire. The analysis showed that the Cronbach's alpha of cognitive identity (0.817), evaluation identity and emotional identity in this study were all greater than 0.7, and the Cronbach's alpha of social media usage was also 0.6. The above shows that the scale has good reliability. Based on the feedback from the respondents in the pilot study, the questionnaire was revised and improved.

3.2. Variable Measurement

3.2.1. Social Media Use

In this part, the questionnaire is divided into the following 4 parts for measurement: (a) frequency of use, (b) information acquisition mode, (c) motivation of use and (d) information acquisition channel. For the measurement of frequency of use, respondents answered "1" = almost never "5" = almost every day about the question: "How much is your frequency of using social media?". The remaining items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

3.2.2. Identity

Identity includes three dimensions of cognition, evaluation and emotion, mainly adapted from the scale of WangT [13]. Firstly, regarding the cognitive dimension of identity, the scale asks respondents how much they agree with the eight questions: "I am happy to introduce myself as a college student", "The ideal and career of college students should be combined with the development of the country", "College students should have good morals level" and so on. Secondly, the scale of the evaluation dimension is combined with team identification by Bob Heere et al., which includes five questions such as "Generally speaking, I am happy to be a member of college students" and "other people's general view of college students is positive". Finally, the emotional dimension included five questions such as "I really like the identity of a college student" and "I feel like a personal compliment when someone compliments a college student" to measure the degree of emotional involvement with the

identity of a college student [14]. All options are on a five-point Likert scale, with 1-5 representing a range of topics from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

3.2.3. Control Variables

Gender, age, school district, and educational background were set as control variables in this study. By controlling for the effects of these variables, it is possible to more precisely measure the correlation between social media usage behavior and identity.

3.3. Data analysis

Statistical analysis of the data was performed using SPSS analysis software. In addition to descriptive statistical analysis, this study explores the impact of college students' social media usage on their identity through correlation analysis and multivariate regression analysis.

4. Results

4.1. The Basic Situation of Chinese College Students' Social Media Use and Identity

From the point of the usage of social media, about 70% of respondents said they spend time on social media "almost every day", and the information acquisition mode on social media is mainly active acquisition. The samples collected in this study show that in terms of information acquisition channels that they "frequently" or "almost daily use", more than 50% of the respondents indicated that they would use domestic media (official media, unofficial media and We-Media bloggers), among which 78% had contact with domestic We-Media bloggers; on the contrary, only about 20% used foreign media (official media and We-Media bloggers). In terms of motivation, the percentages of respondents who "agree" and "very agree" with social interaction, entertainment and information acquisition are higher than 70%.

From the perspective of identity, respondents have a relatively high degree of identity (M=3.86, SD=0.612). Specifically, the mean scores of the three dimensions of identity are all above 3.6 (the standard deviation is between 0.6-0.8 and the degree of dispersion is low). Meanwhile, in the measurement of the hierarchical elements of the three dimensions of identity, the mean value of each stratified element is higher than 3, which means that the respondents' attitudes towards the items on the cognitive, evaluation and emotional dimensions of identity are mostly "agree" and "very agree". Respondents had the highest average score in the cognitive dimension (M=4.03, SD=0.656), followed by the evaluation dimension (M=3.87, SD=0.746), and the emotional dimension was the lowest (M=3.69, SD= 0.763). In addition, identity and three dimensions of college students studying in Chinese mainland are higher than those studying in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan area and abroad.

4.2. Correlation Analysis Results

Through Spearman's correlation analysis, it is found that, in general, the frequency of social media use, information acquisition mode, and three types of motivations (entertainment, information acquisition and social interaction) have a significant positive correlation with college students' identity. Regarding information acquisition channel, the data show that the use of domestic media (official, unofficial and personal We-Media) has a significant positive correlation with identity, while exposure to foreign media (official and personal We-Media) has no correlation with identity.

4.3. Multivariate Regression Analysis Results

Regarding the test of the relative size of the dimensional effect of social media use on identity of college students, the analysis shows that the information acquisition mode has a positive and significant impact, and the frequency of use has no significant impact on identity. Therefore, H1a is not supported but H2a is supported. Regarding motivation of use, the motivation to obtain information can positively and significantly affect the identity of college students. For information acquisition channel, only exposure to domestic official media can positively and significantly influence identity, while other social media types have no significant impact (see Table 1).

Table 1: Results of regression analysis predicted identity (N=173).

Variables	dimensions	B(SE)	Beta	T
Frequency of social media use		0.335(1.021)	0.022	0.328
Mode of information acquisition		1.797(0.411)	0.284	4.374***
Social media use motivation	Obtain information	4.351(0.918)	0.313	4.737***
Information acquisition channel	Domestic official media	2.475(0.670)	0.241	3.692***
F		17.204***		
R²		0.563		
The corrected R²		0.531		

$*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001$

Table 2-4 shows that the mode of information acquisition has a positive and significant impact on cognitive identification, evaluation identification and emotional identification. On the contrary, frequency of use has no significant impact on the 3 dimensions of identity identification. These results support H2b-d but refuse H1b-d. From the perspective of social media use motivation, the motivation to obtain information can significantly improve the cognitive identity, evaluation identity and emotional identity of college students. In addition, on the cognitive dimension of identity, entertainment motivation also has a significant positive impact, but the effect is smaller than information acquisition motivation. In the emotional dimension, social interaction motivation has a significant positive correlation, but the effect is not as good as information acquisition motivation.

For information acquisition channels in social media, the data show that college students' contact with domestic official media can positively and significantly affect the 3 dimensions of identity, while other information acquisition channels do not have this effect.

Table 2: The results of regression analysis predict the cognitive dimensions of identity (N=173).

Variables	dimensions	B(SE)	Beta	T
Frequency of social media use		0.636(0.529)	0.086	1.203
Mode of information acquisition		0.612(0.213)	0.200	2.878**
Social media use motivation	Entertainment	1.563(0.504)	0.238	3.101
	Obtain information	1.969(0.475)	0.292	4.141**
Information acquisition channel	Domestic official media	2.475(0.670)	0.241	3.692***
F		13.404***		
R²		0.501		
The corrected R²		0.464		

$*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001$

Table 3: The results of regression analysis predict the evaluation dimensions of identity (N=173).

Variables	dimensions	B(SE)	Beta	T
Frequency of social media use		0.156(0.427)	0.030	0.366
Mode of information acquisition		0.419(0.172)	0.226	2.861**
Social media use motivation	Obtain information	1.088(0.384)	0.227	2.835**
Information acquisition channel	Domestic official media	0.647(0.280)	0.184	2.311*
F		7.362***		
R²		0.356		
The corrected R²		0.307		

$*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001$

Table 4: The results of regression analysis predict the emotional dimensions of identity (N=173).

Variables	dimensions	B(SE)	Beta	T
Frequency of social media use		-0.457(0.388)	-0.085	-1.177
Mode of information acquisition		0.694(0.156)	0.311	4.448***
Social media use motivation	Social interaction	0.915(0.2674)	0.229	3,428***
	Obtain information	1.293(0.349)	0.264	3.708***
Information acquisition channel	Domestic official media	0748(0.255)	0.207	2.938**
F		12.906***		
R²		0.492		
The corrected R²		0.454		

$*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001$

5. Discussion

The findings suggest, first, identity (and its three dimensions) was not affected by frequency of social media use as expected. A possible explanation is that Generation Z constitutes the vast majority of college students today, for whom the use of social media has become routine. Numerous empirical studies on the frequency and dependence of college students on social media have also proved that: college students rely seriously on social media. Therefore, the difference in frequency of use among college students is small, resulting in that frequency of use does not have a significant impact on identity. In addition, although college students rely heavily on social media, there are individual differences in the content used. For example, college students who like to find current news and social hot topics may have a higher identity as a "college student" than college students who are accustomed to watching entertainment information. Future research can conduct further research on this.

Second, the information acquisition mode of college students has a significant impact on identity (including its three dimensions), and the more active college students seek information, the higher their identity, which is consistent with the hypothesis of this study. In the process of using social media, individuals come into contact with information that they did not intend to understand, resulting in changes in their cognition, attitude, behavior, etc [15]. Therefore, when college students use social media, the information they obtain according to their specific purpose or interest is relatively consistent with their own cognition, so that they can more effectively consolidate and enhance their identity.

Third, in terms of motivation of use, the study found that the main purpose of college students is to obtain information, which is conducive to improving their identity, while the other two motivations have no such effect. This is consistent with existing research: the motivation of most respondents is to seek information and use social media messages, which is a strong and persistent motivation [16]. College students use social media not only to share information, but also to gain professional knowledge and experience. In addition, entertainment motivation can also significantly affect the cognitive dimension. For college students, social media has become their main platform for entertainment. These interests also coincide well with those of today's college students. As social media is becoming more and more perfect in satisfying needs such as leisure and entertainment, these leisure activities often prompt users to spend more time or energy in social media activities [17]. Through common interests, college students can find like-minded partners (who are also college students) on social media, which can further enhance the feeling of "we are all college students, and we all have common interests", thus helping to enhance college students' identity.

In addition to information acquisition motivation, social interaction motivation can significantly affect the dimension of emotional identity. Since social media can connect weak ties and consolidate strong ties, it is beneficial to promote the emotional connection between users and groups (whether online or offline). If college students use social media for social interaction with college student users, then their attachment to the "college students" group will be higher. As a result, their identity in the emotional dimension will be higher. Future research can further explore college students' social interactions on social media.

Fourth, the study found that domestic official media is instrumental in shaping the identity of Chinese college students, which is consistent with previous research conclusions. Empirical studies have shown that college students have higher trust in official micro-media than unofficial micro-media [18]. According to the data result, college students are more in contact with domestic We-Media bloggers on social media. Although there are many bloggers who are also college students sharing various content that makes college students empathize, this does not significantly affect the identity of college students. It suggests that official media still play an irreplaceable role in guiding the minds of college students: whether it is the role models of college students promoted by the

official media or the topic discussions on the current situation of college students, due to its own authority and high degree of trust, college students and the public attach great importance to the official media. Therefore, the construction of official media on social platforms urgently needs to be improved, so as to improve the credibility and dissemination power of the platform, and expand the influence of official media on the Internet.

6. Conclusion

The "identity" of college students focused on the cognition of individual college students to belong to the group and the acceptance of the group, so as to construct the identity transition from "student" to "social person". Therefore, this paper focuses on discussing social media and its impact on Chinese college students' identity. The study aimed to better help college students improve their identity, so as to benefit their future development. Questionnaires were used in this study, and 173 valid samples were obtained. The main findings are as follow.

Regarding the basic status of social media use and identity of Chinese college students, the results illustrate that college students rely on social media in their daily lives. They use social media with various motivations, and most of them take the initiative. In terms of information acquisition channel, more college students tend to use domestic media, including official media, unofficial media and We-Media" on social media. The overall level of identity of Chinese college students is higher, and compared with students in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and abroad, students studying in mainland China have a higher level of identity.

In terms of how college students' social media use affects their identity, college students' social media information acquisition mode positively affects their identity, while the frequency of social media use has no such effect. Accessing to the country's official media as well as the motivation to get information can boost college students' identity.

Focusing on the three dimensions of identity, positive information acquisition mode, motivation of information acquisition and the use of domestic official media have a positive impact on the cognitive, evaluation and emotional dimensions of college students' identity. For the cognitive dimension, entertainment motivation also has a significant positive effect, but the effect is less than that of information acquisition motivation. For the emotional dimension, social interaction motivation has a significant positive correlation, but the effect is not as good as information acquisition motivation.

The study has certain limitations. First of all, the sample of college students studying outside Chinese mainland in the questionnaire is small, so the research results may only be applicable to Chinese mainland, and future research can further expand samples from other regions to improve universality. Second, this study did not examine the moderators and mediators that might influence the identity effect. For example, the level of the university may affect the identity of college students in different degrees, which in turn affects the relationship examined in this study. Finally, the research may be too general in measuring the social media usage of college students. For example, only the three motivations of social interaction, entertainment and information acquisition were measured, and there was no other significance in the content of social media exposure. Future research can be further refined measurement standard.

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