

The Influence of Overseas Internet Use Behavior on College Students' Political Attitudes

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Abstract

With the development of new media technology, college students have become the main users of the Internet. At the same time, their political thoughts and behaviors are increasingly affected by the Internet and new media. Different ideological backgrounds, mixed information and multiple values will inevitably affect college students' ideas, values, moral concepts and political attitudes. By using the methods of questionnaire and in-depth interview, this paper analyzes the impact of overseas network behavior on college students' political attitude.

Keywords

Overseas Internet Use Behavior; Political Attitudes; Online Media; Network Behavior.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of Internet technology, new media has exerted a great influence on politics, such as social movements, political elections, democratic decision-making and interest expression (Campbell & Kwak, 2010; Vitak, et al., 2011). Young people, the main population of Internet use, are increasingly affected by the Internet and new media on their political ideas and behaviors. The active presence of the young generation can be found in the Arab Spring, youth social unrest in Europe, the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States, the anti-service trade movement of Taiwan students, the Occupy Central demonstration and anti-reform riot of Hong Kong students, etc. The virtual space and time constructed by the Internet brings massive information and multi-cultures, which are dispelling traditional core values and dominant ideologies. "It almost penetrates the mechanism of traditional media's delivery of mainstream political culture and core values, and directly affects the political judgment and choice of contemporary youth" (Lu, 2015).

As a group of young people with higher education level, college students' network behavior is unique. Even with strict network regulations, such as the great firewall, the keyword filtering, and the restriction of visiting foreign media websites, some people still use virtual private network to visit overseas Internet taking advantage of their information technology and foreign language ability. In the social tide of globalization and information, the influence of foreign information and thoughts on college students has been inevitable. Then, what kind of influence has the overseas network behavior had on the political concept of college students, whether has it dissolved their political identity, and what new challenges has it brought to the current ideological work? At present, there are many studies on the Internet behavior of college students in China, but there is a lack of first-hand data collection and empirical research on the overseas Internet use behavior of college students. Therefore, this paper mainly conducts an empirical investigation on the time, frequency, demand and evaluation of overseas Internet use by college students, clarifies the characteristics of college students' overseas Internet behavior, and tests the influence of overseas Internet behavior on their political attitude. The significance of this study is mainly reflected in two aspects. Theoretically, this research helps to deepen the

research on the mechanism of the formation of young people's political attitude and the effect of new media. Practically, it is helpful to the ideological construction of colleges and universities and is related to the stability and development of the country, since youth is the key stage of political socialization, which may affect the future political cognition, political judgment and the stability of the political system.

2. Literature Review

Political attitude refers to a country's social members' emotion, cognition and behavioral tendency towards its political system and its political roles, institutions and processes (Chen, 2018). Personal experience, educational content and external social environment are important factors affecting the formation mechanism of individual political attitude. The decentralization of the Internet, the diversification of information sources and its penetration into daily life have changed the process of political information communication and individual participation in online activities, which in turn have promoted the change of political culture. Meyrowitz(1985)found that electronic media began to subvert traditional collective identities, creating symbolic spaces in which citizens could construct new political identities. SahidUllah's (2013) study pointed out that the Internet provided an alternative platform for information exchange, which not only helped young people express their views in the virtual world, but also affected their understanding of political activities and decision-making. A survey done by Calenda and Meije (2009) on young people in Italy, Spain and the Netherlands showed that the emergence of new media significantly increased their political participation. Wang (2007) found that the Internet had a positive impact on users' political attitudes, i.e., the more frequently they used the Internet, the higher their political trust and political efficacy would be. Farrell's (2012) study suggested that the Internet polarized users in terms of ideology, values and attitudes.

While China has made great achievements in the economic field, great changes have taken place in the social field. An important manifestation is the divergence of interests and ideological diversification of social members. The Internet interweaves with various factors such as practical problems and exerts a profound influence on users' political attitudes, political identification and political participation. Zhang and Liu (2014) found that the audience's exposure to online alternative media and participation in online public affairs had a negative impact on their political trust level. Lu et al. (2015) found through an empirical study that the increase in the frequency of Internet use would lead to a decrease in young people's trust in the local government, officials and decision-making, resulting in a decrease in their evaluation of the current system and sense of social justice. Chen and Bei's (2010) research found that the political value orientation of college students with heavy Internet use was more deviated from the mainstream. Zhao (2014) found that compared with other students, students participating in social public affairs on Weibo had stronger willingness to participate in politics and attached importance to their own political rights, but there was no significant difference in their recognition of mainstream political attitudes.

The aforementioned studies on the relationship between college students' political attitudes, political socialization process and Internet application mainly focuses on domestic Internet behavior, while there is no research on overseas Internet behavior. As a group of young people with higher education level, college students frequently use the overseas network relying on their advantages of information technology and foreign language ability. In this case, investigating the domestic network behavior solely cannot fully grasp the characteristics of college students' network behavior and its impact. Based on the above literature, two research questions were posed:

RQ1: What is the relationship between college students' overseas Internet use behavior and their political attitudes?

RQ2: Is there a significant difference in political attitudes between college students with and without overseas online behaviors?

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection and Sampling

In this paper, questionnaire survey and in-depth interview were used to analyze the influence of overseas Internet behavior on college students' political attitudes. The participants were college students in Shanghai. Through snowball sampling, 252 effective questionnaires were received from Fudan University, Tongji University, Shanghai International Studies University, East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, East China University of Political Science and Law, Donghua University, Shanghai Institute of Visual Art, Shanghai Business School, etc. Statistics showed that the ratio of male to female is about 2:3. the proportion of liberal arts, science and technology, arts, business and medicine is 40%, 27%, 11%, 19% and 5% respectively. The proportion of Party members is 4%. The proportion of self-reported subjective class identification from upper class, upper middle class, middle class to lower middle class and lower class is 4%, 17%, 56%, 21% and 3% successively. The proportion of middle and lower middle accounted for nearly 80% of the proportion.

3.2. Questionnaire Design and Variable Measurement

Dependent variables

This study measured college students' political attitudes from the dimensions of political system, economic system, fairness and justice, nationalism, government satisfaction, and political education. Each dimension was expressed with three to four declarative sentences. Likert scale was used to assign 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 to strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. The larger the score, the more likely the political attitude is to be mainstream; the smaller the score, the more radical the political attitude is.

Independent variables

Independent variables included college students' overseas network use behavior and control variables. College students' overseas network use behavior mainly referred to the frequency of their overseas Internet behaviors, usage history, average daily usage time, types of frequently-visited websites, contents and evaluation. In terms of influencing factors of college students' political attitude, gender, major and political status are the variables that are often considered and measured. We believe that compared with objective class status, the subjective class identity of individuals' perception of their position in the social class structure is more directly related to social and political attitudes. Therefore, this study mainly examined the influence of variables such as gender, major, political status and subjective class identity.

4. Conclusion

4.1. The Basic Situation of College Students' Overseas Internet Use Behavior

In the sample of the survey, college students with overseas online behavior accounted for nearly 50%, which indicated that overseas online behavior is a relatively common phenomenon among college students. Nearly 75% have used foreign networks for one to three years, 16% for three to five years, and 10% for more than five years. In terms of the frequency of use, 28% used it almost every day, 18% used it frequently (four to five days a week), 30% used it sometimes (two to three days a week) and 24% used it occasionally (one to two days a week).

Nearly 70% of college students spent an average of one hour a day, 16% of them spent one to two hours, 16% spent more than two hours, and a very few of them spent more than four hours on overseas Internet.

In terms of the types of networks frequently visited by respondents, social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Ins, and YouTube) and news media (e.g., BBC, Reuters, and CNN) were mostly visited. College students' overseas online activities included browsing news information (3.8), obtaining learning materials (3.8), following celebrities (3.6), interacting with friends (3.3), and expressing opinions on current affairs (2.8). Information needs and learning needs were the strongest motivations, followed by entertainment and social needs. College students' political participation needs to express views on current events were not strong. Half of the respondents believed that foreign media had more objective and diversified information than China media, that they could express their opinions more freely on the Internet in foreign countries, and they were not satisfied with the practice of deleting posts in China.

4.2. The Influence of College Students' Overseas Internet Use Behavior on Their Political Attitudes

In terms of political attitude, college students who used the overseas network had a moderate political attitude on the whole (MD ranged from 3 to 3.5), indicating that they were in a relatively neutral state and showed a more rational attitude with no extreme political tendency. Results also showed that college students who had overseas online behaviors had slightly lower scores in the recognition of political system, fairness and justice, government satisfaction, political education and economic system, and had lower recognition of mainstream political values, compared with college students who did not have overseas online behaviors.

Overall, there was no significant correlation between the time, frequency, social needs, learning needs, news and information needs of using overseas network and political attitudes. The longer the history of using foreign networks, the lower the degree of identification with political system ($\beta = -.246, p < .05$). The stronger the entertainment demand of college students, the stronger the nationalist sentiment ($\beta = -.208, p < .05$). The stronger the political participation consciousness of college students, the more rational the nationalist sentiment ($\beta = -.190, p < .05$).

Table 1. Multiple regression analysis

	Political System	Fairness & Justice	Economic System	Satisfaction with Government	Nationalism	Political Education
Use Overseas Internet or Not (No=0)	-.142*	-.063	-.018	-.163*	.109	-.191**
Gender (Female=0)	.014	-.024	.110	.025	.072	.071
Political Status (Not a Communist Party Member =0)	.047	.017	-.027	-.001	.054	.062
Subjective Class Identity	-.127	-.013	.117	-.053	-.032	-.005
Major (Compared With Liberal Arts)	.038	-.020	-.020	.029	-.271***	.143*
Science & Engineering	.005	.014	.037	.154*	-.233**	.172*
Arts Business	-.068	-.095	-.083	-.109	-.240**	.071
Medical	.000	-.019	-.001	.008	-.141*	-.007

RQ2 asks about whether there is a significant difference in political attitudes between college students who use overseas Internet and those who don't. Multiple regression analysis was

conducted, and the results showed that there were significant differences in political system, government satisfaction and political education among college students who used and did not apply overseas Internet. Compared with those who did not use the overseas Internet, the students who used the overseas Internet were less likely to identify with the political system, less likely to be satisfied with the government and less likely to agree with the necessity of political education. In addition, different gender, political status and subjective class identity did not show significant differences in political attitudes, only the major difference was significant. In terms of satisfaction with the government, arts majors were more satisfied, and in terms of the necessity of political education, science and engineering majors were more likely to agree with it. Especially in the aspect of nationalism, there was no significant difference in whether to use overseas network, but there was a significant difference in majors. Compared with liberal arts majors, students majoring in science and engineering, business, art and medical science had more radical nationalist sentiment (see [Table 1](#)).

5. Conclusion

Due to their advantages in information technology and foreign language ability, college students mostly study and live in a relatively open and interactive network communication environment, and more contact and use of overseas network media has become a reality that cannot be ignored. Different ideological background, mixed information, and multiple values inevitably have an impact on college students' ideas, values, moral concepts and political attitudes. In particular, some bad information (such as pornography, violence, terror and reactionary) from the so-called free network abroad can easily have a negative impact on college students who are still in the immature stage of development. As Peng (2014) pointed out, "When the dominant political values are widely questioned and challenged, social value conflicts will often occur. The conflict of values will not only make the policy, the ruling party and the government in trouble, but also erode the legitimacy foundation of the political system and the country." As an important force to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, contemporary college students not only shoulder the important mission of promoting the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics, but also may become a potential lever to influence social stability and a key minority to influence the ruling foundation of the Party. The cultivation and construction of their ideology is of great importance to the future development of the country and is related to the stability and development of the country. It is out of such doubts and concerns that a comprehensive investigation of college students' Internet use behavior and its impact becomes an urgent task. This paper made an empirical survey of college students' overseas online behavior, summarized the characteristics of college students' overseas online behavior, and tested the relationship between college students' overseas online behavior and political attitudes. Based on the research results, the following points were discussed:

First, the impact of college students' visiting overseas network is mainly reflected in the impact brought by massive information. In the in-depth interview, many interviewees said that the information of overseas network was richer, and more diversified views and opinions could be seen. Interviewees also mentioned that they would browse overseas news websites, especially for the views that they were interested in, so that the information they got would be more comprehensive and the content would be better. However, the majority of interviewees said that they would not be affected by browsing overseas news websites, but make their own judgment by combining the information obtained in China. The results of data analysis also showed that college students had a strong demand for news information when using overseas networks, but the motivation of information demand did not have a significant impact on college students' political attitudes. This is in stark contrast to domestic studies, which showed that the use of online media news (in China) had a negative impact on college students' political

ideas (Wang, 2009) and on college students' political identity (Lu, 2015). Therefore, although college students have a high evaluation of overseas online news media, we should not worry about the influence of overseas news and information on college students' mainstream political ideas. Diversified information needs may be a basic demand of young people in the era of globalization.

Second, when college students use overseas Internet, they will inevitably be influenced by multiculturalism. Did multiculturalism dissolve their identification with mainstream political ideas? This study suggests that many college students are exposed to different cultures for the motivation of entertainment, and carry out cross-cultural exchanges and communication. Their most common activities are to look at the daily life of foreigners, interesting short videos, gossip about entertainment stars, and learn about the fashion trends of young people abroad. Data analysis showed that entertainment motivation was only significantly related to nationalism in all dimensions of political attitudes. Multicultural communication does not dissolve college students' identification with traditional culture. On the contrary, the stronger the motivation of entertainment demand, the higher the degree of identification with traditional Chinese culture. In the process of communicating with various cultures, college students show more respect for differences and tolerance to different cultures. College students do not show favoritism to either traditional Chinese culture or Western culture. For example, interviewees said:

"I met interesting foreign friends because of playing games, and communicated with them often. If I hadn't been surfing the wall, I certainly wouldn't have had this experience. This kind of cultural exchange is very attractive to me."

"The changes in the fashion industry can also reflect the fusion and collision of some cultures. If there is any change in my thoughts by using overseas Internet, it may be that I am more tolerant of cultural differences."

"After contact with overseas network, I pay more attention to the multiple aspects of problems, view events more dialectically, and gradually develop an inclusive attitude towards cultures."

However, the historical duration of using overseas Internet had a significant impact on the identification of traditional culture, which was negatively correlated with the expression "I am deeply proud of Chinese traditional culture". That is to say, the longer the history of using overseas Internet, the lower the identification of traditional culture. This result also suggests that the multicultural impact on college students may be more of a subtle process. The key point of improving the cultural identity and enhancing cultural confidence is not to isolate college students from cultural communication with the outside world, but to combine the traditional culture and contemporary culture, so as to arouse the college students' love for traditional culture.

Third, there were significant differences in political system, political education, government satisfaction and nationalism between college students who used overseas network and those who did not. Except in the aspect of nationalism, college students who used the overseas Internet were more rational. College students who used the overseas Internet had lower approval than those who did not use the overseas Internet in the identification of the political system, government satisfaction and the necessity of political education. Although the results of data analysis showed that the correlation was not very strong, it might be a developing trend and should be taken seriously. Lippmann (2006) put forward the concept of mimicry environment in his famous book *Public Opinion*. The mimicry environment constructed by media can guide people's cognition. When people are in the midst of media information infiltration, their view of the real world, especially the reality that is hard to experience personally, depends more on the image constructed by the media. For the virtual space and time constructed by the Internet, "at the level of social construction of cognition, the Internet has changed the way, content and scope of information contact, and this change will inevitably

affect individuals' views and attitudes towards the world around them" (Zhang, 2018). College students are in the tide of information globalization, which is inevitable. Another result from this study showed that the longer the history of using foreign networks, the lower the level of political system identification. According to the Cultivation Theory, the media will construct people's perception of the external world, and those who are heavy media users will think that our society is as portrayed in the media, and it is a subtle influence. The formation of ideas, values, moral concepts and political attitudes is not achieved in a single day. Overseas online behavior is more of the unconscious influence brought by long-term immersion. Therefore, in terms of the guidance and governance measures of college students' network behavior, a long-term strategy of "the spring breeze melts the rain, and moistens things silently" should be formulated. It should be drained rather than blocked.

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