

Influences of Populism on Youth in Social Media

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Abstract: In recent years, the global spread of COVID-19 has brought significant instability and uncertainty to the lives of people worldwide while also providing an opportunity to spread populist ideas. Especially in recent years, with the development of Internet technology, populism and the internet have fused to form a "cyber-populist" social trend. This online populism has a wide range of influence and destructive solid power, bringing a great crisis to global ideological security. At the same time, online populism is also insidiously attacking young people. It is mainly manifested in the birth of a destructive mentality among young people, inducing them to blindly follow the crowd, lose their independent personalities, and polarise their value judgments. This paper analyses typical public opinion events and their data in recent years by searching the internet and the Civiw website; in the light of the characteristics of youth expression in the Internet era, the negative impact of online populism on the psychological development of youth is explored. The paper goes on to discuss the reasons for the negative impact of online populism on the psyche of young people: inadequate mechanisms for monitoring online opinion at universities, insufficient protection of young people's awareness of the rule of law online, and a lack of online activism among young people. Only by promoting social justice from a macro perspective, controlling the gathering of online groups, using laws to channel public psychology and bringing online speech back to mainstream ideology is the only way to move the youth population from impulsiveness to rationality, and it is also the way to address the dangers posed by online populism.

Keywords: populism, youth, social media

1. Introduction

"Populism" is a diverse social trend, the two main core ideas of which are anti-elitism and anti-pluralism [1]. With the development of the internet, today's 'populism' is often manifested in social networks as a new type of online populism. However, "populism is not only a social and political phenomenon but also the result of a group psychological reaction" [2]. Populism, which raises the banner of being a voice for ordinary people, appears to be an attempt to make its actual point; in fact, it is the expression of a personality formed in the cultural atmosphere of mass society, a group sentiment expressed by this mass personality in response to social contradictions such as economic disparities, social injustice and imbalances in educational resources. Le Pen's theory of group psychology states that "once the individual enters the group, the self-conscious individuality disappears, the unity of thought and feeling" [3]. The mass psychology of impulsiveness, extremism,

irritability and irrationality that usually characterises them is similar to the unified group psychology on which online populism relies.

Online populism is a prevalent research topic among scholars regarding social thinking. Some scholars have studied the development process, dissemination mechanism and governance strategies of online populism, such as exploring the roots of online populism and its governance path [4]. Some other scholars have studied the manifest characteristics of online populism and its dissipation strategies [5]. Another group of scholars has conducted microscopic studies with a unique perspective. For example, some scholars have conducted in-depth theoretical analyses of online populist events and interpreted the deductive features of online populism in detail [6]. Other scholars have combined online populism with other disciplines and analysed how online populism has moved from "symbolic violence" to "real violence" [7]. Some other scholars have studied the impact of online populism on college students, concluding that the spread of online populism in colleges and universities will weaken the ideal beliefs and online literacy of some college students and emphasise the need to guide the values of education of college students from multiple perspectives [8]. There is no doubt that there are many unique flashes of scholarly research on online populism, but few scholars have explored the impact of online populism on youth from a psychological perspective in light of the current data.

From a practical or academic perspective, psychological involvement is essential to further analysis of online populism. It is crucial to identify the psychological roots that lead to its occurrence and confront the group mentality to propose reasonable solutions. Therefore, this paper analyses online populism from some psychological perspectives in the context of specific popular events while not limiting itself to the study of Internet users as a group, but focusing on the very specific of young people among Internet users and exploring what adverse effects online populism may have on the psychological development of young people.

This paper has implications for both real-life and academic research. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the mystique and allure of online populism through group psychology, from the theoretical point of view to finding the psychological root of network populism, calling for people and academics to confront the significance of group psychology for populism. These will help subsequent studies better propose a rational solution to the problem.

2. Influence

Adolescents' physical and mental development is still immature and their moral consciousness, though formed, is still fragile [9]. Due to the unique nature of their physical and mental development, young people are vulnerable to the infection of "populism". In particular, in the new media era, the internet has facilitated the development of "populism" and has given rise to "internet populism". When asked, "Do you think the current phenomenon of online populism is serious" on a scale of 10, the public's overall perception of the seriousness of online populism was 7.4. Among them, those under 30 perceive the seriousness of online populism, especially among young people aged 20 to 29 (7.82 points) and those under 20 (7.63 points). The survey shows that growing and marginal youth groups have emerged as increasingly influential among youth groups. The growing youth group refers to young people who are studying in schools, including students in junior high schools, high schools, colleges and universities, among which university students in key universities are the main ones. According to this survey, the student group scored 7.92 on the perception of the seriousness of online populism [10]. A Group of young students is characterized by less life experience and undefined values and is more susceptible to the influence of subcultures and extreme rhetoric. The marginal youth group refers to those who have fewer social resources, less attention from public opinion or are outside the mainstream of society, mainly including new generation migrant workers, young people returning to their hometowns, small town youth and rural youth. They are more susceptible to populist views on hot news events on the internet.

Therefore, according to the survey results, compared to other age groups of Internet users, the youth group has a more obvious perception of online populism and a deeper understanding of the trend of online populism itself. It is only through a clear understanding of the impact of online populism on young people that society can take better measures to protect young people's physical and mental development. We strongly encourage authors to use this document to prepare the camera-ready.

2.1. Prompting the Birth of a Destructive Mentality in Adolescents

"It is the desire for the destruction that is first noticed in the masses [11]." Groups with a destructive mentality have very distinctive characteristics: a loss of rational thinking and behaviour and greater use of violent words or behaviour. The birth of this destructive mentality is undoubtedly a significant threat to society's safety and has a highly negative impact on the psyche of young people.

On the evening of March 15, 2022, CCTV 3-15 evening exposure of Hunan Yueyang plug flag vegetable industry and other five vegetable processing enterprises to produce "substandard sauerkraut" health conditions worrying, foot stepping sauerkraut, littering cigarette butts footage record scene shocking. The phrase "substandard sauerkraut" has been on social media hot searches for some time. At the same time, instant noodle companies such as Master Kong and Unity, which have a cooperative relationship with the exposed factories, were also involved and became the focus of public opinion. After the incident broke out, Unity and Master Kong issued statements and apologies on their websites, while other affected companies such as KFC, White Elephant and Imairang also quickly issued statements saying they had nothing to do with the exposed sauerkraut processing companies. As can be seen from Figure 1, during this period, public opinion was mainly dominated by the issue of the "substandard sauerkraut" and the company's response, with cyber citizens" condemning the double standards and disregard for food safety of the companies involved" and "discussing the partners of the companies involved"—partners," and so on. However, as time passed, some unexpected opinions emerged on the internet. At first, some internet populists began to pretend to speak out for the economically disadvantaged individuals on the internet, posting things such as: "The earth pit sauerkraut has torn away the last dignity of the poor" and "Innocent! Tens of thousands of peasants have become the biggest victims", and later on to the level of the whole country, with statements such as "Chinese people are cheating Chinese people" and "their people are cheating their people", which endanger social stability [12]. These online populist articles greatly inflamed the already angry hearts of cyber citizens, causing them to move from criticism of the companies and people involved to attacks and smearing of regulators, product producers and business operators in the relevant fields, and to further spread their anger to the entire convenience food industry and even the entire import and export industry, causing the incident to gradually break out of its original controllable scope and seriously The incident has gradually broken out of its original scope of control, seriously affecting the cyber citizens' interpretation of the truth of the incident and subverting the existing operation mechanism of the relevant industry.

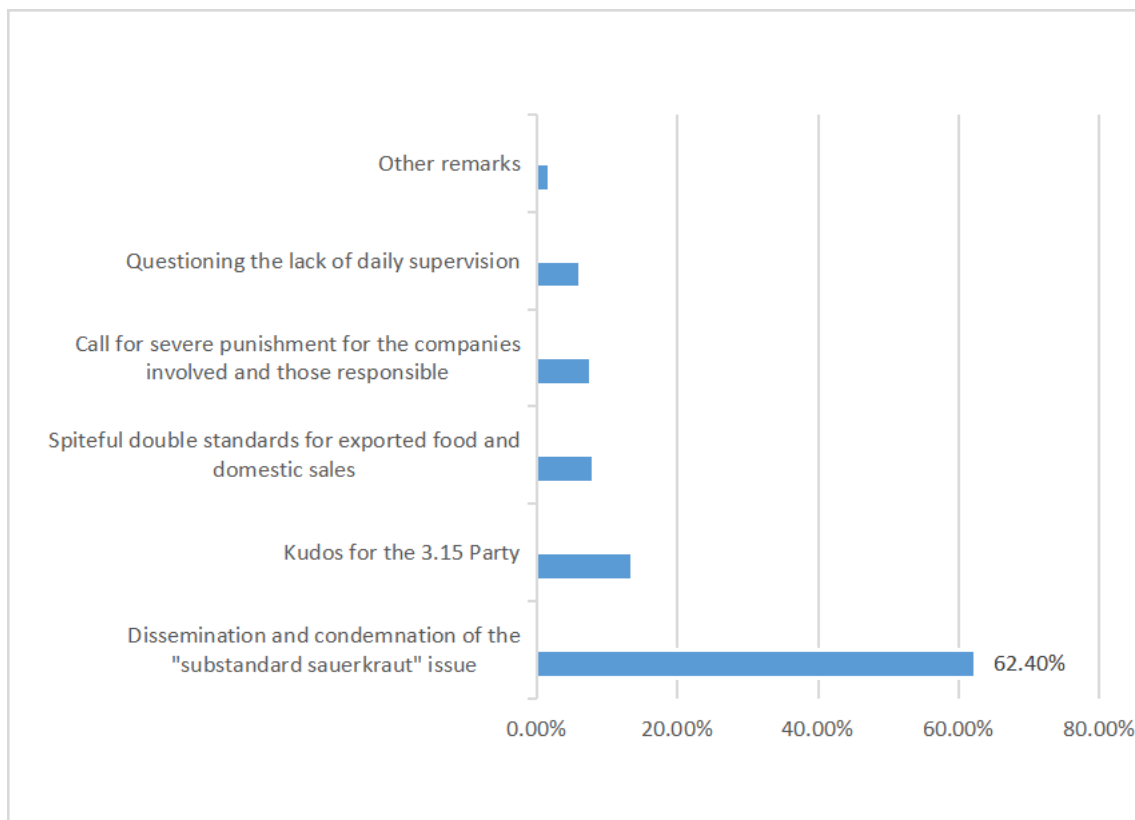


Figure 1: Distribution of Internet users' topics [13].

Throughout the incident, public opinion erupted in such an uncontrolled manner precisely because of the social emotions that these online populist articles stirred up in public. As the events unfolded, the public's attention shifted to the imbalances in economic development and less to the events themselves. Young people can easily be tempted to make irrational statements when confronted with information from different perspectives on the internet. As it turns out, these unthinking statements only fuel the fire and derail public opinion, thus intensifying social tensions. For example, many teenagers have started to believe that the reason for the emergence of "Substandard sauerkraut" is because of the imbalance in economic development, and many "anti-rich" comments have been made, which undoubtedly represent the unconsciousness of online populism that has led many teenagers to develop an unthinking and destructive mentality.

2.2. Inducing Young People to Follow the Crowd and Lose Their Independence Blindly

"There is a tendency for group members to unify their thoughts and feelings with each other [14]." Psychologically speaking, the herd mentality is sometimes not positive; it can lead us to dogmatism and paranoid tendencies. A blind herd mentality can cause us to lose our ability to think independently and to judge events. The rise of internet technology has made it easy for people to fall into a blind herd mentality: "Using an emerging medium to reinforce a perception can put a community into a hypnotic state [15]." Internet populism uses popular public opinion events to instil ideas such as difficulty in finding employment, difficulty in buying a house..., and to burden the public, especially the physically and mentally immature youth. Young people whose development is still immature are put under "mental shackles" and tempted to abandon their independent thinking.

In January 2019, Tianlin Zhai showed his post-doctoral acceptance letter from Peking University on the internet, and then in February, Tianlin Zhai said in a live broadcast that he did not know what

"know.com" was, triggering a heated debate among the public. Cyber citizens have said that it is very illogical for Tianlin Zhai, a post-doctoral student at Peking University, not to know what "know.com" is. As the investigation of the incident finally confirmed that Tianlin Zhai had indeed committed academic misconduct, Tianlin Zhai himself has been duly punished. Throughout this incident, the public, especially the youth, should have taken this as a warning to avoid the same mistakes from happening again. However, during the fermentation of public opinion on the incident, some online populists spread populist statements such as "anti-intellectual" and "anti-elite", making many young people question the academic world by publishing false information and creating rumours. Statements such as "academic circles are already dirty", "professors are all bad", and "there is no hope for higher education in China" frequently appear in the mouths of young people, but many of the people who make such statements or the young people themselves do not know what they are talking about [16]. Many people or teenagers who make such statements do not have any academic experience. It is, therefore, clear that online populism can easily lure young people into the mentality of blindly following the crowd and losing their ability to think independently, which will undoubtedly cause them to gradually lose their independent personalities and become puppets manipulated by populists.

2.3. Extremes of Value Judgement for Young People

"When groups express their emotions, they always show simplistic and extreme characteristics, either extreme love or hate [17]." This extreme emotion will make the public lose their ability to discriminate, ignore the middle state and judge things by simple right and wrong. Online populism exploits this, "compelling those who cannot easily make judgments to make black or white judgments [18] quickly." In this case, the populist's grievances can become the existence of another widespread outrage, while the populist's personal preferences can become what the public loves. When a hot issue arises on the internet, the populist will dig out some reasons for the incident, such as management blind spots, social hotspots and economic disparities, and make a big deal out of them, spreading populist rhetoric. At the same time, populists will also make use of the emotional psychology of cyber citizens to make them lose their rationality and judgement in a vain attempt to make them see only the shortcomings of the social system, to induce them to selectively forget other significant historical achievements and the contributions made by the social elite to the country and society, to achieve the goal of online populism, which is "anti-establishment, anti-elite, anti-intellectual and merging with extreme nationalism". The immaturity of young people's own physical and mental development, as well as their lack of life experience, leads to young people not being able to make accurate judgments easily, making them psychologically susceptible to the black-or-white approach of online populism, which ultimately leads to their paranoid physical and mental development.

For example, the 2020 Olympic champion Qian Yang was subjected to cyber-violence. 2020 Olympic Games saw China's Qian Yang win gold medals in many events, and as a result, she quickly became popular on the internet, gaining the praise of many netizens. However, there was a lot of "discord" when a netizen discovered that Qian Yang had posted pictures of NIKE shoes on social media. "Chinese athletes, why do they collect Nike shoes?" "This is a Chinese star?" "Get the hell out of China!" Such language continues to emerge from the internet, and these comments reflect online populism. It is worth mentioning that some netizens were congratulating Qian Yang for winning the gold medal one minute, and the next minute they were posting "get out of China" such a massive change in attitude in a short period is a sign of extreme value judgement. Subsequently, many netizens commented that Qian Yang should burn those shoes if she is patriotic; such comments reflect extreme patriotic ideas. As it turns out, such extreme statements are full of exaggeration and ignorance and make individuals completely lose their sense of responsibility. The uniqueness of the youth group determines that it is susceptible to the infection of populist ideas on the internet, which leads to the

extremes of youth values and is not conducive to the healthy physical and mental development of youth.

3. Discussion

There are many reasons why online populism can harm young people.

3.1. Reasons at School Level

At the school level, on the one hand, campus life in many universities today is relatively free and relaxed, which gives young people enough time and energy to focus on online information, which can lead to online populism among young people [19]. On the other hand, many universities today do not pay enough attention to the spread of online populism among youth groups. With the development of the internet, it is easier for youth groups to use online media such as WeChat and QQ to discuss incorrect values such as populism, but universities do not have timely and accurate information about each student, making it difficult to monitor them. At the same time, in daily education, some teachers fail to guide teenagers to establish correct values on time, making it difficult for teenagers to form correct values and have rational behaviours. In addition, some teenagers have not established a correct sense of online morality and legalism, and universities have not provided further guidance in this regard, resulting in many teenagers being unable to know the illegality of their actions.

3.2. Reasons at the Level of Media Communication

In terms of media communication, the development of social media such as Weibo and WeChat has exacerbated the decentralised nature of the internet, breaking the monopoly of discourse in real life and enabling young people to express their views freely on the internet; secondly, because of the convenience of the internet media, young people rely heavily on channels such as WeChat and Weibo to collect and share information, which also makes it easier for groups to reach consensus. On the other hand, many irresponsible public media deliberately fabricate hot topics in order to arouse public attention, and after they have been widely disseminated on the internet, they often characterise the public opinion as "the second generation of the rich acted recklessly" and "the high intellectuals are not consistent with each other". Young people's minds are subconsciously influenced by these statements, which pin the crime on the "rich", the "elite," and the "government".

3.3. Young People's Reasons

From the youth's perspective, the main reason for this comes from the youth's lack of social experience. Many teenagers today focus on their cultural studies while at school, living under the shelter of their parents and teachers, not understanding the cruelty of the natural world and having a poorer ability to accept it in their hearts. In this environment, young people generally have an overly simplistic perception of society and do not have enough social experience to distinguish the truth of events and make objective comments.

In addition, as there is still a lack of research on online populism at home and abroad, the theoretical aspects of this paper are still lacking, and the discussion in the whole paper does not go far enough, and further in-depth research is needed.

4. Conclusion

With the further development of the internet in recent years, there has been great scope for the development of online populism. In particular, online populism has led the public, especially youth

groups, to blindly stand on the moral high ground and accuse "elites" and "highly educated people" in the post-epidemic era. Therefore, this article analyses the negative psychological impact of online populism on youth groups by taking into account specific examples of hot public opinion. The study of the adverse effects of online populism on young people will deepen the understanding of the harmful effects of online populism on the mind.

Firstly, online populism is a natural and highly harmful social trend, especially for young people who are more vulnerable to the harmful effects of online populist ideas due to their immature physical and mental development. Secondly, online populism has already harmed many young people, such as the birth of a destructive mentality, the tendency to follow the herd blindly, and the extremes of value judgement. Young people are the hope of humanity, and it is essential to recognise the harmful effects of online populism.

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