

# Formation Mechanism and Governance Path of “Light Social Interaction” among College Students from the Perspective of Social Exclusion

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## Abstract

The phenomenon of “light social interaction” among college students, characterized by low investment and shallow interaction, is replacing traditional deep connections. This study uses a three-dimensional framework based on social exclusion theory—institutional, technological, and relational exclusion—to analyze the mechanisms behind this trend and explore solutions. Findings show that light interaction is an adaptive response to exclusion: institutional pressures foster utilitarianism, technology weakens real-world social skills, and relational gaps in both online and offline networks reinforce this behavior. While it may temporarily ease exclusion, it risks a cycle leading to deeper exclusion. Addressing this issue requires multi-stakeholder collaboration: reforming education to reduce institutional exclusion, regulating technology to minimize alienation, and enhancing students’ real-world interaction through training and peer support. This study offers a theoretical lens for understanding youth sociocultural shifts in the digital age and provides practical strategies for building a healthier social environment.

## Keywords

College Students  
Social Exclusion  
Light Social Interaction  
Digital Technology  
Educational Involution

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## 1. Introduction

Affected by various factors, especially advances in digital technology, today’s youth are experiencing significant changes in their social interaction patterns. “Light social interaction” has drawn increasing attention<sup>[1]</sup>. A joint survey by the Social Survey Center of China Youth Daily found that 77.4% of young respondents agree that this

superficial, emotionally detached form of interaction is becoming dominant<sup>[2]</sup>. This trend is especially evident among college students<sup>[3]</sup>. It is not merely a shift in preference but a response to structural pressures, including institutional exclusion in education, digital alienation, and social exclusion in both online and offline environments.

Existing research mainly examines college students' "light social interaction" from social demand. However, few studies explore its mechanisms and governance strategies from social exclusion. Drawing on social exclusion theory, this paper proposes a three-dimensional framework—institutional, technological, and relational exclusion—to explain how these exclusion mechanisms influence students' social behaviors. It also investigates strategies to dismantle such structures and foster a healthier social environment.

## 2. Phenomenon Review: Light Social Interaction and Social Exclusion Theory

Light social interaction is a new way for youth to connect, offering relaxed experiences, simple relationships, and pure intentions<sup>[4]</sup>. Currently, scholars are focusing on the causes of changing youth interaction patterns and their behavioral effects. Sun S et al.<sup>[4]</sup> suggest that light social interaction shows how Generation Z adapts to the digital era, influenced by changes in social structures and individual needs. Xiang J<sup>[5]</sup> argues that changes in youth social behavior result from declining social competence and an increasing preference for leisure-based interactions, which may lead to a shallow relationship society characterized by weak social ties<sup>[6]</sup>.

The theory of social exclusion originated from poverty research in the 1980s and later extended into the social domain, connecting it to social dilemmas. This offers a framework for understanding alienation in social interactions. Xu L et al.<sup>[7]</sup> found that social exclusion reduces social self-efficacy and increases social anxiety, showing its impact on behavior through psychological factors. Jia Y et al.<sup>[8]</sup> showed that social exclusion worsens social anxiety, with interpersonal trust acting as a moderating factor—those with low trust are more likely to fear negative judgment.

## 3. Formation Mechanism: The Superposition Effect of Multiple Exclusions and the Adaptive Choice of Light Social Interaction

### 3.1. Multiple Exclusions: The Structural Pressure Field of College Students' Social Interaction

#### 3.1.1. Institutional Exclusion: Resource Squeeze Under Educational Involution

The evaluation system in colleges and universities perpetuates social exclusion. Students often prioritize beneficial relationships and avoid those seen as non-utilitarian, deepening this divide. Unequal resource distribution worsens the issue, as high-quality academic and social resources concentrate among top students. Those in weaker positions may engage in low-pressure interactions to relieve stress. For example, average students may avoid comparing themselves with top performers to reduce anxiety, but this also limits non-utilitarian social connections.

#### 3.1.2. Technological Exclusion: Implicit Control of Algorithms and Platforms

Digital technology reinforces social circles through information cocoons, leading to superficial interactions. It limits exposure to diverse perspectives and discourages deep connections. Virtual communication often relies on emojis or short texts, which can misrepresent emotions. Social media feeds users homogeneous content based on their profiles, trapping college students in similar interest groups and limiting cross-circle interactions. Features like likes and comments offer instant rewards, reinforcing shallow engagement. Over time, students may mistake "likes for companionship," weakening their ability to engage in meaningful emotional exchanges.

#### 3.1.3. Relational Exclusion: Identity Marginalization in Virtual and Real Networks

Relational exclusion leads college students to prefer superficial social interactions. Because of the gap between their online and real selves, they fear rejection and hide true emotions. Exclusive language and social norms create barriers, pushing outsiders to avoid deep connections. Emotional detachment and the rise of utilitarian relationships encourage pseudo-intimacy,

which masks real emotional needs. For example, unspoken silence among roommates may seem peaceful but avoids emotional closeness, reducing anxiety but limiting meaningful bonds.

### **3.2. Survival Strategy: Adaptive Choice of Light Social Interaction**

The above exclusions together create strong social pressure that leads to light social interaction through “exclusion perception–psychological defense–behavioral adjustment.” Essentially, this is a passive response to exclusion pressure, which in turn worsens social exclusion.

Three types of exclusions create systematic pressure. Institutional exclusion leads students to see relationships as resource exchanges, shaping their choice of social partners. Combined with algorithm-driven homogeneity, it solidifies social circles and reinforces technological exclusion. Technological exclusion weakens real-world emotional bonds, increasing identity fragmentation and fear of emotional failure. It also raises sensitivity to resource competition in institutions. These experiences trigger psychological defenses, making individuals favor instant feedback and avoid deeper interactions.

Psychological defense leads to superficial social interactions, where college students exchange resources based on needs to reduce costs and maintain personal boundaries. They rely on symbolic expressions to manage low expectations and avoid risks, and use aloofness to escape social pressure. As light interactions become common, deep social skills atrophy, limiting meaningful connections and widening social gaps. This also heightens sensitivity to exclusion, reinforcing psychological defenses. Ultimately, stronger defenses increase reliance on light interaction, creating a cycle of “exclusion–light interaction–deeper exclusion.”

## **4. Governance Path: Multi-Subject Collaboration to Break the Exclusion Cycle**

### **4.1. Institutional Optimization: Shifting Educational Assessment and Distribution of Social Resources**

Colleges and universities should reform their evaluation

systems and create social spaces to reduce the negative effects of resource competition on relationships and encourage meaningful interactions. First, institutions should shift evaluation from focusing solely on GPA to including non-utilitarian indicators. Second, they should build environments that promote emotional connections. For example, regular activities in interest-based clubs and public welfare projects can move beyond task-driven interactions, restoring the warmth of face-to-face communication and helping students build genuine relationships based on shared interests.

### **4.2. Technological Regulation: Regulating Algorithmic Alienation and Improving Network Supervision Mechanisms**

Social platforms should tackle technological exclusion among college students and create a healthier digital environment. First, improve algorithms by reducing reliance on similar content and distributing resources more evenly to ensure fair participation and prevent monopolization, especially for users with fewer connections. Second, increase transparency by clearly explaining how content and traffic are prioritized, helping students recognize algorithmic influence, identify hidden biases, and become more aware. Third, partner with universities to promote media literacy by offering practical courses that teach students to distinguish symbolic interaction from real emotional connection, encouraging mindful use of digital tools and greater control over technology.

### **4.3. Subject Empowerment: Scenario-Based Social Training and Peer Support Network Building**

Colleges and universities, along with students themselves, can enhance student development through scenario-based training and peer support. Institutions can offer practical courses like mock interviews and team projects, helping students build listening, communication, and conflict resolution skills. They can also establish peer networks through club activities and online support platforms, encouraging experience sharing, expanding social connections, and improving interpersonal abilities. On a personal level, students should balance light social interaction and in-depth communication. Participating

in small group discussions and regular meetups can strengthen deep connections and improve real-world social resilience.

## 5. Conclusion

Light social interaction among college students is not only a result of the digital age and evolving education models but also a reaction to structural pressures. This trend stems from overlapping forms of exclusion: academic competition and unequal resource access push students toward practical interactions; information

bubbles and algorithms weaken real-world social skills; and weak emotional bonds and identity confusion reduce meaningful connections. Together, these factors create a cycle of social exclusion. While light interaction may ease stress temporarily, it can deepen isolation, trapping students in a pattern of “exclusion–light interaction–deeper exclusion.” Breaking this cycle requires collective action. Schools should foster inclusive environments and fair resource distribution; tech platforms must improve algorithm transparency; and students need social skills training and peer support. Only through joint efforts can this cycle be disrupted.

### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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