

A Research on the Online Expression Practices of College Students Under the Background of New Media Empowerment: Taking the College Campus Wall on WeChat as an Example

Meihua Cheng¹ & Ziqing Liao¹

¹ School of Publishing, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, China

Correspondence: Meihua Cheng, School of Publishing, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology. E-mail: lhhl129@163.com

Received: August 4, 2025; Accepted: September 18, 2025; Published: September 19, 2025

Abstract

New media empowerment has enhanced college students' self-awareness and endowed them with more discursive power. They can utilize new media to express themselves and speak freely. However, in real situations, this is not necessarily the case. When engaging in online expression, college students also encounter numerous obstacles. This has caused them to gradually transition from "active expression" at the beginning to "silent screen-watching", thus plunging into a deeper sense of loss and solitude. Meanwhile, they have explored a series of self-regulation methods and have not abandoned their efforts to resist. Nevertheless, merely relying on these measures is insufficient if we hope to help restore the gradually weakening voices of college students in online expression. It requires the combined efforts of various parties, including individuals' courage to face challenges, the guidance of online communities, and the regulation of the government. Only in this way can we maintain the harmony and stability of the online expression environment and truly enable college students to fully showcase themselves and express bravely in the tide of new media empowerment.

Keywords: new media empowerment, online expression, online violence, the undergraduate population

1. Introduction

In an era where new media technologies are reshaping the communication landscape, individuals are granted greater autonomy in interpreting information and are provided with platforms and spaces to exercise their self-determination. This has led to an active engagement in online expression. From the era of universal blogging to the visual extravaganza of the short-video era, successive technological advancements have continuously lowered the barriers to communication, transforming the metaphor of "everyone has a microphone" into a tangible reality.

Among the diverse groups participating in online expression, college students, as "digital natives," have had their self-awareness significantly awakened by new media. They exhibit a strong eagerness and willingness to freely articulate their viewpoints, publicly voice their demands, and unreservedly express their emotions online, thereby emerging as a prominent presence in the digital realm. However, a paradoxical phenomenon has emerged in recent times: college students seemingly demonstrate a decreasing inclination to express themselves online. Their voices are gradually fading into obscurity, presenting a real-world challenge to the optimistic narrative of new media empowerment.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to conduct an in-depth observation and analysis of this phenomenon, using the university WeChat campus wall as a case study. The study will explore the motivations, real-world manifestations, underlying obstacles, and potential solutions regarding college students' online expression within the context of new media empowerment. By putting forward corresponding recommendations and considerations, this research endeavors to comprehensively understand the characteristics of contemporary college students' online expression practices and to decipher the intricate psychological and emotional mechanisms that underlie them. Such insights are of crucial importance for fostering a harmonious and stable online communication environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *The Subjectivity of the Audience and Empowerment of New Media*

The concept of subjectivity has its roots in the realm of philosophy, which pertains to the value and significance of an individual's existence. It is manifested as an individual's self-awareness characterized by freedom and self

- discipline. The definition of subjectivity has a long - standing history. From Descartes' "Cogito, ergo sum" (2000) [1] to Hegel's "Substance is subject" (1979) [2], and further to Marx's "the activity of sensuous man" (1995) [3], humanity has been continuously exploring and debating the issue of human subjectivity. Although human subjectivity represents an inherent dynamic attribute of the individual, its realization is contingent upon discursive expression and social interaction. The introduction of the concept of subjectivity into the field of communication thus facilitates a more accurate understanding and grasp of the psychological and behavioral characteristics of the audience.

Literally, the terms "audience" and "subjectivity" might seem like a pair of contradictory concepts. Historically, constrained by the functional limitations of mass communication, there has been an overemphasis on the passive role of the audience as mere recipients, overlooking their potential to act as active communicators, demonstrating agency and initiative (2019) [4]. With the development of new communication technologies, an increasing number of scholars have started to focus on the subjective nature of the audience. As Negroponte noted in *Being Digital*, "The once - called mass media are evolving into personalized two - way communication. Information is no longer 'pushed' to consumers; rather, people will 'pull' the information they desire and engage in information creation" (2007) [5]. The emergence of the new media communication context has significantly enhanced the subjectivity of the audience. Everyone can now become a disseminator of online information, enjoy the freedom to select online content, and critique it, which epitomizes a form of "empowerment".

Empowerment (also referred to as "capacity building" or "enabling") is one of the classic theoretical frameworks in the social sciences. Originating in the United States during the 1970s, Barbara Solomon first introduced the concept of empowerment based on her research on racial discrimination. She defined it as a process of "assisting socially disadvantaged groups in countering unfair treatment and enhancing their rights and capabilities" (1976) [6]. Different from traditional notions, new media empowerment stimulates individual potential on a broader scale. New media empowerment can be defined as "the relatively stronger social activity capabilities bestowed upon social members during the rapid ascent of new media. Relying on various new media platforms, individuals' autonomous rights across various domains of social life are further expanded" (2016) [7]. Through the use of new media, individuals can activate their rights consciousness and develop the ability to consciously leverage new media technologies to expand the exercise of their rights, thereby improving their own circumstances in new media practices (2019) [8], and fully showcasing the subjectivity of the audience. Technologically, the advancements in new media technology have significantly lowered the barriers for individuals to access and utilize the Internet. People are no longer dependent on mass media to express themselves independently. The application of technology accentuates and reinforces the empowerment function in users' interactive behaviors such as "selection", "dissemination", and "creation", rendering the entire empowerment process more tangible. Socially, new media has maximally mobilized individuals and their relational resource networks, fundamentally altering the power dynamics and rules of the game (2024) [9]. New media provides the audience with power elements such as resources, participation platforms, and discursive spaces, thereby establishing a communication environment conducive to the realization of power. More significantly, new media empowerment implies that the audience, who were previously in a disadvantaged position in the communication landscape, can deconstruct and transform existing power relations through participation, expression, and action, thus promoting a more equitable and just distribution of communication power. In particular, in the context of participation, expression, and action, new media empowerment has effectively transformed "communication for the weak" into "communication by the weak".

2.2 Public Engagement and Online Expression

Currently, the cyberspace shaped by the profound development of information technology is not merely a digital information - flowing space in a technical sense but also a cultural interaction space (2018) [10]. Cyberspace has extended the public space both in time and space, thereby creating a new arena for public participation. In particular, the development of new media technologies has provided ample space and freedom for online expression behaviors, facilitating the online public participation of the audience and even enabling ordinary users to emerge as significant forces in certain public events or activities.

Consequently, scholars' research on the topic of online expression initially revolves around the perspective of public participation. Scholars first noted the positive impact of online expression on public participation. For instance, in feminist movements and during the COVID - 19 pandemic, the enthusiasm and influence of netizens' expressions were evident. They posited that online expression can better serve public participation, thus emphasizing the importance of safeguarding the freedom of online expression. However, upon further investigation, scholars also began to recognize that phenomena such as information monopolies, asymmetries in discursive capabilities, and digital capitalism within cyberspace are continuously creating new power divides,

giving rise to anti - public elements and contributing to the real - world paradox of public participation in cyberspace (2022) [11]. Through these studies, scholars have critically examined the online expression environment and the freedom of online expression.

Furthermore, it is of great significance to expand to more micro - level research perspectives starting from the macro perspective of public participation. Research in this area can be broadly categorized into three directions: analyzing the characteristics of online expression, exploring the influencing factors of online expression, and investigating the guiding mechanisms of online expression.

Regarding the analysis of the characteristics of online expression, some scholars argue that the online discourse expression patterns of contemporary youth are more distinguishable, bearing distinct group characteristics. Their expressions are characterized by rich emotional undertones, prominent symbolic representations, and unique growth contexts (2022) [12]. Other scholars, through the study of the "fan circle" phenomenon, have found that fan groups perceive online expression as more authentic and liberating compared to real - world expressions. However, it is also more confrontational and filled with animosity (2024) [13]. Some scholars have pointed out that negative interpretations and extreme language seem to have become common in college students' online lives. Moreover, they lack a clear understanding of the impact of their online words and actions on others, as well as the extent and duration of such impacts, which may potentially lead to extreme cases of cyberbullying (2022) [14].

In exploring the influencing factors of online expression, some scholars, drawing on the Spiral of Silence theory, have discovered that in different dimensions reflecting the "perception of the opinion climate," discrepancies with the opinions of mainstream media and parental views have a significant positive influence on college students' online opinion expressions (2014) [15]. Additionally, some scholars have found that college students' online opinion expressions are significantly influenced by social capital. Specifically, the higher the bridging social capital, the stronger the inclination of college students to publicly express their opinions online; conversely, the higher the bonding social capital, the weaker this inclination (2014) [16].

In the exploration of the guiding mechanisms of online expression, scholars assert that in the face of the objective reality of college students expressing their opinions through diverse online media, it is essential to establish a corresponding guiding mechanism for college students' online opinion expressions to effectively manage such expressions (2017) [17]. Some scholars have also directed their attention to the governance of college students' cyber - violent activities. They emphasize the need for all parties to collaborate and implement a series of measures for educational guidance, effectively harnessing the positive aspects of online expression and minimizing the impact of online hostility and violent incidents on college students (2019) [18].

Overall, young people, especially college students, as the primary users of internet platforms, show a relatively high level of concern for online expression, making them a highly representative subject of research. Nevertheless, previous studies have certain limitations. Firstly, when examining college students' online expression behaviors, scholars tend to focus on the seemingly increasingly prominent negative aspects on the surface, while paying insufficient attention to other multi - dimensional expressions underlying these behaviors. Secondly, regarding the phenomenon of cyber violence, research often concentrates on the characteristics and governance of cyber violence with college students as the perpetrators, while overlooking the psychological responses of college students as the victims.

Therefore, this study aims to fill these research gaps. By addressing the following three research questions, it endeavors to expand the scope of research on college students' online expression, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive and detailed understanding and grasp of contemporary college students' online expression behaviors:

What are the actual manifestations and motivations of college students' online expression in the context of new media empowerment?

What are the obstacles to college students' online expression under the backdrop of new media empowerment?

How do college students adapt and resist in the face of these obstacles to online expression?

3. Research Design

This research adopts the methods of semi - structured interviews and questionnaire surveys to explore the online expression practices of contemporary college students within the context of new media empowerment.

In terms of subject selection, this study initially focuses on the college student population. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, college students constitute a substantial and significant group of internet users, and they are also an actively expressive group empowered by new media. Secondly, the college stage is a crucial period

during which young people gradually establish their worldviews, values, and life outlooks. Thus, investigating and analyzing the online expression practices of college students holds substantial practical significance for guiding them to form correct perspectives in these aspects.

Furthermore, this study further specifies the research subjects as the WeChat campus wall communities of college students. WeChat is the most commonly used social media platform among college students. The campus walls, independently created by college students on WeChat, have emerged as a distinctive new media landscape on university campuses. Beyond the regular dissemination of student submissions and the provision of services such as aggregating, integrating, and publishing information related to help requests and consultations for on-campus students, the process of information dissemination on the campus walls connects a greater number of college students with shared areas of interest. They engage in enthusiastic discussions and exchanges in the comment sections, transforming the campus walls into a common forum - style new media gathering venue for college students. Consequently, the WeChat campus wall communities of college students vividly represent the online expression practices of this demographic.

Operationally, this research combines convenience sampling and purposive sampling techniques to recruit users of WeChat college campus wall communities for interviews. Regarding the inclusion criteria for respondents, all participants are required to be current undergraduate or postgraduate students, and they must also have relevant experiences within these communities, such as personally submitting posts, spending time browsing submissions, posting comments, and responding to others' comments. Eventually, 27 eligible respondents were selected for semi-structured interviews.

This study distributes questionnaires through a combination of offline and online approaches.

Offline component: From September to October 2024, in public spaces such as libraries, teaching buildings, and cafeterias of Shanghai - based universities, a stratified random sampling method was employed. Eligible students were invited on - site to complete paper - based questionnaires.

Online component: Questionnaires were disseminated via official accounts of college campus walls, as well as platforms like Xiaohongshu and Weibo. During the questionnaire screening phase, all respondents were required to recall their specific experiences of using the WeChat college campus wall within the past year. Respondents who did not meet the usage criteria or were unable to articulate specific usage scenarios were excluded. In total, 300 questionnaires were retrieved. After a rigorous validity screening process, 273 valid samples were retained. These samples encompass undergraduates (accounting for 65%) and postgraduates (accounting for 45%).



Figure 1. Word cloud of associated vocabulary related to "online expression"

4. From Active Expression to Silent "Screen Peeping": Dual Facets of a Wall under the Anonymous Mechanism

In the questionnaire survey, each participant filled out three associative words related to "online expression". After excluding invalid responses such as popular internet catchphrases and personal names, and consolidating duplicate responses, a total of 331 associative words were ultimately obtained. The words with relatively high frequency among them were selected to create a word cloud, as shown in the figure below (Figure 1). Among these words, "keyboard warrior" had the highest frequency. The proportion of related terms such as "troll" and "jumping on the bandwagon" was also substantial. Meanwhile, positive terms like "freedom" and "diversity" also emerged. Moreover, there were instances where antonyms like "open" and "not open" appeared concurrently. From this, it can be inferred that for college students, the current online expression environment exhibits an obvious "dual-sided" characteristic.

Based on Rogers' innovation diffusion theory, the empowerment of new media can be conceptualized as a communication process. At different stages of this communication process, diverse individuals assume distinct roles and exert varying influences. These individuals encompass "innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards"(2002) [19]. Among them, the college student group undoubtedly serves as early adopters and facilitators of new media technologies and services. They not only reap the benefits of new media empowerment but also expedite its advancement. The development of new media extends beyond mere superficial technological innovation; it also propels the awakening of people's self-awareness, brings about transformations in interpersonal relationships, and enhances discourse power. All these factors exert a profound impact on people's self-expression and identity formation, particularly so for college students who are avid users of new media.

Firstly, new media empowerment enables college students to engage in more proactive self-expression. In real-life settings, college students are burdened with the responsibilities and obligations inherent in their real identities, as well as the expectations of others. They are constrained by social roles, class identities, gender norms, and other identity attributes. For example, the identity of a postgraduate, on one hand, implies the status of being a student. On the other hand, in traditional perceptions, society attaches numerous value judgments to this identity, integrating qualities such as "erudition" and "excellence in both character and academic performance" into its connotation. Although these appraisals are laudatory, to a certain extent, they resemble restrictive barriers, imposing a palpable sense of "burden" on college students.

New media, however, constructs a novel social context. For instance, on the campus wall, there exists a type of contribution known as the "self-promotion post". As the name suggests, it allows individuals to showcase themselves, whether it be their appearance, singing prowess, dancing skills, etc. For college students, this provides an opportunity to shed the various pretenses of reality and break free from the shackles of identity, enabling them to pursue and mold a new, idealized, and flawless version of the "self"(1993) [20].

"Getting more attention and recognition on the campus wall than in reality, and it's easier to make new friends. I'm not very bold to show myself in reality, but I'm more relaxed on the wall." (Interviewee 2)

Secondly, new media empowerment facilitates college students' creative and reconstructive expression. Through the empowerment of new media, individuals can promptly access information and voice their opinions. These expressions, disseminated through new media channels, converge and may even give rise to online public opinions with far-reaching social implications. For example, the occurrence of numerous public events on the internet is a direct outcome of the influence of new media empowerment on the audience's expression practices. College students are no exception. New media offers college students a plethora of channels for social engagement. Bolstered by new media empowerment, college students can attain identity experiences that are either unattainable or challenging to acquire in real life.

They exhibit a greater eagerness to participate in social affairs through various new media platforms such as forums, Weibo, and WeChat, expressing their viewpoints and fulfilling their aspiration to highlight a new group identity and reconstruct a new sense of identity.

"For some hot topics, I can see many people actively submitting posts and enthusiastically joining discussions in the comment section. I think this reflects college students' sense of responsibility towards society." (Interviewee 22)

Consequently, through the interaction on the WeChat campus wall, college students can, on one hand, actively infuse boundless imagination into online virtual interactions, thereby obtaining understanding, recognition, and emotional compensation that are elusive in real-life interactions. On the other hand, the WeChat campus wall has evolved into a platform where college students can showcase and construct their identities. In group interactions,

they gain novel identity experiences, shape and reconstruct new identity perceptions, and create unique online expression forms exclusive to the college student community. It should be noted, however, that these are predicated on the "anonymous mechanism" of the campus wall.

"All comments are made in the name of the campus wall, so it's very 'safe'." (Interviewee 10)

The "anonymous mechanism" implies that when individuals enter the digital realm, they can ostensibly emancipate themselves from the so-called "physical constraints"(2019) [21]. As a result, within the virtual space forged by new media, people subconsciously perceive a dissociation between the consequences of their actions and their real-world selves, thereby experiencing a sense of liberation from the burden of responsibility(2016) [22]. This, in turn, provides college students with enhanced psychological security. When the fear stemming from reality diminishes, they become more emboldened to showcase diverse aspects of themselves, express their values and stances, and even articulate their views on sensitive issues with composure.

Nevertheless, this has led to a situation where the campus wall, despite fostering a vibrant and enthusiastic community atmosphere, has also witnessed the emergence of numerous inappropriate behaviors and even chaos. Under the psychological influence of the new media anonymous mechanism, while individuals become more audacious in revealing their true emotions, it also implies a higher likelihood of losing control over excessive emotions. This results in a decline in the ability and motivation to regulate one's own behavior, thereby triggering malicious expressions and aggressive behaviors that are relatively rare in the real world.

Consequently, under the empowerment effect of the new media anonymous mechanism, the campus wall not only exhibits a characteristic of free expression of opinions but also further manifests a diversity of expression styles. Some college students opt to freely vent their emotions, while others tend to maintain rational discourse. A significant number of interviewees indicate that they choose to "lurk without commenting", thus giving rise to the unique expression style of "screen-watching".

"If I post something and get a backlash, it will really affect my mood. Of course, I'm afraid of being scolded. To be on the safe side, it's better not to say anything." (Interviewee 3)

Silent "screen-watching" is a consequence of cyberbullying. When expressing their opinions, individuals tend to observe the prevailing opinion climate. If they perceive their views as belonging to the minority, they often choose to remain silent to avoid isolation(2013) [23]. This ultimately gives rise to a scenario where "one side voices its opinions vociferously while the other side remains silent", thereby forming the "spiral of silence". In real life, silence is manifested as refraining from speaking, while in the online context, it takes the form of "screen-watching".

When the vocal side exhibits certain extreme biases, this phenomenon of "daring to be indignant but not daring to speak out" further underscores the underlying violent behavior. This is because individuals must consider the potential consequences of not choosing to remain silent, such as being subjected to "human flesh search", "social ostracism", or even the extension of online condemnation to the offline realm, which may escalate into real-world violence.

5. From "Pseudo-solidarity for Mutual Support" to "Collective Solitude": Barriers to College Students' Online Expression

5.1 Spurious "Solidarity for Mutual Succor"

Ulrich Beck, a German sociologist, posited that with the progression of science and technology and the impetus of industrialization, humanity has transitioned into a novel risk society. The past life experiences, technological instruments, and institutional frameworks are no longer adequate for us to forestall, evade, and address the perils of novel social risks. Contemporary individuals are, in essence, "dwelling on the volcano of civilization. (2004) [24]"

For the college student demographic, in the current risk society, they are burdened with pressures emanating from multiple fronts, including academic pursuits, career prospects, interpersonal dynamics, intense competition, and future decision-making. The omnipresent sense of insecurity and uncertainty pervades their lives, compelling them to seek outlets to extricate themselves from the weight of reality. New media has cultivated an expression environment that is thoroughly open, emotionally charged, and fragmented. Here, social needs that remain unfulfilled and unacknowledged in real life can be explored within the digital realm.

"On the campus wall, I can say things that I want to say but can't in real life. If I don't get along well with my roommates, I can anonymously tease them online. I can't really go to their faces and scold them. Also, when I see someone on the wall posting a picture of someone going to the cafeteria in slippers (without showing their face)

and saying such people are disgusting, I strongly agreed in the comment section. But in real life, I can't go to their faces and point my finger at them and scold them." (Interviewee 19)

Grounding in the anonymity mechanism, the campus wall serves as a platform that facilitates the transformation of real-life reticence into online condemnation. It has evolved into a forum-like congregation point. Through a diverse array of posts, college students can identify kindred spirits who share their perspectives. By expressing unanimous comments, they can forge a cohesive group and amplify their collective voice to safeguard the group's interests.

In the physical world, social bonds are typically forged through geographical proximity and kinship. In the digital landscape, however, shared interests emerge as the primary cohesive force. Within this process, not only do the hitherto silent individuals find emotional catharsis, but those who join the chorus also experience a sense of solace reminiscent of "finding comfort in unity." Interest-based communities formed around hobbies, or online spheres shaped by shared values, emotional aspirations, and cultural experiences, endow college students with a distinct sense of belonging and kindle anticipations for positive emotional encounters.

5.2 The Intrinsic "Collective Solitude"

However, the emotional experiences derived from these interest - based groups or online communities do not necessarily align with the expectations of college students. "Self - contained indulgence" does not necessarily equate to "non - confrontational isolation"; instead, it often leads to a more pronounced form of "self - isolation".

Firstly, as members of a community, individuals tend to prioritize receiving and internalizing the voices within their own community, thereby creating an "echo chamber" effect. In such an environment, individuals are inclined to conform their viewpoints to those of the group. This, in turn, often results in a dearth of diverse perspectives within the group, hindering the ability to conduct objective and unbiased analyses.

Secondly, when information acquisition is predominantly guided by personal interests and needs, individuals are likely to become entrapped in an "information cocoon". Inhabiting an information cocoon, individuals experience a reduction in opportunities for interaction with the external world and a gradual erosion of the inclination to engage in such exchanges. Consequently, the characteristics of homogeneity within the group and heterogeneity between groups become increasingly pronounced. Driven by this "Internet Balkanization" phenomenon, group members are more prone to conflicts of varying magnitudes with diverse value systems.

Subsequently, the continuous repetition of homogeneous opinions leads to a narrowing of the group's perspective. In an attempt to gain group acceptance, members may develop extreme ideologies or even exhibit extreme exclusionary behaviors, thereby contributing to group polarization and potentially escalating into cyberbullying. Moreover, the emotionally charged nature of group behavior further exacerbates aggressive tendencies.

The campus wall serves as a sort of "public stage". Contemporary college students typically possess a strong sense of self - awareness and a pronounced drive for self - actualization. They initially aim to achieve a certain degree of "self - presentation" through active participation in contributions and discussions on the campus wall, seeking validation from the group. However, they frequently encounter issues such as excessive nitpicking, over - interpretation, unwarranted moralizing, and hasty judgment in the comment sections of the campus wall. Even sincere attempts at clarification and explanation are often misconstrued as evasive maneuvers or deliberate misinformation, attracting even more virulent negativity.

As a result, contrary to their initial aspirations, they are compelled to acknowledge that "finding solace in unity" is merely an illusory perception. In reality, they are ensnared in a deeper sense of isolation. Despite the belief that the Internet provides a platform for expressing genuine emotions, they find that few are willing to listen or offer support. Instead, they are inundated with unbridled emotional outbursts and a lack of regard for others' feelings. This realization intensifies their sense of disappointment and isolation, highlighting the existence of an insurmountable emotional divide.

Following the fleeting excitement of this "pseudo - unity for comfort", they are, in fact, thrust into a state of deeper emptiness and isolation. The online communities established through the Internet fail to foster the kind of intimate connections they once yearned for. As Turkle aptly noted, "Online social interaction is, at its core, a form of superficial socialization, offering primarily fragmented and tenuous connections. When we become overly reliant on this form of interaction, we gradually drift away from the rich and complex relationships in the real world, giving rise to a novel form of isolation. (2014) [25]"

6. From Overt Demonstration to Covert Reversion: The Self - regulation and Struggle of College Students' Online Expression

6.1 Shift the Expressive Manner and Conduct Spontaneous Self – Presentation

When faced with obstacles in the process of expression, college students instinctively opt to shift to alternative forms of expression. The campus wall does not monopolize the means of expressing campus life experiences (Interviewee 27). Instead, numerous alternative avenues exist for students to pursue emotional experiences that elude them within their immediate social circles.

The exponential growth of artificial intelligence (AI) technology has transcended the conventional relationship between humans and tools. An increasing number of college students now engage with AI on levels that encompass emotional support, social companionship, and even emotional fulfillment(2024) [26].

"Open the AI software, input a specific 'personality', and you can generate the lover you want. It's very interesting. There are even dedicated AI boyfriend/girlfriend apps." (Interviewee 16)

The sense of isolation experienced by college students during online expression endeavors triggers an innate desire for companionship. While the emotional connections forged within online communities may fall short of expectations, the virtual companionship offered by "cyber lovers" provides a seemingly "perfect" and "reliable" emotional outlet. This form of interaction not only offers a channel for emotional release but also mitigates feelings of emptiness among students.

The transition to different modes of expression serves as a mechanism for emotional regulation and self - adjustment. It enables students to process negative emotions and may foster self - reflection and personal growth.

Simultaneously, online platforms serve as mediums for self - presentation, a phenomenon deeply ingrained in college students' enthusiasm for online expression. The digital landscape extends beyond a single "front stage"; when one platform proves inadequate, numerous others are available for continued self - expression. Among these, the Moments feature on social media platforms has emerged as a prime "showcase" for self - presentation.

In contrast to other public platforms, Moments offers college students enhanced visibility and agency in their pursuit of an ideal self - image. Through the strategic use of text, images, and videos, students effectively curate and present themselves to their social network.

"I like to use Moments as a 'message board'. After all, Moments is for friends to see, they can understand your views. Even if they have different opinions, the communication is very gentle." (Interviewee 23)

"Moments carries the part of me that wants to be seen and remembered by others. On the one hand, I can get likes and comments from everyone, and on the other hand, I enjoy it myself." (Interviewee 12)

As a pivotal avenue for self - expression, Moments offers college students a means to secure positive emotional support, alleviate anxiety associated with external criticism, and construct an idealized self - image. These outcomes align with students' aspirations for positive engagement in the digital realm(2025) [27].

Beyond digital platforms, participation in events such as concerts and music festivals provides another avenue for self - expression. Activities such as vigorously waving glow sticks, swaying in rhythm with the crowd, and cheering unabashedly facilitate the release of stress and the redirection of negative emotions.

These forms of self - expression enable students to reframe negative experiences as transient or external, thereby fostering resilience in the face of adversity. By reclaiming a sense of joy and control, students cultivate a positive mindset, empowering them to confront challenges with optimism and hope. This process not only bolsters their confidence but also reinforces a proactive approach to navigating life's complexities.

6.2 Seek "Nostalgic" Experiences and Resort to Invisible Expression

For college students, the anticipation that new media platforms would offer superior avenues for expression has regrettably not been fulfilled. The sentiment expressed as "One single statement leading to a lifelong sense of introversion" reflects their profound disappointment, not merely with the platforms themselves but with the entire new media technological landscape. This disillusionment has given rise to a strong undercurrent of nostalgia, compelling them to yearn for a return to a past replete with cherished experiences.

"I would invite my roommates to visit the botanical garden or go hiking. Since I lived in the countryside when I was a child, whenever I feel depressed, I want to return to the carefree childhood and embrace nature." (Interviewee 26)

Nostalgia, as an emotional construct, has permeated modern society, serving as a coping mechanism in the face of contemporary challenges. When confronted with the complexities of the present, individuals often find solace in

the memories and longings associated with the past(2025) [28]. Through engaging in nostalgic behaviors, they seek to evoke emotional resonances, rekindling a sense of inner peace and well - being. In the context of college students' online expression experiences, the obstacles encountered have triggered a profound sense of nostalgia, prompting them to delve into their pasts in search of spiritual sustenance. This nostalgic inclination not only aids in navigating present difficulties but also functions as a psychological therapeutic mechanism, offering a relatively gentle means of seeking solace.

If self - regulation can be construed as a mild form of self - healing in response to the challenges of online expression, then resistance in the face of injustice assumes an equally important role. Intriguingly, college students' resistance to the barriers of online expression often takes on a covert nature.

"+1", "Same", when one wants to express an opinion but has some concerns, they can say this. You can see many people following this pattern in the comment section, but when they come together, they still seem quite powerful. (Interviewee 24)

Caught in a dichotomy between the yearning for unbridled expression and the imperative to safeguard their identities from the perils of online violence, college students don the metaphorical "cloak of invisibility." This seemingly paradoxical behavior, while reflecting the internal conflict within their psyche, represents a pragmatic strategy for navigating the treacherous waters of the digital realm. It serves as a potent weapon in their arsenal against online violence, enabling them to extricate themselves from the shackles of online expression dilemmas. Through this form of resistance, they are able to draw upon the strength necessary to confront the realities of the present and embrace the uncertainties of the future, a pursuit far more substantial and impactful than succumbing to escapist fantasies.

7. Conclusion

The empowerment of new media has emerged as a prevalent social phenomenon, with its manifestation among college students being particularly notable. Endowed with a relatively high level of knowledge, active intellectual faculties, and a keen sensitivity to new phenomena, college students have emerged as a highly dynamic group in online expression within the digital realm.

Nonetheless, an issue that demands our attention is that despite having the means to voice their opinions in the online space, the voices of college students are growing increasingly subdued. Their presence in online discourse is gradually fading, a trend that not only hinders the positive development of college students within the digital sphere but also undermines the creation of a healthy, harmonious, and vibrant online ecosystem.

To effectively address this concern and assist college students in reclaiming their rightful influence in online communication, it is essential to mobilize the efforts of multiple stakeholders. By fostering a collaborative approach, we can generate a powerful, concerted force. This comprehensive endeavor should involve constructing a multi-dimensional support framework that addresses the various aspects of this complex issue.

7.1 The Self - Shaping of College Students: Realizing the Metamorphosis of Self - Growth

From the perspective of college students themselves, the crucial aspect lies in actively confronting challenges and attaining self - growth. As a significant demographic in the realm of online expression, college students inherently exhibit positive attributes and a vibrant, forward - looking demeanor.

When confronted with impediments in online expression, such as cyber violence, the neglect or misinterpretation of their viewpoints, college students should eschew a passive and evasive stance. Instead, they should proactively engage in self - regulation, seeking appropriate channels to alleviate feelings of isolation and stress. Acknowledging difficulties is fundamental to circumventing a self - defeating cycle of self - negation. Only by adopting a positive mindset can they confront these challenges with greater courage and resolve, refusing to yield to adversity.

Furthermore, college students should perceive these challenges as invaluable opportunities for personal development. By consistently reflecting on their experiences and refining their communication skills, they can navigate the landscape of online expression with enhanced confidence and poise, articulating their perspectives in a more sophisticated and assertive manner.

7.2 Community Guidance: Fostering an Inclusive Environment for Expression

Online communities, serving as a pivotal arena for college students' online expression, bear the weighty responsibility of cultivating a conducive environment for such expression.

On one hand, it is imperative to steadfastly uphold and propagate positive values while actively steering the discourse towards harmonious discussions. Online communities can offer a diverse array of communication

platforms for college students. This can be achieved through initiatives such as organizing distinctive cultural events and establishing dedicated community forums, which not only enhance the management and standardization of group members but also encourage multifaceted expressions. By respecting diverse viewpoints, these communities can mitigate the emergence of confrontational sentiments and guide members to engage in rational deliberations. Through the formulation of explicit community guidelines and the appointment of discussion moderators, the likelihood of extreme or exclusive inclinations can be minimized. This, in turn, fosters an open and inclusive discussion climate, invigorates the group's vitality, and emboldens college students to express themselves with confidence and enthusiasm within a positive and salubrious milieu.

On the other hand, meticulous attention should be paid to optimizing the micro-level design to forestall the advent of cyberbullying. Online community platforms should leverage cutting-edge algorithmic technologies to enhance the vetting of group members and the screening of content. The establishment of a scientific content assessment framework enables the timely identification and handling of information that may precipitate cyberbullying. Strengthening the platform's anti-cyberbullying functionality, such as implementing a rapid reporting mechanism and issuing alerts for sensitive terms, can effectively disrupt the dissemination of cyberbullying. Additionally, the provision of personalized post-cyberbullying counseling mechanisms, offering psychological support and legal assistance to affected college students, along with the refinement of private messaging privacy features to safeguard users' personal information, collectively contribute to creating a secure and nurturing online expression environment for college students.

7.3 Led by the Government: Standardizing the Ecosystem of Online Expression

The government assumes a leading role in internet governance.

Firstly, it is essential to continuously strengthen internet information legislation and govern the internet in accordance with the law. Although China has promulgated a series of internet-related laws and regulations, there remains a dearth of high-level specialized legislation targeting cyber violence. The complexity and perniciousness of cyber violence have become increasingly evident, and the existing legal framework falls short in meeting the practical governance requirements in certain aspects. Consequently, efforts should be expedited to refine relevant laws and regulations for preventing and addressing cyber violence. This involves clearly defining the concept of cyber violence, establishing identification criteria, and prescribing punitive measures. By promoting multi-faceted comprehensive governance, integrating legal, administrative, and technological means, the internet ecosystem can be enhanced, offering a robust legal safeguard for college students' online expression. This ensures that the right to express in the digital realm is effectively protected by law for college students.

Secondly, there is a need to systematically promote the real-name system for some users at the front end, thereby standardizing their online expression behaviors. The anonymity mechanism prevalent in the digital space has, to a certain extent, contributed to the proliferation of irrational online expressions and cyber violence. Although China has implemented an internet real-name system where real names are voluntary at the front end but mandatory at the back end, its regulatory impact on the vast majority of netizens remains limited. Appropriate real-name promotion strategies can be formulated based on the unique characteristics of different online communities and user demographics. In collaboration with public security departments, the real-name system at the front end can be gradually rolled out. This system serves as a deterrent to online users, making them aware that engaging in cyber violence will incur real-world sanctions. As a result, users will be more likely to self-regulate their actions, reducing the occurrence of irrational online expressions and fostering a more civilized and orderly online environment for college students.

Thirdly, emphasis should be placed on education and guidance to cultivate the self-awareness of the online community. On one hand, through diverse channels such as school education, community outreach, and online courses, regular publicity and educational campaigns should be conducted on topics including laws related to cyber violence prevention and the associated hazards. This aims to enhance the legal literacy and digital proficiency of internet users. By making college students aware of the legal implications and social ramifications of cyber violence, their self-protection and sense of responsibility can be fortified. On the other hand, the handling of cyber violence cases should be regularly publicized. Using real-life cases as a cautionary measure, online users can be made to recognize the gravity of cyber violence through in-depth case analyses. This approach fosters an understanding of the importance of adhering to online rules and guides users in establishing correct online values. By jointly constructing a healthy internet ecosystem, concerns among college students regarding online expression can be alleviated, and their confidence can be restored.

By integrating the efforts of college students themselves, online communities, and the government, coordinating supervision, regulation, and governance of the online environment, negative voices in the digital landscape can be

effectively curbed. This creates a vast space for the dissemination of positive and healthy content, thereby purifying and optimizing the online environment. Only in this way can college students fully showcase their vitality and creativity in the era of new media empowerment, expressing themselves with clarity, significance, and impact. This will propel the development of the online space towards a more positive, healthy, and orderly direction, transforming it into a crucial platform for college students to thrive, exchange ideas, and disseminate positive values.

References

- [1] Descartes, R. (2000). *Discourse on the method*. The Commercial Press.
- [2] Hegel, G. W. F. (1979). *The phenomenology of spirit, Part I*. The Commercial Press.
- [3] Marx, & Engels. (1995). *Selected works of Marx and Engels, Volume I*. The People's Publishing House.
- [4] Meng, W. (2019). The subjectivity of the audience in Internet communication. *The Young Journalists*, (33), 11-12.
- [5] Xia, H. (2007). The development and significance of the subjectivity of online audiences. *Social Sciences in Gansu*, (4).
- [6] Black, S. B. (1976). *Empowerment: Social work in oppressed communities*. Columbia University Press.
- [7] Jiang, H. (2016). Reflections on the developmental positioning of higher continuing education in the context of media empowerment. *Studies in Continuing Education*, (2), 4-6.
- [8] Zhao, A., & Zuo, L. (2019). The dualism of college students' identity construction within the context of self-media empowerment. *Research on Contemporary Youth*, (2), 91-97.
- [9] Cai, Q., & Nie, H. (2024). Can social capital overcome the isolation dilemma? A research on the new media empowerment of rare disease communities. *Research in Journalism and Communication*, (8), 96-111, 128.
- [10] Cui, Z. (2018). *The philosophical dimensions of cyberspace: From technology and interests to ethics*. China Fortune Publishing House.
- [11] Yan, G., & He, Z. (2022). Publicity and anti-publicity: The paradoxes and resolutions of public participation in cyberspace. *Theory and Reforms*, (6), 133-146, 161.
- [12] Wang, N. (2022). The discourse expression paradigm of contemporary youth in cyberspace: Generation, functions, and guidance. *Studies in Ideological Education*, (12), 82-87.
- [13] Zhu, R., & Li, W. (2024). A comparative research on the expressions in the online and real-world public opinion fields within the "fan circle" phenomenon. *Contemporary Communications*, (6), 62-68.
- [14] Liang, S., & Cao, D. (2022). "Social death": Emerging trends of youth cyberbullying and governance pathways. *The Frontline of Social Sciences*, (4), 234-240.
- [15] Zhou, B., & Lv, S. (2014). An empirical investigation into college students' online opinion expression and its influencing factors: With "the spiral of silence" and "opinion climate perception" at the core. *Contemporary Communications*, (5), 34-38.
- [16] Yu, X., & Wang, Y. (2014). A study on the influential factors of college students' public opinion expression in the context of social networks. *Research on Chinese Youth*, (10), 97-104, 96.
- [17] Qin, Y., & Xu, L. (2017). An analytical exploration of the construction of a guidance mechanism for college students' online opinion expression in the new media era. *Studies in Ideological Education*, (2), 88-91.
- [18] Rogers, E. M. (2002). *The diffusion of innovations* (4th ed.). Central Compilation & Translation Press.
- [19] Rheingold, H. (1993). *The virtual community: Finding connection in a computerized world*. Addison-Wesley Longman Publishing.
- [20] Liang, C. (2019). *Research on new media empowerment and citizen expression* [Doctoral dissertation, Chongqing University].
- [21] Yu, G., & Ma, H. (2016). The new power paradigm in the Internet era: "Relational empowerment"—Reconfiguration of social relations and transformation of the power structure in the context of "connecting everything". *The International Journalism Community*, 38(10), 6-27.
- [22] Noelle-Neumann, E. (2013). *The spiral of silence: Public opinion – The social skin of ourselves*. The Publishing House of Peking University.

- [23] Beck, U. (2004). *Risk society*. Yilin Press.
- [24] Turkel, S. (2014). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Zhejiang People's Publishing House.
- [25] Cui, X. (2024). "Cyber lovers": Research on emotional communication in human-machine interaction within the interactive ritual chain. *The Research of New Media*, 10(19), 7-11.
- [26] Liang, D. (2025). "Raw life" vs. "fancy-finished moments on social media": A psychological capital perspective on youth social performance. *Research on Chinese Youth*, (2), 87-94, 77.
- [27] Ji, L., & Xia, Y. (2025). Activation and sharing: Research on the emotional production of nostalgia within the framework of spatial theory. *News Enthusiast*, (3), 38-42.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).