The Formation, Impact, and Rectification of Contemporary University Students' Values under the Influence of Online Populist Ideology

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Abstract: Populism, empowered by internet technology, has given rise to a wave of online populism characterized by irrational emotional criticism. College students, as a significant group using the internet, face the safety risks of emotional outbursts, emotional spread, and emotional exploitation associated with online populism. In response to the problems of weakened mainstream cultural identity, blurred direction in personality development, and hollow internet legal literacy among some students, society, online platforms, and universities need to take measures to jointly address the impact of online populism on the values of college students, who are still in a critical developmental stage. It is necessary to address both the symptoms and the root causes, balancing regulation with long-term effectiveness. Strengthening cultural identity, emphasizing guidance and education, cultivating independent personalities among college students, practicing core socialist values, improving governance methods, creating a positive online environment, and promoting a combination of guidance and governance are essential. This approach aims to fundamentally neutralize the wave of online populism and cultivate positive values among college students.

Keywords: Online populism; College students; Values

1. Introduction

Populism has been selected as one of the top ten domestic social trends for nine consecutive years. In 2020, the trend of populism evolved into online populism, appearing on the list of the top ten domestic social trends [1]. Online populism, as an extension of populism on the internet, shares certain characteristics with populist trends. Its core value concept is "people-oriented," its value label is "people worship," and its forms of expression include "anti-system, anti-intellectualism, and anti-authority." These are all conveyed through misleading viewpoints and ambiguous rhetoric, making it difficult to discern their true nature. Particularly for contemporary college students, who have not yet fully formed their values and enjoy a high degree of behavioral freedom, online populism poses a greater threat to their value systems. College students are the future of the nation and the hope of the country; their value orientations will determine the value orientations of future societal development [2]. Therefore, ensuring the establishment of correct values among college students is of paramount importance. To this end, it is urgent to understand the formation patterns of online populism, establish defense mechanisms in universities to counter the spread of online populism, and help college students build a strong ideological defense to resist the erosion of online populism.

2. The Formation of Online Populist Ideology

2.1. The Creation of a Mainstream Context of Internet Decentralization

The internet has ushered the public into an era where "everyone has a microphone." Compared to the traditional media era, the internet era provides ordinary people with a platform to control their own discourse. The internet's system, which integrates equality, openness, and flattening, gives everyone the possibility of becoming the center. In the traditional media era, information release had to go through government-media department-staff filtering. However, the internet era not only synchronizes government-media-public information but also triggers a revolution in ordinary people's control over discourse. In this context, democratic power has been greatly maximized, and while people enjoy this power, they also bear the risk of power polarization. Anti-intellectual populists have found an outlet for expressing violent emotions through the internet. According to the 47th "Statistical Report on the

Development of the Internet in China," as of December 2020, netizens with junior high school and high school/technical secondary school/vocational school education levels accounted for 40.3% and 20.6%, respectively. The proportion of netizens with elementary school education or below increased from 17.2% in March 2020 to 19.3% [3]. It is evident that the majority of netizens still have a high school education or below. When social events related to disadvantaged groups occur, these groups are more easily swayed due to "empathy" and, under the stimulation of populist rhetoric, lose their rational and objective judgment, becoming key targets for populist mobilization. The internet facilitates the formation of the "herd effect," where blind crowds often ignore the truth, let emotions overpower reason, and follow the trend to become part of the "herd." Populists use the internet to deconstruct mainstream discourse, distort the facts, and spread online rumors with the ultimate goal of inciting irrational crowds to attack the elite. In the internet arena, where everyone has a voice, the internet empowers people to become the center of discourse but also traps everyone in the crisis of becoming a target of attack.

2.2. The Irrational Transformation of Collective Discourse Demands

The internet has broken the traditional media's monopoly on discourse power, becoming the mainstream channel for the public to express their demands. People not only obtain information promptly through the internet but also offer suggestions on livelihood issues through various online platforms such as government Weibo accounts and public WeChat accounts. As of December 2020, there were 140,837 verified government Weibo accounts on the Sina platform alone[3]. The public's discourse power in the online realm has significantly increased. However, populists have taken advantage of this empowerment through network technology to incite discourse online. Populists, waving the banner of "people's sovereignty" and presenting themselves as the "voice of the people," employ tactics such as vilifying and demonizing the strong while glorifying and sympathizing with the weak, aiming to provoke disputes between different social strata and to divide the common people from the elite. At the same time, China is in a crucial stage of reform, with development outcomes leading to numerous social contradictions, including income disparity, resource allocation, and medical issues. Although the benefits of reform and opening-up still need to be further strengthened, the process of social reform is long and arduous, and the causes of social problems are multifaceted. Populists leverage online dissemination to attribute all problems to the excessive control of elites over the democratic system, thus inciting "social anxiety" among the common people. By using populism to manipulate public sentiment, there is a blind following of public opinion among the masses, resulting in an irrational transformation of collective discourse demands. In this context, people temporarily forget the proper use of the internet, and the positive function of online suggestions and feedback is overshadowed by malicious emotional outbursts.

2.3. The Counter-Discourse Representation of Extreme Emotional Transformation

Counter-discourse representation refers to identifying contradictions within dominant discourse texts and using its own counter-discourse system for new interpretation and reconstruction [4]. Initially, counter-discourse representation complements dominant discourse, typically evolving alongside the development of the main discourse. "Robert Cox believes that when a certain discourse in society gains widespread social acceptance and recognition, forming a subconscious cultural norm, or when such discourse has sufficient driving force to universalize and legitimize existing consciousness and practices, dominant discourse emerges." [5]Discourse is an expression of ideology, and populism has always attempted to compete with mainstream ideology for online discourse power. Simultaneously, the exposure of numerous existing and unresolved social issues in our country, the empowerment provided by internet technology, and the influence of public emotions have all become sufficient conditions for the formation of counter-discourse. Populists, enthusiastic about political and online assertions, often start with social events, creating conspiracy theories and online rumors related to the elite class before official conclusions are reached, inciting online emotions. This leads netizens into the post-truth misconception. Using preconceived impressions to form the "apparent motion effect". By the time the authorities have investigated and released the truth, online rumors have already spread. The rigor and high standards required for news release by official media result in delays, which often lead some to mistakenly perceive it as a cover-up for the elite class. The conflict between the common class and the elite class is more pronounced online, where counter-discourse evolves from extreme emotional outbursts to threatening political intentions. Populists, under the guise of "speaking for the people," morally coerce the elite class, deliberately creating contradictions. When public resentment reaches a certain level, they use the discretionary power of the online space to conduct "online trials" that appear

to cater to public opinion. Fundamentally, the anti-pluralistic nature of populists makes them oppose any form of democracy, viewing "ignoring the judiciary, online trials" as the standard for people to achieve democracy, constituting a form of moral coercion and online hegemony. As Ralf Dahrendorf said, populism is simple, but democratic politics is complex [6]. The many methods populists use under the pretense of considering the common people have an inherent purpose of discourse incitement and emotional manipulation.

3. The Impact of Online Populist Ideologies on College Students' Values

3.1. The Decrease in College Students' Identification with Mainstream Culture

Enhancing college students' identification with mainstream culture is a crucial adhesive for strengthening social cohesion. Historical materialism suggests that cultural confidence is an important prerequisite for national confidence, national strength, and social development [7]. With economic globalization, populists have seized the opportunity to exploit various issues faced by our country during reform and development, idealizing other countries' political systems and institutions to criticize our socialist system. At the same time, populists have used the characteristics of hedonism and individualism to stigmatize the Chinese elite by generalizing and distorting their image. This includes exaggerating the impact of social events, deliberately creating and spreading online rumors about the elite's hedonistic and materialistic behaviors, and even attributing social problems like widening wealth gaps and increasing class stratification to the existence of the elite itself. Various online media, driven by the commercial value of click-through rates, aggressively promote the spread of populist rhetoric, solidifying the demonization of the elite among the general public. As a result, traditional Chinese cultural values such as "a gentleman uses frugality to overcome difficulties," "cultivating oneself with calmness and nurturing virtue with frugality," and "prohibiting extravagance and promoting frugality as a beautiful policy" are questioned under the impact of Western materialism and hedonism. College students, who should adhere to the correct cultural guidance of "a scholar must be resolute and diligent in facing heavy responsibilities," find their space for cultivating value ideals through mainstream culture being squeezed and their sense of identification weakened. Therefore, it is important to guard against the irrational emotional outbursts that can occur online due to the interplay of the virtual nature of the internet and the irrationality of populism.

3.2. Vague Direction in College Students' Personality Development

The spread of online populism not only impacts the personal personality development of college students but also casts doubt on the construction of the shared ideals of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Indeed, some regions in our country currently face significant disparities in wealth, unequal resource distribution, and the unreasonable "996 work system." These are pressing issues that need to be addressed and are inevitable challenges as our country progresses toward socialist modernization. Online populists exaggerate the issue of class entrenchment, promoting social cases where ordinary citizens face unfair competition against "second-generation officials" and "second-generation wealthy individuals," fueling unjust online rhetoric such as "poor families find it hard to produce successful offspring." On this basis, online populists constantly observe the words and actions of social elites, seeking opportunities to portray them as targets of resistance for the lower classes. College students, being the new force in the online realm with active thinking but simplistic ideas, are also in a period of "identity and role confusion." If online populists continuously deepen the impression of "class entrenchment" in the minds of college students and emphasize that the "lower class" can never cross the class gap through personal efforts, it will greatly undermine their self-confidence, diminish their motivation to move forward, and lead to a lack of mental resilience, creating a potential ideological hazard for the nation's rejuvenation. Currently, there is indeed a phenomenon of slow class mobility and excessive influence of the elite class in our country, which diminishes the idealistic passion and aspirations for a better life among college students. To address this, universities and relevant departments should take appropriate measures to actively guide and encourage students to confront life's setbacks, strengthen their ideological defenses, and help them establish robust psychological prevention mechanisms.

3.3. The Hollowing Out of College Students' Online Legal Literacy

The virtual nature of the online environment, combined with the limited cognitive development of

college students, often leads them to become complacent about legal constraints in the online world. Upon entering higher education, students who have just left their family homes experience relative freedom but also face differences in their understanding of social realities. Their youthful exuberance makes it easier for irrational emotions to be exacerbated online. Online populism capitalizes on students' curiosity, targeting their preferences with social issues that attract their attention. For instance, it portrays non-elite groups as absolute victims and elite groups as perpetrators, spreading rumors and attacking the elite. College students, who often lack social awareness and have simplistic views, are easily swayed by online populists and fall into erroneous "personal heroism" online, blindly participating in attacks on the elite. When addressing social issues such as power and sex transactions and corruption, we should strongly condemn these issues morally and impose strict legal regulations. However, we must also recognize that such corruption can occur in any social class, though under the influence of online populism, it becomes a phenomenon unique to the elite. This not only stirs animosity towards the elite among college students but also conveys the erroneous value that "the elite can do whatever they want." "The internet is a place for social mobilization; it does not require verification of factual truth. People engage in discourse production at will, and this occurs in what is perceived as a moral high ground, where the power of discourse is sufficient to destroy individuals." [8] Online populists guide public opinion on social hot topics, downplay the issues themselves, and exaggerate the suffering of the common people. Ill-informed individuals, fueled by blind animosity, engage in online attacks on the elite, with college students—who cannot discern the essence of online culture—becoming a significant part of this trend. "Online populism elevates network violence that loses collective awareness to new heights. If mockery, rumors, and slander become internet norms, they will severely disrupt our network order, leaving college students in a chaotic online environment, reducing their online moral sense and hollowing out their legal literacy."

4. Strategies for Correcting College Students' Values Under the Influence of Online Populism

4.1. Strengthening Cultural Identity and Practicing Core Socialist Values

College students are the future of the nation, and practicing core socialist values is a crucial guarantee for cultivating their sound values. The excellent traditional culture of China serves as the cultural foundation for the formation of core socialist values. The significant enhancement of our cultural soft power benefits the deepening of the socialist core value system and subsequently improves citizens' quality and social civilization. Core socialist values are a profound interpretation of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and the work of cultivating these values in college students is closely linked to the nation's development. Therefore, the government, society, and universities must adopt relevant measures to foster students' high awareness of mainstream culture. Starting with the education of ideals and sentiments in the new era, we should help students view issues from a historical dialectical materialism perspective, mentally accept and emotionally embrace our excellent traditional culture, and actively practice core socialist values. Firstly, within the campus where students frequently engage, the university administration should enhance the promotion of China's excellent traditional culture by offering lectures or courses on cultural values. Secondly, from a historical perspective, teachers and educators should guide students to review our nation's great historical and cultural achievements. "Observing its source allows us to understand its flow." The educational program aims to strengthen the atmosphere of cultural influence, improve students' cultural discernment and awareness, and reignite their patriotism and national confidence.

4.2. Focus on Guiding Education to Cultivate Independent Personalities in College Students

Online populism can easily spread negative messages among college students, partly due to the insufficient intensity of positive guidance from mainstream values. For the proper formation of college students' values and the healthy development of society, families, schools, and society as a whole should systematically participate in guiding students' values, aiming to create a collective force for value guidance. Firstly, parents, as the primary educators of their children, should focus on guiding their children's personal values through the shaping of family culture. Since parents interact with their children more frequently than others, they are better positioned to understand their children's thoughts and dynamics and can help in shaping independent, principled, and well-rounded personalities from the start. Secondly, schools should strengthen the curriculum related to digital literacy. Given the convenience of technological advancements and the trend towards younger exposure to the internet, integrated programs for digital literacy should be developed for primary, secondary, and higher

education. If college students possess sufficient intellectual judgment and psychological resilience to handle online populism before entering higher education, they can be somewhat protected from the impact of populism on their values after entering college. Higher education should no longer be limited to real-life skills; it must also focus on nurturing students' qualities in the virtual space of the internet as a key part of building a sound personality. Helping college students combine grand ideals with practical pursuits, enrich their extracurricular lives, and, more importantly, deepen their spiritual world to cultivate independent personalities is crucial. Additionally, fostering rational, scientific, and inclusive public spirits among students, as well as maintaining internet public safety and adhering to internet public order, is essential. Finally, addressing the slow social mobility and resource allocation issues faced by our country requires effective improvement methods. Only by fundamentally eliminating the imbalances and inadequate development in society can we hope to eradicate the roots of populism.

4.3. Improve Governance Measures to Create a Better Online Environment

The cyberspace administration should intensify its efforts to address false information online and prevent the spread of online populism in higher education institutions. The relatively lenient information control on online platforms, the lag in information processing by cyberspace administration, and the imperfections in network governance mechanisms provide opportunities for online populists to prioritize subjective conjectures over facts. Online platforms are the primary channels for expressing online populism, and since university students are a key target audience for online dissemination, the exclusivity of online populism can narrow their cognitive perspectives. Official media is an important channel for university students to access authoritative information, and it is crucial to leverage the trust that university students have in official media. Firstly, official media should promptly and accurately convey documents from various levels of units and government departments. Additionally, it should focus on integrating socialist new customs with traditional Chinese virtues and media, creating a pioneering demonstration platform based on core socialist values to effectively guide university students' values. Secondly, the government and relevant departments must ensure that online information is truthful and accurate, which is essential for maintaining an optimal network environment in higher education institutions. In the face of online populism that confuses issues, obscures truths, and uses divisive tactics, relevant departments should take timely preventive measures. Regarding public skeptical comments, the cyberspace administration should enhance the efficiency of message verification and dissemination, respond quickly, and make timely decisions. Finally, it is necessary to strengthen the construction of network governance mechanisms and build a "firewall" against the dissemination of ideological content among university students. The law is the baseline of morality, and regulation of online populism must ultimately be implemented through the formulation of reasonable and rigorous regulations. Although the country has established relevant laws on network security, adjustments are needed to address the potential risks faced by university students. Integrating prevention and governance mechanisms, cultivating legal and responsibility awareness among university students, and establishing a reasonable supervision mechanism will facilitate the transition of university students from online disseminators to online overseers, thereby fundamentally establishing an immune system against online populism among university students.

5. Conclusion

This paper has observed the formation of online populism, described its negative impacts on university students, and explored methods for its governance. Currently, the influence of online populism on cyberspace and real society is self-evident. Once university students become accustomed to the discourse and logical thinking patterns of online populism, the influence of this trend will continue to amplify in cyberspace. The cost of this is the degradation of collective will and emotional polarization. Meanwhile, driven by the instigation of reactionary forces in the West, the spread of online populism will not cease. Therefore, the exploration of corrective measures against online populism must be long-term and continuous.

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