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“Confrontation”and “Apology” : A Study of Conflicts among Online Youth Groups from the Perspective of Balance of Power Theory

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Abstract:
Currently, the Internet has become an important platform for communication and expressing opinions, bringing convenience to everyone while also posing some problems. Just as the phenomenon of online confrontation is a facet of the development of the Internet, it is like a mirror.It reflects the diverse voices and emotions in our society. This study focuses on the conflict phenomenon among online youth groups, systematically exploring the root causes and evolution process of conflicts among online youth groups. At the same time, the study analyzes the impact of third-party authoritative institutions intervening in the balance of discourse, revealing how to guide emotional confrontation to a rational level through discourse power and institutionalization. The purpose of this study is to explore the root causes of conflicts among online youth groups and the impact of third-party authoritative institutions' intervention on online public opinion.Through text analysis and in-depth interviews, it studies the internal logic and fundamental characteristics of the phenomenon of mutual criticism on the Internet from the perspective of young people, providing a new path for the peaceful development of the Internet.

Keywords:
balance of power theory, youth, conflict, psychology, Apologize.

1 Introduction

With the popularization of the Internet, the youth group has also gained unprecedented discourse power. Senior scholars have paid attention to issues such as the political power transformed from the discourse power of the youth group and the channels for expressing public opinion. On the other hand, we have neglected that the youth group is not without contradictions and conflicts. On the contrary, we have observed that the Internet is increasingly filled with situations such “asmutual insults”and“being forced to apologize”. The youth group uses posts, video comments, and other means to criticize each other and refuse to concede. This new trend is clearly contrary to China's traditional cultural and moral values, making the Internet present a“ chaotic”situation of power struggle.

According to the viewpoint in Adam Smith's“ The Wealth of Nations”, rational discussion should inevitably lead to rational freedom of speech and problem-solving.However, it is evident that netizens' energy is more

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focused on mutual conflict and attack and rational discussion often ultimately degenerates into mutual dissatisfaction rather than changing one's own viewpoint. On the Internet, whether it is the government, celebrities, or internet celebrities, they are often " picked on" and their loopholes are sought. Therefore, authoritative discourse no longer exists, and what remains is only mutual blame-shifting and dissatisfaction. We are curious about what kind of psychology drives them to engage in conflict and attack.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Conflict phenomena among online youth groups

The conflict among the online youth group has sparked multi- perspective research in academia. The root of the conflict lies solely in the clash of words, commonly referred to as "confrontation". "Confrontation" should not be an emotional outburst,but rather a principled expression of one's stance. It should be based on defending core values, refuting obvious fallacies, or resisting personal attacks. Effective "Confrontation" addresses the issue at hand, not the person, and is rooted in facts and empathy. Its aim is to clarify viewpoints and correct errors, rather than humiliate the other party. So, how can we balance the so- called "Confrontation" to prevent the conflict from escalating?

The term "apologize" is most fitting. "Apologizing" is by no means a sign of weakness, but rather an embodiment of courage and responsibility, serving as a lubricant for repairing relationships and maintaining social health. In Intercultural Conflict Styles, foreign scholar Ting-Toomey conducted an overall analysis of conflict communication strategies from the perspective of face negotiation theory,pointing out that the essence of apology is a face- saving ritual, and its absence will lead to a spiral escalation of conflict. In"The Five Percent" (2011), foreign scholar Coleman conducted an overall analysis of group conflict from the perspective of social power dynamics, pointing out that young people tend to reconstruct imbalanced power relationships through confrontational behaviors (such as"dui").The foreign scholar Waltz (1979), in his book Theory of International Politics, pointed out:"Self-help is necessarily the principle of action in an anarchic order."The foreign scholar Hindman (2008), in his book The Myth of Digital Democracy, pointed out: "The Internet is not eliminating elites,it is just replacing one set of elites with another."

Domestic scholars such as Qu Tao (2023) have explored the triggering mechanism of conflict discourse from the perspective of cognitive differences, insufficient relevance, identity maintenance, lack of rationality, and contextual adaptation. Combining cognitive appraisal theory, they discussed the triggering mechanism and dynamic development characteristics of conflict from a dynamic development perspective. Domestic scholars like Gao Jun (2023) examined how netizens construct identity through conflict strategies in online conflict discourse from the perspective of identity.Communicators achieve identity construction through conflict discourse, mainly using conflict strategies such as seeking disagreement, making others uncomfortable, and deconstructing communicators. Gao Yi (2024) systematically explained the phenomena of interruption and overlap in conflict discourse that deviate from turn-taking rules from the perspective of discourse analysis theory. Using realistic and natural conflict discourse as corpus and based on the theoretical foundations of interactive linguistics and the principle of purpose, he attempted to construct a "purpose- oriented conflict interaction model" to explain conflict speech acts. He believed that verbal conflict was an adversarial behavior

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influenced by the differences in positions of the interacting parties and is the result of communicators pursuing specific purposes. Domestic scholar Pang Xiaofeng (2022) explained that conflict discourse is essentially the verbal expression of communicators' judgments and identifications of the threat to face, social power, and interactive goals based on specific contextual factors, closely related to the communicators' tendency towards harmony, based on interpersonal relationship management theory.

There is a certain correlation between conflicts among online youth groups and the phenomenon of cyberbullying. Domestic scholar Huo Xiaodan (2009), drawing from Psychological Analysis of Youth in the Phenomenon of Cyberbullying ,pointed out that youth are both active participants in cyberbullying and the main victims of it. Youth's participation in cyberbullying is driven by a de- individuated mentality.It is jointly caused by feelings of deprivation, rebelliousness, self- justification and rationalization, and achievement motivation. At the same time, participating in cyberbullying also has a negative impact on young people's formation of correct self-awareness, social attitudes, social behaviors, and the construction of good interpersonal relationships and the development of healthy cultural psychology. Meanwhile, domestic scholars Guo Chunfu and Huang Lifang (2023) utilized LDA topic identification and Snow NLP sentiment analysis in their study Analysis of Youth's Discussion Topics, Emotional Tendencies, and Prevention Mechanisms Regarding Cyberbullying Incidents to describe the topic discussions among young people regarding different types of cyberbullying incidents. They analyzed the emotional tendencies of young people towards four types of cyberbullying incidents: trust crisis, food safety, entertainment public opinion, and insult and defamation, providing a reference for correctly guiding young people's online behavior.

However, despite exploring conflict behavior patterns, face theory, and cultural psychology, these studies overlook the balanced relationships in conflicts among online youth groups. In the struggle for discourse power, the exhaustion brought about by the violent discourse game among youth groups may lead to a shift towards rational discussion and the establishment of a more peaceful and balanced communication model.

2.2 Balance of power theory

The core idea of the balance of power theory is that countries will, through internal development or external alliances, balance any country or group of countries that may attain a hegemonic position in the system, thereby preventing a single dominant power from dominating the international system and maintaining the relative stability and multipolar pattern of the system.Conflict is not only a personal grudge, but also a structural reaction triggered by the imbalance or transfer of power within the group. Its essence is the result of power imbalance. Therefore, the perspective of the balance of power theory can better address a series of issues related to youth group conflicts.

In"Its Complicated" (2014), foreign scholar Boyd conducted an overall analysis of digital social interaction from the perspective of media ecology,pointing out that the quantifiable feedback mechanisms (likes/retweets) of technology platforms can reinforce the performative nature of confrontational behaviors.

Domestic scholar Yan Qing (2021) combines the phenomenon of maintaining the stability of the international system with the balance of power theory, summarizes the results of power distribution produced by actors who have practiced balance of power in history, and deeply analyzes the current status of the development of major-country relations under the current international situation. Domestic scholar Liu Siwei (2014)

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combines the actual phenomena of China's macroeconomics with the balance of power theory, proposing that the balance of power theory based on structural realism should not completely exclude macroeconomics. The assumption that individual autonomous behavior proposed by macroeconomics can lead to the failure to establish equilibrium and the need for individuals to be completely rational for equilibrium establishment can provide a new perspective and a new direction of interest for the structural realist balance of power theory.

However, these studies did not examine the phenomenon of mutual criticism on the Internet from the perspective of the youth group, and therefore did not address the questions regarding youth group conflicts from the perspective of the balance of power theory.

2.3 Problem Statement

The article seeks to answer the following questions based on the theory of balance of power:

From a micro perspective, what are the purposes behind the mutual criticism among teenagers on the Internet? What characteristics do those being criticized exhibit? What is their psychological process?

From a macro perspective, can this power struggle achieve a mutual balance,thereby transforming from irrational mutual criticism to rational discussion?

3 Research Methodology

This article analyzes the widespread phenomena of confrontation and emotionalization in the current network from the perspective of the root causes of conflicts among the online youth group. By employing content analysis and in- depth interviews, it delves into the underlying reasons behind the confrontation.

3.1 Text analysis method

This study employs text analysis method to analyze and study the entire process of a hot event, subsequently examining the manifestations, root causes, and intrinsic motivations of the conflict. It also analyzes the public opinion orientation on different platforms and the attitude changes after third- party intervention, providing a solid data foundation for theoretical verification.

3.2 In- depth interview method

This study adopts the method of in-depth interviews, aiming to deeply explore the attitudes, motivations, and underlying conflict reasons of college youth groups towards the phenomenon of“junior students publicly complaining about their schools online”.It focuses on analyzing the complex psychological motivations behind their “counterattacks”and “apologies”. The interview questions mainly revolve around three dimensions: first, understanding the most intuitive reactions; second, exploring the motivations behind their participation in public rebuttals and attacks; third, mining the cognitive judgments behind identity and behavior. The interviewees are 13 college alumni or current students with different backgrounds, including their types of graduate schools and stages of study.There are differences in the degree of emotional identification with the alma mater,ensuring the representativeness of the sample. The interviews adhere to strict ethical norms and are conducted under the premise of safeguarding the rights and interests of participants.

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4 Research Finds

4.1 The current situation of discourse power exploitation

4.1.1 Reasons for power struggle among online youth groups

The number of internet users in China has reached 1.092 billion, an increase of 24.8 million compared to December 2022. Among them, the proportions of internet users aged 20-29 and 30-39 are 13.7% and 19.2% respectively.In the era of new media, the number of internet users continues to increase, and the proportion of the youth group cannot be ignored. At the same time, there is a fluid and balanced political situation among internet users.“No one can stand to see the other”,which reflects a fear of power exploitation. This fear of power exploitation represents a struggle for power. The online outspokenness of the youth group is essentially a preemptive power struggle to prevent power from being exploited. In the modern network environment full of uncertainties, the anonymity of the internet reduces the moral and social costs of attacks, alleviates anxiety about identity and rights, and utilizes the convenience provided by the internet to reduce so-called fear. It is an irrational strategy to gain temporary discourse power by competing for“symbolic power” .

“Conflict talk is essentially a verbal manifestation of a communicator's judgment and recognition, based on specific contextual factors, that the other party's words or actions pose a threat to their face, social rights, and interactional goals. It is also closely related to factors such as the communicator's harmony orientation.” Contemporary youth growth up in an era of rapid development of the internet, with diverse channels for acquiring knowledge. They have their own unique perspectives on different things and have strong demands for fairness, justice, and supervision. However, in real life, the public has their own evaluation criteria in terms of consumption, environmental protection, and brand effect.

The root cause of the phenomenon of power struggle among online youth groups lies in the fact that young people in real society grow up in a materially relatively affluent yet highly competitive environment, facing multiple pressures such as academic pressure and workplace involution. In real life, they often find themselves in a situation where their voice is drowned out. It is precisely this lack of power in real life that drives young people to turn to the internet. The open complaints of junior students about their dormitory environment on campus reflect the emptiness of the internet.The identity transformation from a passive recipient to an active constructor has been achieved occasionally, reflecting the symbolic acquisition of real power.

The“Patagonia mountain explosion incident”has garnered significant attention from netizens. While advocating for green environmental protection, they lit fireworks on the“Roof of the World”. While promoting the so-called outdoor spirit,they used the Himalayas as a backdrop for brand marketing. The online youth community has engaged in heated discussions regarding the“Patagonia mountain explosion incident”, which essentially revolves around a fierce competition between brand capital and ecological governance.

The underlying significance of this power struggle lies in revealing that contemporary Chinese youth are transitioning from passive recipients of information to active participants in public affairs. By competing for discourse power, they not only demonstrate their concern for events but also reflect their awareness of participating in ecological governance

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When many people speak out together, the weak voice of an individual can converge into a force that cannot be ignored. This collective power places the discourse power in an advantageous position, thereby forcing the other party to respond.

4.1.2 Preemptive attack driven by fear

The youth group has realized that in the new power field of the internet, silence means giving up power, and losing one's voice means being exploited. The deep fear of power exploitation is at the core of conflicts. They fear that their interests and viewpoints will be ignored and that they will become victims of power. Therefore,discussion is no longer a rational exchange seeking consensus, but has evolved into a game with no winners.“In online communication, conflicts often arise due to differences in goals, interests, positions, or viewpoints between the communicating parties. On the one hand, the communicating subjects are not constrained by face-to-face communication. On the other hand, influenced by their own identities, they use varying degrees of conflict discourse to attack and rebut each other.”

In the public opinion storm surrounding the Archaeopteryx mountain explosion incident, the overwhelming consensus of “refusing to reconcile”stems from a deep-seated fear. The fear lies in the possibility of losing one's right to speak, the fear that ecological damage will be easily brushed aside, the fear that brands will once again confuse concepts in the name of development, crushing all dissent, and most importantly, the fear that silence this time will lead to power being completely disregarded in similar incidents in the future.

It is this fear that has given rise to preventive public opinion attacks. When incidents occur, people no longer wait for official investigation conclusions. Instead,they actively label the act of blasting mountains as an unforgivable ecological destroyer, and question the enterprises and the approval process behind them. The public takes the initiative to protect the environment and criticizes unreasonable behavior.The right to speak rationally. This preemptive attack is essentially an attempt to stifle any possibility of ignoring it by exerting pressure.

In this process, the youth group exerted dual pressure through morality and public opinion, forcing the brand to shift from ignoring to publicly responding, and pushing the regulatory authorities to shift from compliance approval to reassessment. This downward shift of power from discourse to practical level not only breaks the previous handling methods but also re-examines the evaluation criteria for ecological issues.When Archangel becomes a case to alert other brands, it allows more brands to see the resolute attitude of consumers in ecological governance and their undeniable power in protecting the environment.

The results have proven that it was precisely this intense, fear-driven, and persistent criticism that successfully reversed the balance of discourse power. The incident, which could have been resolved internally at the beginning, quickly escalated into a public incident that demanded“high attention and immediate thorough investigation. ”The official stance of “standing together with the public” was ultimately demonstrated, not due to proactive investigation, but rather as a necessary compromise to collective power in the face of a powerful trend of public opinion.

Therefore, in the era of new media, due to different definitions of discourse power and varying interests, as well as differing degrees of fear of losing power, speaking out has become an eternal survival strategy. This

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mechanism of competition deeply reveals the core of our Internet discussions, leading to a certain degree of balance in the formation of discourse.

4.2 Mechanism of power struggle

Based on the psychology of fear, netizens are more inclined to simulate an “imaginary power holder”who possesses more discourse power, and is thus more likely to exploit the discourse of vulnerable groups and even damage their rights. The government, celebrities, internet influencers, and even ordinary people are all targets of ordinary netizens' power resistance. The criticism of famous individuals is aimed at undermining their discourse power, thereby establishing a power balance between the famous and themselves.“Social power includes two fundamental principles: fairness and reciprocity, reflecting people's expectations of their own and others' social rights and obligations in communication. The principle of fairness refers to the equality of relationships between communicators, which should not be driven or exploited by the other party, including two sub-principles: loss-gain and autonomy-control. The former refers to consideration for others, where one party should not be exploited or harmed by the other party, and the overall loss and gain between communicators should be balanced; the latter refers to one party in communication should not be controlled and driven by the other party.”

4.2.1 Attack upwards to achieve power devolution

Attacking from above to achieve power devolution targets those who are perceived as“imaginary power holders”with prominent status and a significant power gap. The online youth group dismantles power by bringing these individuals down from their pedestal s, enabling power to“devolve”and seize discourse power. In the online society,“attacking from above”has become the core strategy for the youth group to achieve“power devolution”. The public complaints of junior students about their dormitory environment are a typical manifestation of this strategy. By turning daily life issues into public topics, this discourse competition essentially involves creating public opinion pressure to prompt power concessions, thereby achieving the reconstruction of discourse power.

However, this process of power devolution triggered a counterattack from the alumni community, resulting in a complex power balance situation. The counterattack from alumni stemmed from the criticism and attacks from their juniors, which shook the foundation of their own identity. Alumni attempted to dismantle the discourse power by redefining complaints as“sentimental”. This game is essentially a contest between two generations over the definition of discourse power. The younger generation achieves power devolution by attacking from above. In this process,complaining about dormitory conditions has gone beyond mere grumbling and become an act of reshaping identity for the younger generation.

In the public opinion storm triggered by Xibei's ready- to- eat meals, a typical “upward attack”was once again staged. This time, the public's criticism is not only directed at the dishes themselves, but also at the“imaginary power holders”behind them,who have transformed traditional Chinese cuisine into high-priced meal kits and deprived consumers of their right to know and speak using the terminology defined by so-called capital and“ready-to-eat meals”. Attack has become the core means for consumers to regain their right to speak, questioning the deviation between price and value, and mocking the transparency of kitchens. All of these reflect the“descent”of power from business giants to consumers.

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It is precisely because of this continuous public criticism that has forced Xibei, a dominant commercial powerhouse, to step down from its lofty brand status and engage in public explanations regarding its business model, pricing logic, and corporate integrity. This controversy surrounding ready-to- eat meals ultimately achieved not just the removal of a certain product or the issuance of a certain statement, but also secured a voice and briefly shaken the power of capital to define value. It made the once unquestionable commercial authority feel the power of netizens on public platforms for the first time, and it also led to a re- examination and redefinition of the catering industry.

The mainstream sentiment of “not accepting apologies”for refusing reconciliation stems from the belief that accepting an apology implies tacitly acknowledging that the other party still holds a position of power where they can be “forgiven”. The privilege of using apologies to defuse the situation is taken away, and by refusing, the public gains the right to demand substantive responses.And occupy a more proactive position in the power relationship. Only by resolutely refusing to reconcile can resistance and potential change be achieved.

When Xibei shifted from its initial defense of maintaining high quality to ultimately promising to optimize the experience and enhance transparency, and even when local market regulatory authorities successively introduced labeling standards for ready-to-eat meals, this marked the success of the devolution of power. Through continuous questioning and resistance, the public not only shook the pricing model of individual enterprises but also successfully transformed the issue of transparency in the catering industry into a content for industry regulation. Xibei has transitioned from being a benchmark in high- end dining to a negative example of integrity issues in the catering industry, achieving a partial shift in commercial discourse power from brands to consumers and regulatory authorities.

4.2.2 Centralize power through downward implementation

The appropriate delegation of power, aimed at better achieving the centralization and recollection of power, is essentially a way to autonomously repair problems through different strata, better respond to public demands, and simultaneously achieve the recollection of power, thereby better grasping the discourse power and the overall situation of events. This approach targets ordinary individuals who are considered to be unworthy of their positions or who have violated potential rules. The online youth group suppresses them through collective discipline, safeguarding the imagined collective interests, thereby achieving the recollection and centralization of power. A freshman complained online about the poor conditions and unreasonable management of the school dormitory. This is a normal expression of emotions. However, in the “imagination” of other alumni, this freshman is constructed as a“sentimental” and “unable to endure hardship”target of criticism. His voice forms a challenge to campus order and the collective silence rule, constituting a subtle exploitation of the psychological advantages of those who have experienced it before. Through this intense discourse conflict, the core motivation is not to discuss specific issues such as dormitory conditions themselves, but rather to believe that the freshman's behavior violates the internal rule of “not air ing family dirty laundry in public, ”constituting a betrayal of group interests and a tarnishing of external image.

The interview revealed that alumni believe they have the right and obligation to correct this behavior through criticism, thereby maintaining the order of the school.As an alumnus stated,“Issues can be reported internally, but posting them online is a different matter.”

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We scold her to tell her what the rules are here.“Apology serves as a crucial facework ritual in conflict management. It is a symbolic gesture that helps to repair damaged identities and restore social equilibrium.”

This indicates that the complaints made by new students on public platforms are constructed by alumni as an“imaginary power holder” , someone who, by posting videos to attract attention, may damage the collective reputation of their alma mater,and who is defended through criticism Face work. The criticism from alumni becomes a form of power resistance, aiming to restore the power norms in their minds through verbal confrontation. In this incident,the power was not centralized by the school's orders, but rather by the spontaneous words of the alumni. They redefined the rules under the premise of safeguarding the collective reputation, ultimately centralizing the power of individual complaints,gaining the initiative in discourse, and consolidating the collective reputation.

Whether it's attacking the brand side from above or disciplineing a complaining newcomer from below, the underlying logic remains consistent. Out of fear of power exploitation, the critics actively intervene in the process of power distribution through discourse practice. By pulling power downwards or tightening it through discipline, their ultimate goal is to create a state of power balance that makes them feel safer and more in control. In this process, the symbolic transfer of discourse power from one side to the other takes place, and cyberspace thus becomes a medium for power judgment and transfer.

4.3 The politics of balance of power and chain reaction in discourse power

4.3.1 Achieving a discourse balance between fear and criticism

In traditional society, the discourse power is highly concentrated in the hands of authoritative institutions and elite classes. The Internet has fundamentally dismantled this centralized communication structure, achieving a“downward shift” and “spreading out” of discourse power, providing the public with unprecedented channels to voice their opinions. Both the Ancest or Bird explosion incident and the Xibei prefabricated food incident reflect that when dispersed individual questions converge into collective power,they can achieve supervision and balance against authorities in different fields. The “ criticism”in the Internet era has become a key force for the public to reclaim their rights and promote social development towards a more fair and transparent direction.

Based on a deep fear of power exploitation, a specific cognitive framework has been formed- from the perspective of “imagining fictional stories” , any “other” who holds dissenting views or merely differs from one's own position is constructed as a “famous person”. This “famous person” is no longer limited to traditional celebrities and authorities, but refers generally to all objects that are considered to occupy a certain discourse advantage in a specific discourse context. Once the other party is labeled as a“ famous person”, the attack begins. This attack is not for the purpose of discerning truth, but rather an act of competing for discourse dominance. The intensity of its rhetoric has nothing to do with the importance of the event itself, but is closely related to discourse power.

In this process, forcing the other party to“apologize”becomes a crucial juncture.However, the ultimate purpose of“apologizing” itself is more like a handover of power. Apologizing means that the other party acknowledges their transgression or mistake, thus providing a legitimate excuse for the disintegration of their

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discourse power.

The real purpose of cyber conflict is to accomplish the compulsory transfer of power and gain discourse through this series of operations.Power ultimately forms a fragile and temporary“balance of power”. When the other party loses credibility due to apology, the attacker gains a sense of psychological security and satisfaction from the realization of power. Their sign of success is not solving the problem, but achieving the imagined outcome.

4.3.2 Emotional confrontation and rational negotiation

In the process of competing for discourse power on the internet, emotional confrontation and rational negotiation are always in conflict. Therefore, balancing the relationship between emotion and rational negotiation, as well as analyzing the underlying reasons, becomes a key point. When we focus this perspective on universities, we find that complaints from junior students about dormitory incidents serve as a typical example of observing this contradiction. Everyone expresses their dissatisfaction with the living environment through social media, essentially seeking rational dialogue.

By emphasizing that“we managed to survive with worse conditions back then,”alumni position themselves in a vulnerable position, yet gain a discourse advantage.Their criticism of newcomers is no longer a bullying of the strong over the weak, but an embodiment of justice. When alumni support criticizing newcomers, they are actually seeking a psychological balance. They may have complained themselves back then, but ultimately chose silence and acceptance. Now, seeing someone standing up to break the rules, they feel that their choices have been denied, which makes them uncomfortable. Therefore, they must suppress this behavior of newcomers to prove that their endurance back then was correct, so as to achieve psychological balance.

4.3.3“Not accepting apologies”has become a new equilibrium strategy

In the current online public opinion discussions, the public's bargaining power has achieved a qualitative leap, and its core symbol is the refusal to accept symbolic compromises. Netizens have begun to actively use“not accepting apologies”as a new game strategy, thereby changing the original balance of achieving forgiveness through admitting mistakes in brand crises, forcing enterprises to shift from traditional public relations to substantive rectification.

After Luo Yonghao's Weibo post, the readership of related topics quickly exceeded 100 million, and consumers' trust in Xibei declined significantly. Some netizens pointed out that the broccoli in the children's meal was frozen and had a shelf life of up to 24 months, which netizens jokingly called“older than the children”. The incident led to a significant drop in sales at Xibei stores. For example, in Shijiazhuang.

The sales revenue of takeout and dine-in at city stores decreased by 70% and 50%respectively compared to the same period last year, with the daily average revenue of stores nationwide halved, resulting in a daily loss of approximately 30 million yuan.

Initially, Jia Guolong, the founder of Xibei, denied using pre-prepared dishes,stating that“none of the dishes in our stores are pre-prepared” and announcing a lawsuit against Luo Yonghao. However, consumers gradually posted “evidence of pre-prepared dishes,”such as chicken soup made with seasoning packets and frozen

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food packaging, further escalating the conflict. Faced with continuously deteriorating business data, Xibei publicly apologized on September 20th and promised to change nine core dishes, including lamb skewers and beef patties, to be made on-site in the stores. Xibei ultimately managed to calm the storm through apologies and rectifications, but its brand image was severely damaged. This incident reflects that catering enterprises need to pay attention to transparent promotion when using pre-prepared dishes, which is the key to avoiding trust crises.

By refusing to accept low-cost apologies as a symbolic protest, netizens successfully broke the temporary balance and The direction of public opinion has shifted from questioning the brand to focusing on industry standards. The official intervention has provided the public with a more authoritative basis, enhancing their discourse power in the public opinion game. Refusing to accept apologies has become an important means for the public to balance and force the other party to make substantive responses, thereby striving for a more favorable balance in the next stage of the struggle.

4.3.4 Shift the focus of public opinion from individual criticism to systemic reflection

In the Internet era, hot-button issues often trigger emotional individual criticism.However, what truly drives social progress is not emotional counterattacks, but rather the shift in public attention from moral judgment of individuals to deeper systemic reflection. This shift is not naturally occurring, but rather a rational contemplation of events facilitated by authoritative institutions and the development trend of the situation.

In the early stages of the Xibei incident, public opinion revolved around emotional criticism of price fraud and brand dishonesty. With the intervention of market regulatory authorities and the promotion of new regulations such as the explicit labeling of ready-to-eat meals, public discussion quickly shifted to issues such as transparency in the catering industry and consumers' right to know, achieving a shift from the moral level to institutional establishment. Similarly, the Archaeopteryx incident shifted from condemning the enterprise for damaging the ecology to deep reflection on ecological issues and shortcomings such as sustainable development after the intervention of environmental protection departments.

These two cases demonstrate that timely intervention from authoritative institutions can shift the discussion from emotional attacks to the institutional level, ultimately promoting institutional improvement through a rebalancing of discourse power. Ultimately, it not only resolves controversial issues but also establishes a new balance through institutions, responding to public demands while also consolidating the rationality of the governance system.

4.4 “Re- incorporation”of the politics of balance of power in online discourse

Instead of defending their dominant position, the powerful side actively downgrades their status. They construct a position of “my interests align with those of the weaker discourse power holders” through their words and attitudes, implementing the most clever strategy of “re-cooptation”. This is not about imposing dominance, but rather about actively showing weakness. Through the apparent transfer of discourse power, they retreat to advance, reshaping their identity and thus regaining dominance at a deeper level.

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The weakness shown by Xibei is due to external pressures on its operations,which have to some extent shaken the core of traditional cuisine production, making it slightly passive. The weakness shown by Archaeopteryx is through self- criticism and correction, which has re- established its reverence for nature, appearing sincere and proactive.

It can be seen that the success of the strategy of showing weakness lies not only in the lowering of posture, but also in whether it is consistent with the brand's core commitment. They reshape themselves from“privileged individuals” to “psychological weaklings”in order to gain the right to speak. This strategy perfectly aligns with the core of the weak communication theory- “the world of public opinion is upside down in terms of strength and weakness, and the strong in reality must learn to show weakness in public opinion.”

Originally, they were the targets of criticism. However, continuing to attack a target that has already shown weakness will instead put the critics themselves in a moral disadvantage of bullying the weak in public opinion. They successfully aroused the most primitive emotion of protecting the weak in the public's heart, shifting the public's attention from pursuing responsibility to offering sympathy. By defining themselves as“the weak”, they cleverly redefined the nature of the conflict-it was no longer a confrontation of power, but a dialogue about understanding and tolerance.The dominance of discourse was thus quietly regained.

In this entire process of “showing weakness- empathy- reintegration”, the core position of rational discussion has long been thoroughly deconstructed and abandoned.Whether it is the government, celebrities, or ordinary people, the operational logic for successfully competing for discourse power is purely political in nature. This study finds that discourse conflict is not only a superficial dispute over viewpoints, but also an external manifestation of deep-seated psychological needs and identity anxiety.Therefore, understanding discourse conflict in online public opinion requires not only paying attention to its surface content and power structure, but also delving into the underlying psychological dynamics and inherent meanings. Only by combining discourse, power, and psychology can we fully grasp the complex nature of public opinion game theory and better analyze the inherent logic of balanced discourse.

5.Summary and Discussion

This study employs semi-structured in-depth interviews and text analysis methods to analyze the online public opinion triggered by the “Arctery Mountain explosion incident”and the“Xibei ready-to-eat meal incident”, as well as the criticism directed by university alumni towards the phenomenon of“junior students publicly complaining about their schools”, through the lens of the balance of power theory. It attempts to explore the motivations behind online conflicts among young people. The study finds that in the“Arctery Mountain explosion incident”, the core of the public opinion conflict stems from the public's fear of capital exploiting power without regard for the environment. By constructing a moral framework of“ecological justice”, the collective criticism becomes more reasonable. In the“Xibei ready-to-eat meal incident”,consumers' doubts about the brand's pricing power and right to know, through moral discourse of integrity, elevate the consumption dispute to issues of business integrity and value.

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Based on this, this study proposes the“Micro-balance Theory”applicable to the interaction mechanism of online youth groups. The conflict in the aforementioned event appears as irrational confrontation on the surface, but in reality, it represents an attempt by the youth group to reconstruct the imbalanced order within the power structure. Through the construction of moral frameworks and labeling discourse strategies, they achieve a balance against capital power, commercial privileges, and group norms. This conflict behavior objectively plays a positive role in supervising corporate responsibility, promoting industry transparency, and strengthening group identity. It also reflects the younger generation's high regard for ecological justice,consumer fairness, and collective reputation, demonstrating their practical ability to negotiate power and reshape order in the digital public sphere.

However, it is worth noting that this study also found that the phenomenon of balance-of-power game, which is ostensively for“maintenance”but actually involves “criticism and attack”, can bring negative impacts such as cyberbullying and public opinion pressure. When justice evolves into irrational criticism and attack, it is not only easy to hurt the innocent, but also hinders the resolution of problems. This is worthy of vigilance and reflection.

Meanwhile, this study is somewhat one-sided as the interview samples are mainly friends and alumni of the researcher. Additionally, the text analysis only focuses on some representative cases such as“Arcteryx's mountain-blowing marketing"and"Xibei's pre-prepared food controversy”, but the research on these cases lacks universality. In future research, the analysis of issues related to online communication and online conflicts among young people requires more diversified case studies to more comprehensively reveal the multifaceted causes of online conflicts.

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