

Emerging Social Relations among Contemporary University Students: A Study of Patterns, Features, and Causality

Shuang Wang, Qi Fang, Jingyi Zhou

School of Nursing, Wenzhou Medical University, Wenzhou 325035, Zhejiang, China

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Abstract

Amidst rapid digital technological advancement, contemporary university students exhibit three emerging social patterns: online community-building, social stratification, and more clearly defined personal boundaries. These patterns are characterized by instrumental motivations, low-intensity interactions, and polarized breadth of social networks. While catering to individualized needs and reducing social costs, these emerging modalities entail adverse effects such as cognitive narrowing, emotional detachment, and communicative competence decline. Focusing on university students, this study investigates these emerging social patterns, analyzes their features, and uncovers underlying causality, aiming to inform interventions for fostering healthy social engagement.

Keywords

University students' social interaction; Social circles; Instrumental ties; Boundary awareness; Mediatization; Mental health

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1. Introduction

In recent years, propelled by new media technologies, college students worldwide have exhibited three defining features in social relations: the instrumental turn in social motivations, the lightweight nature of social intensity, and the polarization of social breadth. While these emerging patterns accommodate individualized needs and reduce social costs, they concurrently engender adverse outcomes such as cognitive narrowing, emotional detachment, and declining communicative competence. Focusing on university students, this study investigates these emerging social patterns, elucidates their features, and excavates

underlying causality, aiming to provide evidential grounds for promoting healthy social engagement.

2. Patterns

The social patterns of contemporary college students are primarily characterized by online community-building, social stratification, and more clearly defined personal boundaries.

2.1. Online community-building

Online community-building constitutes a distinct social pattern among college students, characterized by strong internal identification and well-defined external boundaries rooted in shared interests, values, or identities. Such communities primarily manifest as three ideal types: interest-based circles, value-based circles, and identity-based circles, each organized around a corresponding shared attribute. This pattern exhibits exclusive cohesion: members experience strong belonging and identification within the group, yet face communication barriers or estrangement with outsiders due to the absence of shared symbolic codes and a discursive framework, thereby reinforcing a clear demarcation between “us” and “them.” Rooted in commonalities and consolidated through internal cohesion, this modality inherently excludes out-groups.

2.2. Social stratification

Social stratification constitutes an emerging pattern wherein relationships shift from traditional, relatively unitary groups into multiple independent, function-driven modules. This shift is manifested in the shedding of emotional excess and identity constraints, deconstructing social needs into discrete functional units that reconfigure the circle from a stable “concentric-circle” structure into a loose assemblage of autonomous modules. Functional modularization thus becomes the defining characteristic: social needs are disaggregated into independent operational units that coexist without mutual interference. Such ties originate from specific, instrumental needs and terminate spontaneously upon fulfillment, underscoring their inherently ephemeral nature.

2.3. More clearly defined personal boundaries

More clearly defined personal boundaries emerge as a pattern where students proactively establish behavioral and psychological distance, guided by rational calculation, limited responsibility, and instrumental motives. Research indicates that students actively negotiate stable boundaries in both behavior and cognition ^[1]. This is evident in three aspects: a rational cost-benefit analysis of social interactions; strict emotional self-regulation that avoids taking on others’ burdens; and relationships treated as efficient means to achieve specific ends. In contrast

to the emotional intimacy of traditional campus life, this pattern reflects a minimalist, boundary-focused approach to social relations.

3. Characteristics

Contemporary college student social relations are characterized by three salient features: the instrumental turn in social motivations, the attenuation of social intensity, and the polarization of social breadth.

3.1. Instrumental motivations

Contemporary college student sociality exhibits an instrumental turn: social interactions are no longer pursued primarily for emotional communion or recreation, but for pragmatic utility. Traditional sociality prioritized affective bonds over instrumental ends, with purposeful relationship initiation socially sanctioned as opportunistic. Fang *et al.* demonstrated that 72.3% of respondents evaluate potential interactants’ utility prior to calibrating interaction frequency, evidencing a marked instrumental shift. This turn is propelled by three structural mechanisms: (1) resource consolidation via online community-building; (2) precision matching through social stratification; and (3) boundary reinforcement via more clearly defined personal boundaries. Consequently, students increasingly pursue social ties as strategic means to individualized ends, manifesting salient functional characteristics.

3.2. Low-intensity interactions

The attenuation of social intensity denotes students’ proactive reduction of affective investment, temporal expenditure, and relational depth, sustaining ties with flexible restraint. This attenuation manifests across three dimensions. First, information curation: students leverage algorithmic filtering and interest-based tagging to congregate within online circles, screening out irrelevant social cues. Second, relational minimalism: students replace frequent offline gatherings or intensive emotional communion with low-cost digital gestures (likes, comments, shares) to maintain connections. Third, boundary management: students prioritize privacy and interpersonal boundaries, establishing firm limits to avert the emotional burdens of deep disclosure. Such attenuated

intensity thus affords students greater personal autonomy while mitigating emotional overload, yet risks eroding the affective foundations of durable social bonds.

3.3. Polarized breadth of social networks

The polarization of social network breadth constitutes a dualistic trend: offline circles contract while online networks proliferate. Offline breadth attenuates through four observable patterns: reduced non-essential outings, diminished neighborly engagement, declining community participation, and infrequent kinship visits. Online breadth proliferates via three mechanisms: (1) social media transcending spatiotemporal constraints; (2) algorithmic-enabled maintenance of hundreds of weak ties ^[2]; (3) interest-based and professional communities facilitating stranger aggregation and network expansion. This bifurcation—contracting embodied interaction to minimize costs while expanding virtual connectivity to maximize resource acquisition—encapsulates the defining feature of contemporary student social relations.

4. Factors

The emerging social patterns among contemporary university students—online community-building, social stratification, and more clearly defined personal boundaries—are chiefly engendered by three converging determinants: personal anxiety that leads to social avoidance, the widespread use of digital media, and a cultural emphasis on individualism.

4.1. Personal anxiety leading to social avoidance

Psychological avoidance-anxiety constitutes a coping strategy wherein individuals evade fear-inducing stimuli to alleviate psychological distress. Amid global economic stagnation and pervasive precarity, university students confront exacerbated academic and occupational pressures, fueling rising anxiety prevalence. Auerbach *et al.* documented that over 35% of university students exhibit anxiety symptoms strongly associated with social avoidance behaviors ^[3]. This heightened anxiety predisposes students toward secure and predictable social modalities. Bounded communities foster in-group solidarity and ontological security; ephemeral ties minimize affective investment; and more clearly defined

personal boundaries prevent relational encroachment. The instrumental efficiency of these three patterns—online community-building, social stratification, and more clearly defined personal boundaries—accounts for their salient appeal among students.

4.2. The widespread use of digital media

Mediatization dismantles spatiotemporal constraints, compresses distances, reconfigures temporal structures, and archives communication traces, thereby furnishing the infrastructural prerequisites for online community-building, social stratification, and more clearly defined personal boundaries among university students. First, algorithmic curation and targeting affordances enable students to locate and congregate within homophilous circles with precision. Second, the asynchronicity and immediacy of digital platforms facilitate on-demand mobilization of ephemeral ties, allowing students to solicit “instrumental partners” through minimal effort. Third, the disembodied nature of mediated interaction predisposes students to maintain calibrated interpersonal distance and enforce psychological boundaries even in face-to-face encounters. Primack *et al.* demonstrated that extensive mediatization engenders social insulation, propelling students toward bounded solidarity and transient instrumental ties ^[4].

4.3. A cultural emphasis on individualism

Amidst pervasive modernization, independence has evolved from mere self-reliance into a core cultural value emphasizing emotional autarky and personal responsibility. Within this context, university students—as reflexive agents—exhibit a pragmatic reorientation in their social conduct. Affective conservation emerges as a dominant imperative, enabling efficient pursuit of specific goals while circumventing the high costs and uncertainties of deep emotional entanglement. This imperative engenders social stratification and more clearly defined personal boundaries, systematically divesting relational life of affective excess and reconstituting it as a series of precise, low-cost transactions. These developments signify a broader transformation from affective communities to instrumental communities oriented toward individual development.

5. Conclusion and future directions

Contemporary university students' social interactions are increasingly characterized by instrumental motivations, low-intensity interactions, and polarized networks. While these emerging patterns enhance efficiency and preserve autonomy, they also lead to superficial relationships, fragile trust, digital loneliness, and a crisis of trust. This study identifies a systemic shift from emotion-based to function-oriented communities, driven by personal anxiety leading to social avoidance, widespread digital

media use, and a cultural emphasis on individualism, which collectively give rise to online community-building, social stratification, and more clearly defined personal boundaries. The findings provide a theoretical basis for understanding these new social forms and practical insights for stakeholders. Future research should explore ways to help students achieve a dynamic balance between the affective and instrumental dimensions of social life.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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