

Research on the Intergenerational Characteristics and Construction of Social Dilemmas Among Generation Z College Students

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Abstract: As “digital natives” in the digital economy era, Generation Z college students have their social behaviors and patterns profoundly shaped by digital technologies. This study begins by examining the social characteristics of Generation Z college students, discusses the social dilemmas they face, and further analyzes the multifaceted influences of technological evolution, socio-environmental shifts, and cultural conflicts. Finally, it proposes strategies to address these challenges, including strengthening guidance and education from universities, support and guidance from families, and creating a healthy environment. These strategies aim to help Generation Z students break through social dilemmas, establish healthy social relationships, and promote their healthy growth in the digital age.

Keywords: Generation Z, Social dilemmas, Digital technology, Social anxiety, University education.

1. Introduction

In the digital society, college students, as “digital natives,” have their social behaviors and interactions profoundly impacted by digital technologies. Growing up in a digitalized environment, they are highly familiar with social media and digital devices. While these tools provide convenience and pleasure, they also bring a series of issues such as increased social anxiety and loneliness. Investigating the social situations and underlying causes among Generation Z college students can help build healthy social interactions and promote their comprehensive development.

2. Social Characteristics of Generation Z College Students

2.1 The Ecological Stratification of Social Circles Among Generation Z College Students

The social interactions of Generation Z college students have shown clear signs of stratification [1]. They form close-knit social circles based on shared interests, geographical origins, or hobbies, such as anime clubs, social circles, hometown associations, and experimental groups. Within these circles, members quickly recognize each other through common codes of conduct and values, establishing connections and achieving deep emotional and ideological exchanges. However, this also limits their social horizons, making it difficult for them to break out of these circles and form broader and more diverse social interactions. At the same time, in social contexts, individual self-presentation is highly performative. In online social spaces, the performative aspect of Generation Z college students in social performances has become increasingly evident. They carefully curate their social media content to present an idealized self-image to attract others’ approval and attention. This phenomenon of social performance highlights their excessive pursuit of self-image and reveals their instability in social interactions and anxiety about identity recognition. In online social spaces, the phenomenon of “identity anxiety” is evident and widespread. When college students post content on social media and do not receive the expected likes and comments

within a long period, their anxiety levels significantly increase. The transient nature of social connections and the frequent alternation of social divisions are widespread. The extensive use of various social media and applications has expanded the boundaries of social choices for Generation Z. They can perform simple finger-swiping actions to quickly match with social partners who temporarily fit their preferences. This simplified social model meets their psychological needs for easy, free, and low-responsibility social interactions. This social phenomenon also presents the logic of deconstruction and disintegration of intimate relationship structures. Their expected level of deep and stable intimate relationships is scattered across many superficial social fields, formed through the accumulation of brief moments of resonance and emotional connection, seeking rapid emotional gratification. In this model, the fluidity of social relationships is significantly increased, with short-lived and frequently divided social relationships. College students find it difficult to form long-term, in-depth, and stable social connections, often falling into a vortex of constantly changing social partners [2].

2.2 The Significant Shaping Role of Digital Technology

The development of digital technology has profoundly changed their social habits. Algorithmic recommendation strategies have created limitations in information acquisition and social interactions. Many social platforms use algorithmic recommendation models to optimize the way Generation Z college students obtain social information. While this technology allows students to more easily access materials consistent with their interests, it also objectively leads to the formation of “information cocoons.” The information and viewpoints they are exposed to tend to be homogeneous, making it difficult to develop a comprehensive cognitive framework [3]. It is worth noting that many students hope to use online social interactions to actively break through the barriers of “information cocoons.” Meanwhile, the instant feedback nature of social media has led to a “sense of instant gratification” among college students, resulting in dependency on social media. This convenient, efficient, and personalized mode of social interaction is highly attractive to

college students, leading them to become trapped in excessive use of multiple social platforms. The long-term consequences of this will be systemic. For example, in interpersonal interactions, their ability to grasp the authenticity, long-term nature, and respectfulness of relationships gradually declines, leading to discomfort and even inducing social phobias, which have negative impacts on their mental health and social adaptability. During the mental development and social transformation period of college students, the “shaping and taming” effects of technological algorithms are becoming increasingly evident. Taking platforms like Douyin and WeChat as examples, the continuous in-depth analysis of users’ viewing behaviors and preferences forms personalized recommendations for specific users. This directly leads to a reduction in the comprehensiveness of information and homogenization of social topics, revealing the “echo chamber” phenomenon. Various social software applications use dopamine-driven incentive mechanisms. For example, WeChat’s “red dot notification mechanism,” Weibo’s “hot content prompt mechanism,” and Xiaohongshu’s “information push system” all use Skinner-box style behavioral training methods to continuously stimulate college students’ brain neurons, guiding them to form dependencies and addictions to social media, further limiting their boundaries in social behavior and cognitive domains.

2.3 The Intensified Collision of Social Choices in a Pluralistic Cultural Context

In a pluralistic cultural context, the individuality of college students and the sense of belonging and differences between groups are increasing. Generation Z college students’ pursuit of personal value realization and individuality is becoming more evident, with the notable rise of “socializing by interest” phenomena. They emphasize individual independence and autonomy, tending to choose social partners and interaction styles based on personal interests and needs. The traditional sense of collective belonging has weakened. The intersection of individualism and collective belonging has profoundly reshaped the social behavior patterns of college students and had complex psychological effects. During the stage of personal value realization, they experience collective environmental pressures and loneliness, leading to a series of psychological distresses. At the same time, the interweaving, collision, and integration of cultural diversity have made college students’ social experiences more diverse and significantly impacted their social preferences. They are more likely to form close social connections with people who share similar values, leading to the emergence of multiple social circles. In this context, values as the basis for social choices may lead to fragile and unstable social relationships.

3. Factors Influencing the Social Dilemmas of Generation Z College Students

3.1 The Dual Effects of Digital Technology

The algorithmic recommendation technology widely used in social platforms has improved the accuracy and efficiency of information dissemination and recommendation to a certain extent. However, it also lays the groundwork for social dilemmas among college students. Based on the interests of college students, algorithms distribute content, and in the long

run, the information they are exposed to tends to become homogeneous, gradually revealing the problem of “information cocoons.” This type of information environment restricts college students from accessing diverse knowledge and insights, thereby solidifying their social interactions and cognitive growth trajectories. It also hinders their thinking breadth and innovative potential. Over-reliance on online social interactions may lead to gradually distant relationships in real-life social interactions, resulting in social isolation. In the virtual domain, they can easily interact with others through technological means, but such interactions cannot fully replicate the authentic emotional exchanges and behavioral expressions in face-to-face real-life social interactions. It is difficult to form solid and profound interpersonal connections. Long-term immersion in virtual social interactions may lead college students to lack face-to-face communication skills and emotional interaction abilities in real-life situations, which may have adverse effects on their psychological state and social adaptability, increasing the potential risks of social isolation.

3.2 Pressures from Socio-Economic Structural Adjustments

Currently, the socio-economic structure is undergoing profound adjustments, with increasingly fierce market competition and rising competitive pressures. The employment pressure faced by college students continues to increase. Faced with the severe employment situation, college students actively enhance their employment competitiveness, often investing a large amount of energy into academic and skill enhancement, as well as expanding their social networks to improve their employment prospects. Under such circumstances, the social behavior of college students gradually shows a utilitarian tendency, as they tend to establish relationships with individuals who are beneficial to their personal development, neglecting the depth and quality of social interactions. This undermines the foundation of genuine and emotional social interactions, further expanding the scope of social dilemmas. Meanwhile, the increasing social mobility is evident, with college students interacting with individuals from different social strata and groups. Their social scope has expanded beyond the campus to the broader society. However, this expansion is not without challenges. When interacting with people from different social backgrounds, students need to switch their social identities to adapt to the norms and cultural contexts of different social circles. This increases the complexity and intensity of social challenges. During the adaptation phase, they may experience stress and anxiety, making it difficult to quickly form stable and harmonious social structures. The challenges of expanding interpersonal interactions impact their social experiences and psychological states.

3.3 Cultural Conflicts and Value Pluralism

The rise of individualism has led Generation Z college students to place greater emphasis on realizing personal value and showcasing individuality. They hope to highlight their unique personal styles in social activities and pursue the shaping and expansion of individual autonomy and independent personalities. However, in the social and cultural context, the traditional concept of collective belonging

remains powerful. This cultural conflict is particularly evident in the social interactions of college students. From the perspective of individual pursuits, they may experience a sense of alienation from the collective environment, lacking the sense of belonging and support that a collective can provide. This leads to psychological distress such as loneliness and helplessness, which have adverse effects on their psychological and social adaptability, thereby forming social dilemmas. At the same time, in the context of the interweaving and integration of cultural diversity, the value concepts of Generation Z college students have become pluralistic. While this pluralism of values broadens the boundaries of college students' social experiences, it also presents challenges in social choices. Given the contradictions and opposition between different values, it is often difficult for them to make correct choices when selecting social partners and social circles. They hesitate at the margins of diverse value concepts, leading to fluctuations in social relationships and instability in social quality and satisfaction.

4. Strategies to Address the Social Dilemmas of Generation Z College Students

4.1 University Guidance and Education

Strengthen the integration of curriculum and practice to continuously improve college students' social skills. Universities should actively establish courses, lectures, and salons on social etiquette and communication skills, employing diverse teaching methods such as theoretical explanation, case discussion, and simulation exercises to support college students in systematically learning social etiquette norms and effective communication skills. During the teaching process, enhance social scenario simulations to strengthen their communication skills and coping abilities in real situations, thereby boosting their confidence and performance levels in real-life social interactions and enhancing their social skills. At the same time, actively improve the targeting of college students' mental health counseling. Universities should pay full attention to the mental health issues of college students, establishing a comprehensive mental health education and counseling system. Actions such as mental health surveys, individual psychological counseling, and group psychological counseling should be implemented to promptly identify and address psychological distress experienced by college students in social interactions, including social anxiety, loneliness, and identity anxiety. It is recommended to regularly conduct mental health lectures and training to promote mental health concepts and improve college students' psychological quality and self-regulation abilities [5]. Guide them to overcome social barriers with a positive attitude. Additionally, enhance the guidance of college students' values. Universities should strengthen ideological and political education through classroom teaching, themed class meetings, and club activities to guide college students in forming correct worldviews, outlooks on life, and values. In the context of pluralistic cultures, help college students maintain clear thinking and adhere to the correct value stance, resisting the interference of negative values. It is suggested to guide students to discuss values, encouraging them to express their views and opinions. Through dialogue and ideological collisions, build a positive, healthy, and upward value system,

thereby guiding them to make wise choices in social interactions.

4.2 Family Support and Guidance

Enhance multi-dimensional cooperation between families and schools. Parents should actively open up communication channels with college students, regularly keeping track of their social dynamics at school, including interactions with classmates, teachers, and friends. Provide necessary care and support, guiding them to actively engage in social activities and develop positive social habits. Parents can share their own social experiences and teachings with their children, providing them with beneficial references and guidance to enhance their ability to cope with social challenges. At the same time, strengthen targeted psychological quality training to improve college students' stress resistance. Families should focus on cultivating college students' psychological health and guiding them to build confidence and improve their stress resistance. When facing social pressure and setbacks, parents should provide appropriate guidance and encouragement, helping them analyze problems and find solutions instead of merely blaming and scolding. Create a positive family atmosphere to guide children to develop an optimistic and cheerful character, enhancing their psychological quality to handle social challenges with ease and promoting the inheritance and promotion of good family traditions. Parents should set positive examples, carrying forward the family's virtues and values, and serve as role models for college students in their daily lives. Support them in forming correct moral concepts and behavioral patterns and guide them to adhere to family values in social interactions, cultivating qualities such as honesty, friendliness, and respect for others. During family gatherings and daily conversations, discuss social hot topics with children to guide them in forming correct value judgments and avoiding falling into the quagmire of negative social trends.

4.3 Creating a Healthy Environment

Promote collaboration between online platforms and regulatory authorities to regulate online social activities. This can be achieved by strengthening the supervision of social media platforms, increasing the construction of legal systems for online social behavior, and resolutely combating negative phenomena such as cyberbullying, misinformation, and online fraud to create a harmonious, positive, and healthy social network space [6]. Social media platforms must enhance their self-management awareness, strengthen content review processes, and promptly remove harmful content to create a green and safe social space for college students. For example, platforms should strengthen the review of user-published content, impose bans and penalties on accounts that spread violence, pornography, and vulgar content, and jointly promote positive content to guide college students in forming correct online social habits. At the same time, expand and deepen the scope of college students' social practice participation. Efforts should be made to broaden the channels for college students' social practice participation, such as internships, part-time jobs, and volunteer services. Through these activities, college students can break through the boundaries of the campus and interact with people from different social strata and backgrounds, thereby expanding

their social circles and enhancing their social skills. Cooperation between enterprises and universities can be implemented to establish internship centers and create internship positions for college students. This allows them to gain practical experience and meet many new colleagues in the workplace, laying a solid foundation for their future career paths. Social organizations can also carry out various forms of volunteer service activities to attract young people to join. While contributing love and dedication, they can meet like-minded partners and improve their social literacy. Actively promote positive social concepts to guide the direction of social trends. Society should actively promote positive social concepts and foster a healthy and upward social atmosphere to help college students establish correct value systems. Using diverse means such as media publicity, public welfare projects, and cultural products, widely disseminate positive and healthy values and moral concepts[7]. Cultivate college students' proper social behavior habits. Media should increase publicity efforts, showcasing outstanding young role models and their remarkable achievements in learning, work, and social interactions. This can inspire college students to look up to them, learn from their advanced deeds, and develop noble ideals and aspirations. Actively integrate into social construction and demonstrate excellent spiritual and moral demeanor in social activities.

5. Conclusion

Generation Z youth, as native residents of the digital age, have social behaviors and patterns driven by digital technology, characterized by the integration of virtual and reality, technology-driven, and cultural diversity. They are experiencing the convenience and joy brought by digital technology, as well as facing social dilemmas such as increased social anxiety, loneliness, and fragile social ties. These dilemmas are caused by a combination of technological innovation, socio-environmental changes, and cultural conflicts. To help Generation Z college students overcome these social challenges and achieve comprehensive growth, universities, families, and society must collaborate and adopt targeted strategies and measures. Universities should prioritize improving social etiquette, communication skills, and mental health education to cultivate correct value systems among college students. Families should enhance care, support, and guidance to promote their comprehensive development, fostering healthy psychological qualities and positive family cultural traditions. Society should regulate online social environments, expand social practice opportunities, and promote positive social concepts to create a healthy social platform for college students. It is essential to effectively address the social challenges faced by Generation Z college students, guiding them to achieve healthy social growth and maturity in the digital age and laying a solid foundation for their personal development and social integration.

6. Future Outlook

Looking to the future, with the continuous advancement of technology, artificial intelligence, big data, blockchain, and other modern technologies will be more widely applied in social interactions, bringing unprecedented opportunities and

challenges for Generation Z college students. More advanced social tools and platforms are expected to further optimize the social interaction experience, break geographical barriers, and achieve precise and efficient interpersonal communication, helping Generation Z college students expand their social circles and extend their social experiences. However, the rapid development of technology may also bring new social dilemmas, such as privacy breaches, data security, and intensified information cocoons. Preparations should be made in advance to guide young students to properly use technology and avoid falling into social dilemmas. The evolving social environment will have a significant impact on the social interactions of Generation Z college students. Fluctuations in the job market and the diversification of social culture require our continuous attention and in-depth exploration so that we can quickly adjust strategies to support Generation Z college students in growing healthily in a changing social environment, building healthy, stable, and in-depth social structures, and integrating personal and social values to contribute to the continuous development of society.

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