

The Crowd: Study on the Guidance Strategies of University Network Public Opinions

--Taking "Management Through Zhihu" as an Example

Anning Liu

School of Marxism, Wuhan University of technology, Wuhan, China.

venture0427@163.com

Abstract: Group psychology is a crucial factor influencing the occurrence and development of network public opinions in universities. Based on the "Theory of Crowds", this study selects the "Tianjin University's Lockdown Management" as a typical case in the phenomenon of "Management Through Zhihu". In this way, the research starts from four stages -- focus, formation, climax and dissolution of public opinions, returns to look at the psychological motivation of the subjects, analyzes the role of group psychological factors such as blindly following the crowd, the law not punishing numerous offenders, leader guidance and emotional contagion in promoting the formation of university network public opinion crisis behind the phenomenon of "Management Through Zhihu". Based on that, this study proposes that to strengthen the guidance of university network public opinions in the new era, four specific aspects need to be further highlighted: mastering the characteristics of group psychological communication is the basis; giving full play to the role of public opinion leaders is the key; innovative network public opinion guidance mode is the guarantee; and emphasizing the education of network public opinion subjects is the fundamental solution.

Keywords: The crowd; University network public opinions; "Management Through Zhihu".

1. Presentation of the Problem

In recent years, with the rapid development of modern information technology and profound changes in the mode of communication, students have a new channel to express their demands and defend their rights and interests. However, due to their shallow social experiences, their relatively weak ability to distinguish between right and wrong and impulsive nature, the over-passionate fervour and unconventional characteristics of students are clearly unveiled in the phenomenon of university network public opinions. In this case, students are not only easily dominated by frenzied behaviors, but also the general moral norms and rational restraint appear to be unbearable at this time. Also, participants go with the flow under the influence of group emotions without considering the harm their behaviors bring to the university and society. This makes it more difficult to predict, capture, analyze and guide the university network public opinions, and if universities are not careful in handling these network public opinions, they will be pushed into the limelight by students' verbal criticism. The crisis of this phenomenon will not only tarnish the image of universities and damage their credibility, but also ferment into a vicious social incident, which will affect the construction of a harmonious society. Therefore, from the perspective of reality, it is urgent and imperative to explore and innovate realistic and feasible effective strategies for guiding university network public opinions in the Internet era.

Throughout the current research on the guidance of network public opinion in universities, researchers usually focus on the conceptualized material object of "universities" and discuss the external characteristics and external environment such as the construction of public opinion teams in universities, the improvement of institutional mechanisms and the innovation of guidance methods. However, few scholars have studied the internal mechanism of the development of university network public opinion events from the perspective of the psychological factors of student groups, neglecting the study on the internal guidance of the major subject, "people", and the importance of studying student groups and their psychology. What are the psychological characteristics of students in university online public opinion? What are the psychological characteristics of university students in

network public opinion events and how do these psychological characteristics play a role? What is the significance of grasping the psychological characteristics of students for the innovation of network public opinion and the effectiveness improvement of guidance strategies? These are the questions that we need to explore urgently.

The student group can blindly follow the crowd, easily be suggestible and impulsive in network public opinion events in universities, which is highly consistent with the irrational group in Gustave Le Bon's book *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. The group of university students who have lost their conscious individuality and are dominated by the collective spirit can be regarded as "the crowd", the main participant, and plays a significant role in the evolution of university network public opinion. The essence is that student groups rely on external platforms to form and consolidate public opinions, and then exert pressure on institutions or organizations. [3] Based on Le Bon's "Theory of Crowds", this paper takes the recent heated topic of "Management Through Zhihu" as the starting point and selects a typical case for analysis, focusing on grasping the psychology of student groups in university network public opinion events, emphasizing the mutual interaction between student subjects and the universities, and bringing out the most important aspects of university network public opinion guidance more directly and effectively to each specific person in the university community, so as to explore more targeted and feasible strategies for university network public opinion guidance and management.

2. Analysis of a Typical Example of "Management Through Zhihu" -- Tianjin University's Lockdown Management

From the generation of topics to the final formation of network public opinions, it is a continuous movement process and has its own evolution cycle. The criteria adopted in this paper for classifying public opinions are: the focus of the public topic, the formation of public opinion field, the climax of public opinions, and the dissolution of public opinions. [2] As a widespread and long-lasting university network public opinion incident, "Management Through Zhihu" incident at Tianjin University has gone through each stage in the general development path of university network public opinions.

2.1 The Focus of the Public Topic

In July 2020, Tianjin University decided to implement a lockdown management system since the return of students to prevent and control the pandemic. However, during the actual lockdown process, only students were trapped, while Tianjin University staff and even some outsiders were allowed to enter and leave the campus freely. This phenomenon immediately caused discontent among Tianjin University students. The students complained to the university authorities, but the university did not respond to the students' demands and instead blocked some of the "dissenting voices". In order to defend their legitimate rights, students at Tianjin University began to gather and focus on the topic of "travel restrictions", their feelings and thoughts all turned in the same direction, their self-conscious individuality disappeared and a collective mentality of "we must defend our rights", as well as "the crowd", was formed [3].

2.2 The Formation of Public Opinion Field

Public opinion field refers to the spatial and temporal environment in which many people form a common opinion through a number of mutually stimulating factors, and is a collection of people who gather and form a transmission and reception under the role of "field" in the classification of public opinions. [4] Generally speaking, the academic circles believe that there are two public opinion fields in universities: one is the "official public opinion field", which is dominated by universities and propagates the policies and regulations of the Communist Party, the country and the universities; the other is the "private public opinion field", which is dominated by students and reflects their own interests and demands. The latter is also the main public opinion field mentioned in this paper.

The formation of public opinion field generally marks the beginning of public opinion spreading from individuals to groups. If the official public opinion field does not take the initiative to grasp the right to speak at this time, it will easily fall into the passive dilemma of weakened prestige and insufficient influence when dealing with public opinions. On July 18th, 2020, a post titled "How do you feel about Tianjin University still not allowing students to leave the campus?" instantly created an uproar on Zhihu, where the long-suppressed emotions of the student community found an outlet to vent their frustrations, and through the platform of Zhihu, the outrage began to spread among the community and the public opinion field was officially formed. The formation of the public opinion field led to a common direction of thought and feeling among the student body through suggestion and mutual contagion, immediately transforming the implied ideas into a tendency for action. [3] At the same time, due to the sheer number of students and the fact that the law does not punish numerous offenders, the students felt an inspiring force. Furthermore, due to the openness of the Zhihu platform with a large number of young users and rapid dissemination of information, many netizens participated in this "righteous" struggle for rights. The university's unreasonable management system and the miserable situation of its students, as well as the misery of similar students from other universities who have also been under "lockdown", have put Tianjin University at the top of the Zhihu hot list, with a total of over one million views.

2.3 The Climax of Public Opinions

The effect was immediate. Due to public pressure, the organization of state power began to pay attention to and intervene in it. On July 19th, 2020, Tianjin University issued an official notice in response, allowing students to apply for permission to leave the university through proper process, and Tianjin University's "Management Through Zhihu" was declared a success. On the same day, Nanjing University was also at the top of the Zhihu hot list for restricting students' freedom to travel. On the second day, Nanjing University issued an official notice allowing students to travel. With the first two success stories leading the way, students who were being under 'lockdown' by their universities seemed to see the dawn of hope, and after the first taste of blood, the group began to grow increasingly frantic. Affected by the impulsive, changeable and impatient character of the masses, as well as the disappearance of the conscious personality and the gaining of the unconscious personality, irrationality prevails in the majority of students. A series of "shows" and interrogations, such as "How to think about XX University not allowing students to leave the campus" and "When will China's formalism of lockdown management come to an end", began to be staged in major universities nationwide. Under the banner of "Fighting for Release of Lockdown, Protecting Our Rights and Interests", some students have even unscrupulously voiced their doubts and dissatisfaction with their daily education and teaching, daily management and campus environment, which has not only successfully provoked the rebellious mood of the students, but also spread the sentiment rapidly among more students. A large number of students chose to retweet, follow and give compliments to those comments and posts. However, their actions have already deviated from the original intention of defending their rights and have become a farce to vent their discontent, as they slandered and discredited the university in a self-directed and self-performed clamour.

2.4 The Dissolution of Public Opinions

In the end, the universities adjusted their pandemic control management systems, relaxed access restrictions, and joined forces with the Zhihu platform to block certain defamatory and rumorous responses to satisfy certain students' demands and restore the university's reputation. The homogeneous groups gathered by indignation and sympathy tend to be heterogeneous, and the group sentiment tends to calm down. The nationwide farce of "Management Through Zhihu" came to an end, exposing the problems in the guidance of university network public opinion.

3. Analysis of the Causes of "Management Through Zhihu" From the Perspective of Group Psychology

From the above cases, we can see that group psychology has an important influence on the fermentation and evolution of university network public opinions. From the perspective of student group psychology, we can summarize the reasons for the emergence of "Management Through Zhihu" as follows.

3.1 The Drive of Blindly Following the Crowd

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's "Spiral Of Silence" theory states that in most cases, people do not base their opinions on objective facts and self-judgment, but prefer to translate their attitudes into reactions to the ideas of others in order to prevent isolation[5]. When student groups use "Management Through Zhihu" to defend their rights, they are often under pressure from the opinions around them, and they are eager to gain the approval of others and the collective. In order not to be seen as "different", they choose to be swept along by the current of public opinions, causing their own individual behaviour to disappear and creating a herd mentality.

Le Pen also notes that "their feelings, thoughts and actions become quite different from those they would have had if they were alone. Some flashes of thought or feelings simply do not arise in individuals." [3] The herd mentality of the university student body further amplifies the limitations of individual thinking and irrationality in expression, so that when they use Zhihu to defend their rights, they will behave very differently from isolated individuals, simplifying complex issues, polarizing multi-layered conflicts, expressing one-sided and narrow views on the Internet, and not considering the negative impact their actions may have on the image of their university. Under the influence of the herd mentality, the students may become "infantilization" and "intellectual disability", and it is possible that the students may not be able to explain the purpose and the original intention of participating in the "Management Through Zhihu". Their independent will and ability to judge values are shattered in the process of becoming part of the group, and they only blindly follow the general trend or the so-called opinion leaders, and have completely lost the ability to judge the rights and wrongs of the event itself, which is inextricably linked to the lack of social experience, impulsiveness and calm thinking ability of the current university students.

3.2 The Shelter from Law Not Punishing Numerous Offenders

In the case of university network public opinions, because of the large number of people, the individuals are hidden in the group. The participants are no longer individuals who are different and independent from each other, but "anonymous" with the same label. Their actions are no longer carried out in their individual names, and the carrier of responsibility and consequences is transferred from the individual to the group, and all their misdeeds can be attributed to the group's blackmail.

In the network frenzy of "Management Through Zhihu", the large number of participants makes it impossible to accurately identify the individual "mumbling" that is presented to the general public as the "clamour of the crowd". This, combined with the anonymity of responses on Zhihu platform, makes it difficult for schools to hold them accountable and has to some extent reinforced the psychological perception of the students that they are participating anonymously, keeping the risk and cost of their misdeeds much lower. Thus, the sense of responsibility and ethics that once firmly restrained them seem extremely weak at this point. At the same time, "the rage of group feeling is reinforced by the complete disappearance of a sense of responsibility. They tend to gradually realize and assure that there will certainly be no punishment with the greater number of students participating in it" [3] This is why, at the climax of public opinions in the above case, a single post could set off a nationwide furore; and this is also why the negative public opinions brought about by "Management Through Zhihu" continue to fester. In the process of using Zhihu to defend their rights, the student community has become "de-individualized" and "de-responsible" due to the large number of people, diluting individual self-restraint, neglecting value thinking and independent judgement, and putting

on the mask of the Internet to disguise themselves as moral critics. They make unrestrained and excessive comments, using the Internet to attack all aspects of their university, thus forcing the university to compromise.

3.3 Guidance by Opinion Leaders

Le Pen points out that "there is another mysterious and irresistible force in leaders and their ideas: fame. Fame is the main cause of all power, and its dominance paralyzes people's ability to judge." [3] The network public opinion events in higher education usually have corresponding opinion leaders, and these opinion leaders have an important role in guiding and controlling the development of public opinions. In the process of using Zhihu to defend their rights, student groups are easily misled by the inflammatory posts compiled by some opinion leaders, creating a collective delusion, causing student groups to lose their independent thinking, distorting the truth, creating rumours and slanders in blindly following the crowd, and tarnishing the reputation of universities in the midst of the clamour. Out of their blind admiration and obedience to the leaders, the student body becomes impatient and impulsive, psychologically distorted and irrational, and everything they do is considered as a legalized action to fight for their legitimate rights and interests.

3.4 Radiation of Emotional Contagion

The contagion theory of collective behaviour suggests that there is both emotional and behavioral contagion in collective behaviour, where emotional contagion is characterized by mutual contagion and circular reactions. As Kurt W. Back states in *Social Psychology*, "Emotional contagion is a process whereby the emotions of others elicit the same emotions in oneself, which in turn intensify the emotions of others." [6] The similarity in age, the consistency in cultural and social background, the convergence of interests and views, the similarity in living space and the mutual emotional dependence of the students make it extremely easy to gain the unanimous agreement of the group when public opinion events occur, as there is little resistance to the spread of public opinion and it is fast [7].

University students tend to be impulsive, irrational and suggestible in the midst of powerful public opinion storms, which may lead to the possibility that the "Management Through Zhihu" is not just about the incident itself, but may evolve into a group venting of dissatisfaction with the university. When they use Zhihu as a breakthrough to vent their emotions, students in the same or similar situation will immediately feel the same way and take spontaneous action to form a unified organization, and through the publication of irrational and inflammatory immature comments, gather public opinions to build up momentum and use external public opinion to put pressure on university administrators and gain the right to communicate and negotiate with them. Under the influence of this public opinion environment, some "outsiders" on Zhihu will also be infected by this emotion, which in turn will inspire them to sympathize with the students and be angry with the unreasonable management system of the university, further enhancing the public pressure brought about by "Management Through Zhihu".

4. Exploring the Guidance Strategies of University Network Public Opinions From the Perspective of Group Psychology

Through the analysis of the causes of "Management Through Zhihu", we can conclude that universities are slightly passive in the process of handling network public opinions and lack effective guidance and response mechanism. This is not only detrimental to the establishment of a good image of universities themselves, but also can seriously develop into vicious social incidents and affect the harmony and stability of society. Therefore, in the face of all kinds of negative network public opinion, instead of strictly controlling or stopping the damage afterwards, it is necessary to analyze the reasons for the phenomenon of "Management Through Zhihu" from the perspective of group psychology. It is also important to prevent problems before they arise, to take advantage of the situation, to change

according to the time, and to explore more effective strategies for guiding university network public opinions, which is the fundamental solution to build a harmonious university network public opinion ecology.

4.1 Mastering the Characteristics of Group Psychological Communication and Critically Guiding Herd Behaviour

The scientific guidance of university network public opinions should focus on the characteristics of group psychological communication and be based on the full study of the dominant, influential and controlling role of group psychology on group behaviour in public opinions. [8] Through analysis of group behaviour, group psychological characteristics can be used to identify the crux of the outbreak of public opinion crises in university network public opinions and to make predictions on the actions to be taken by the group, so as to more effectively guide the direction, grasp the initiative, carry out proper guidance and intervention work on group psychology and prevent the expansion of public opinions.

At the same time, universities should focus on herd mentality. Herd mentality is not only an important psychological characteristic of groups, but also one of the most important triggers for the occurrence of various types of university network public opinion events. Le Pen states, "From the point of view of feelings and the actions they provoke, the crowd can behave better or worse than individuals, depending on the circumstances." [3] Rather than being uniformly associated with bad and criminal groups, they may also move towards the path of justice and nobility. Therefore, the nature of herd mentality should be accurately judged in the process of guiding university network public opinions. When the mainstream concept of the student group is correct and rational, and matches with the proposition of the university, we should make good use of the herd mentality to help certain individual "rebellious" students to correct their concept and regulate their behaviour, so that they can turn to the correct group. When the group mentality is found to be irrational and disobedient to the university's rules, the herd mentality should be controlled as much as possible to reduce the psychological pressure on the student body by weakening the "spiral of silence", thus preventing students from losing their minds and acting in a way that would damage the university's reputation.

4.2 Strengthening the Construction of Network Public Opinion Teams and Giving Full Play to the Role of Public Opinion Leaders

On the one hand, universities should set up a professional network opinion management team with firm and right political stance, familiar with the Internet discourse, strong public relations ability and crisis awareness as well as high technical level. In this way, they can not only make prompt judgment and disposal of network crisis after it breaks out, but also take the initiative to grasp the right to speak and control the direction of public opinion, so as to avoid distorted reports caused by malicious speculation of students and the community. We should also guide students in universities to think deeply and express rationally about public opinions, so as to reduce the number of group misconducts caused by group impulsiveness. At the same time, it is also necessary to normalize the work of guiding network public opinions, to be prepared for danger in times of peace, to establish a sound early warning mechanism, to open up channels for feedback from students and to expand the influence of the official public opinion field.

On the other hand, according to the theory of "the two-step flow of communication model" (mass media → opinion leaders → the public), information does not flow directly to the general public, but is selected and personally interpreted by opinion leaders before being passed on to the general public, forming different value judgments. [9] How to find and effectively communicate with the "opinion leaders" in universities is the key to enhancing the effectiveness of university network opinion guidance. Public opinion leaders in universities are the bridge for communication between general students and universities. Not only can they thoroughly explain and disseminate the policies and regulations of the university to students in detail, but they can also give timely and effective feedback to the university on students' demands, helping students to solve their problems to the greatest extent.

4.3 Innovating Network Public Opinion Guidance Mode and Opening Up Communication Channels in Universities

Universities must innovate the mode of network public opinion guidance, use modern technology to build a dynamic monitoring system for network public opinion, and big data to integrate information on the whole network, so as to analyze the overall situation of students' thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and guide and prevent their potential network group events. At the same time, university administrators should build a platform for communication with students on their rights and interests, adopt a way of guiding public opinion that is suitable to be unblocked rather than blocked, open up university communication channels and build a long-term guidance mechanism for feedback. Through this platform, students' demands and opinions can be heard and their legitimate rights and interests can be protected. Moreover, the smooth flow of information can enable students to understand the whole picture of the development more accurately and make judgments according to the actual situation, so as to reduce the irrational behaviour of the group caused by the misinformation or deliberate concealment of information in universities. At the same time, this is also conducive to universities being able to judge students' attitudes at the very beginning of the emergence of network public opinions, so as to correctly guide and regulate them in a targeted manner and avoid malicious slander of universities' image by rumours, misunderstandings and other negative information.

4.4 Emphasizing the Education of Network Public Opinion Subjects and Enhancing Students' Digital Literacy

First of all, universities should strengthen the leading role of socialist core values on the university network public opinions. In the process of ideological and political education, universities should strengthen the leading role of mainstream values, occupy the pure ground of university network public opinion with advanced mainstream culture, and resist the poisoning of the young generation by all kinds of wrong thinking. Universities should also enhance the students' collective consciousness, students' awareness of loving and honoring their university, as well as vigorously cultivate the network moral concept of students who can think independently, be rational and responsible, know the etiquette and understand the law. In this way, the positive energy can fill the whole university network. Secondly, universities should incorporate media literacy and political education into the regular education system, integrate digital literacy into daily teaching, strengthen the construction of "Network Ideology and Politics" and "Ideological and Political Network", and help university students form rational thinking and independent thinking through various ways such as seminars, theme-based lectures and offline practical activities. In addition, universities should help students develop the ability to think rationally and make independent judgments, enhance their sense of responsibility and ethics on the Internet, and make them consciously abide by the rules and order of the Internet. At the same time, it is also necessary to strengthen the education of students on the legal system of the Internet, cultivate their awareness of the Internet law, make them understand that the Internet is not an outlaw place, and that they should be careful in what they say and do on the Internet, keep a clear head and rational thinking at all times, not to follow the trend and become a member of the "the crowd", so as to make them become responsible subjects on the Internet.

5. Conclusion

In the digital age, the speed, convenience and freedom of the Internet have given everyone the right to express their opinions in cyberspace. As a result, many wrong ideas are hidden in the fragmented and distorted public opinion information under the cloak of fancy. They are driven by the herd mentality to become a member of the "the crowd", and their reckless statements and anger will drive public opinions to extremes, posing a serious threat to the reputation of universities and social stability. As the main front for moral education and an important subject of network public opinion guidance, universities must pay attention to the new challenges brought by the digital era, prescribe the right remedy, innovate traditional network public opinion guidance methods, build a proper

communication platform with students' rights and interests, accurately control students' collective psychology in network public opinion events, and effectively carry out and strengthen ideological and political education. In addition, the government should also enhance the guidance of public opinions, prevent students from becoming one of "the crowd", eliminate the negative elements that contribute to the "the crowd", and create a clear and breezy Internet environment for the healthy growth of the young generation.

References

- [1] Yang P Analysis and Solutions to the Negative Public Opinions on Social Networks in Universities Taking "Management Through Zhihu" as an example [J]. *Southeast Communication*, 2021(05):105-107.
- [2] Yang, J. The Evolution and Intervention Mechanism of Online Public Opinions in Universities [J]. *The Forum of Leadership Science*, 2012(04):5-8.
- [3] Gustave Le Bon. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* [M]. Translated by Feng, K.L. Guangxi Normal University Press, Guilin, 2007.9.
- [4] Xing, Y.H. Tension and Fusion of Two Public Opinion Fields [J]. *Chinese Journalist*, 2012(12):101-102.
- [5] Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. *The Spiral Of Silence*[M]. Translated by Dong, L. Peking University Press, Beijing, 2013.
- [6] Li, C.Z., Zhou, J. & Zheng, S.F. Some Reflections on Online Public Opinions in Higher Education and Its Research and Judgment [J]. *Jiangsu Higher Education*, 2010, No. 153(05):106-108.
- [7] Kurt W. Back. *Social Psychology* [M]. Nankai University Press, Tianjin, 1986.
- [8] Jia, Y. & Shi, Z. Strategies of Colleges and Universities to Deal with Internet Public Opinion on Campus Emergencies [J]. *China-Arab States Science and Technology Forum*, 2021, No.30(08):145-147.
- [9] Lu, N. Strategies in Guiding university Network Public Opinion from the Group Psychology Perspective of Le Bon's "The Crowd" [J]. *Journal of Yangzhou University (Higher Education Study Edition)*, 2016, 20(05):58- 61.