

# Non-rational Online Expression among Young Students: Manifestations, Antecedents, and Educational Responses

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## ABSTRACT

In the digital age where information technology is deeply integrated into social life, non-rational online expression among university students has become a prominent problem in digital civility cultivation. Based on contemporary online public discourse phenomena and relevant theoretical research, this paper systematically analyzes its multidimensional manifestations: cognitively, algorithm-induced information narrowing and simplistic stereotypical thinking; affectively, emotion-driven group position alignment and excessive moralized emotional catharsis; behaviorally, group polarization in online interactions and instrumentalized reporting due to insufficient rights awareness. It elaborates negative implications: hindering critical thinking and information discernment, eroding rational public discourse, and challenging social trust and legal awareness cultivation. From technology, environment, and individual psychology, it deconstructs formative mechanisms: algorithmic shaping of cognitive boundaries, gaps in family and school digital literacy education, online projection of social transformation mentality, and interaction between cognitive closure needs and group identity. Finally, focusing on digital civility and legal awareness, it proposes educational pathways: integrating algorithmic literacy into core competencies, transforming ideological education into dialogical practice, strengthening rights boundary education, and fostering a rational and inclusive campus culture, aiming to guide young students to become rational digital citizens.

## KEYWORDS

Young students; Non-rational expression; Digital civility; Algorithmic recommendation; Group polarization; Legal awareness

## 1 Introduction

Digital technology has profoundly transformed young students' cognitive patterns, behaviors and discourse styles. Cyberspace, as an open virtual public sphere, has become their main platform for information access, opinion expression, communication and public participation. However, while bringing convenience and freedom, some non-rational expression patterns have emerged, such as simplistic stance-taking on complex issues, impulsive emotional responses to dissenting views, blind following of online opinion leaders, and improper use of reporting mechanisms due to insufficient rights awareness.

Though not mainstream, these behaviors often appear in online discussions, affecting young students' growth and the construction of a healthy digital ecosystem. The Chinese government attaches great importance to digital civility and youth ideological education, emphasizing fostering a clean cyberspace and guiding young people to establish correct values. As the most active group in cyberspace, university students' online expression rationality directly affects digital civility and their own legal awareness and civic competence. Thus, studying their non-rational online expression under digital civility framework has important theoretical and practical value.

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach integrating communication studies, sociology, education and cognitive psychology, this paper sorts out manifestations, analyzes implications, explores formative mechanisms, and puts forward targeted educational strategies to promote rational online expression and accelerate digital civility construction.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

To accurately analyze young students' non-rational online expression, this study adopts a multi-theoretical integration framework, focusing on situational, developmental and environmental factors, and avoiding one-sided pathologization of their behaviors.

From cognitive psychology, Kahneman & Tversky's (1974) cognitive bias theory explains young netizens' preference for simplistic narratives and resistance to counter-attitudinal information—cognitive shortcuts reinforced by algorithmic environments, not inherent personality defects.

From communication studies, Sunstein's (2017) information cocoon and group polarization theory illuminates how personalized recommendations form "information cocoons" and how like-minded online groups amplify extreme views, shaping young students' expression.

From developmental psychology, Arnett's (2000) emerging adulthood theory points out that 18-25-year-olds' identity exploration, instability and peer sensitivity make them more susceptible to group dynamics and emotions, leading to non-rational expression.

From social psychology, Tajfel & Turner's (1979) social identity theory and Iyengar et al.'s (2019) affective polarization research reveal that group identity and emotional antagonism strengthen view opposition, escalating non-rational expression.

From legal education, Tyler's (2006) legal consciousness theory emphasizes that proper rights exercise requires not only legal knowledge but also understanding of procedural norms and rights boundaries—a weak link for some young students.

This framework ensures analytical rigor and comprehensiveness, avoiding pathologization and political biases, laying a solid theoretical foundation.

### **3 Multidimensional Manifestations**

Online anonymity, immediacy and interactivity make young students' non-rational expression show multidimensional, interrelated characteristics that deserve educational attention.

#### **3.1 Cognitive Manifestations**

##### **3.1.1 Algorithm-Shaped Information Narrowing**

Young students increasingly rely on personalized recommendation algorithms for information access. While improving efficiency, these algorithms form "information cocoons" (Sunstein, 2017), pushing content consistent with their preferences and immersing them in homogeneous information for a long time.

Long-term immersion narrows their cognitive framework, reduces multi-perspective analysis ability, and forms cognitive stereotypes, making them less willing to accept divergent views. This phenomenon crosses value orientations, driven by technology and cognitive laws, not ideological or personality factors.

##### **3.1.2 Stereotypical Thinking and Categorical Judgment**

When facing complex online controversies, some young students use simplified labels to judge individuals or groups—a cognitive shortcut that replaces in-depth analysis with emotional judgment, reducing complex social realities to oppositional narratives.

For example, faculty with different academic views may be labeled "opposing mainstream"; students appreciating foreign culture may be categorized "lacking patriotism"; critics may be unfairly called "deliberately finding fault". This labeling obscures issue complexity and lays a foundation for emotional confrontation.

#### **3.2 Affective Manifestations**

##### **3.2.1 Emotion-Driven Stance-Taking**

Digital platforms prioritize emotionally charged content (arousing anger, compassion, indignation) for higher engagement. In public discussions, some young students' stances are driven by collective emotions rather than fact analysis and logical reasoning, adopting emotional "empathy" positions.

This shifts discussion focus from "understanding facts rationally" to "belonging to an emotional camp", replacing reason with emotion. Emotional engagement is not problematic, but prioritizing emotion over reason undermines discourse quality and escalates confrontation.

##### **3.2.2 Moralized Emotional Catharsis**

In hot issue discussions, some young students' emotions escalate from legitimate moral concern to excessive catharsis. Under the banner of "upholding justice", they verbally attack those they deem "wrong", even using insults.

This brings an illusory sense of moral superiority and belonging but violates rational discussion and others' expressive rights. Closely related to online anonymity, group dynamics and platform emotional orientation, it reduces public discussion to emotional release, conflicting with digital civility.

#### **3.3 Behavioral Manifestations**

##### **3.3.1 Group Polarization in Online Interaction**

Social media gathers like-minded people into virtual communities with strong group identity. In these communities, moderate views are marginalized, while extreme views are amplified through mutual reinforcement (Sunstein, 2017).

Under peer pressure and collective emotions, individual views become more extreme, forming group polarization. Moderate opinions evolve into sharp oppositions, a general social psychological process unrelated to individual personality.

##### **3.3.2 Rights Awareness Gaps and Instrumentalized Reporting**

Reporting illegal behaviors is a legitimate civic right, but some young students report others based on incomplete or

selective information due to insufficient context understanding or communication.

Their purpose is to eliminate opposing views and affirm their own "correctness" using institutional authority, distorting the reporting mechanism and undermining mutual trust. This reflects gaps in rights boundary and procedural norm understanding; guiding proper rights exercise is key to legal awareness cultivation.

It is crucial to distinguish instrumentalized reporting from legitimate rights exercise: the problem lies in improper motivation and manner, not reporting itself. We should avoid pathologizing young students and focus on educational gaps.

## **4 Implications**

Young students' non-rational online expression exerts far-reaching impacts on individual development, online discourse quality and social trust.

### **4.1 Implications for Individual Development**

#### **4.1.1 Impaired Critical Thinking and Information Discernment**

Long-term exposure to stereotypical and emotional online environments weakens young students' information discernment and analytical ability. Habitual reliance on emotional judgment and simplistic stance-taking hinders independent thinking and critical judgment, affecting their ability to grasp complex information and participate in social life.

#### **4.1.2 Insufficient Legal Awareness**

Distorted reporting and other non-rational behaviors reflect gaps in understanding rights and obligations. Confusing "freedom of expression" with "unrestricted speech" and "legitimate supervision" with "dissent suppression" indicates immature legal consciousness.

Unaddressed cognitive gaps hinder mature legal awareness formation, potentially leading to improper rights exercise, violations of others' rights and legal responsibilities.

### **4.2 Implications for Online Discourse Quality**

#### **4.2.1 Eroded Rational Public Discussion**

Healthy online discourse relies on reasoned dialogue, evidence-based exchange and mutual respect. Non-rational expression—emotional catharsis, labeling, polarization—replaces dialogue with declaration and discussion with confrontation, filling cyberspace with noise, hindering public issue exploration and clean cyberspace construction.

#### **4.2.2 Undermined Intergroup Trust**

Emotional attacks and stereotypical labeling exacerbate intergroup division. Hostile attitudes toward "opposing groups" damage mutual trust, which may extend offline, affecting campus harmony and social trust-building, conflicting with positive online environment goals.

### **4.3 A Necessary Clarification**

This paper focuses on the formal characteristics of non-rational expression (emotionality, stereotypical thinking, polarization), not substantive value orientations. Young students' online identification with mainstream values and resistance to historical nihilism reflect sincere patriotism and social responsibility, which should be affirmed and guided.

The core is to guide young students to maintain correct values while improving expression rationality, adapting to digital civility requirements and achieving all-round development.

## **5 Formative Mechanisms**

Young students' non-rational online expression results from the interaction of technological, environmental and individual psychological factors. Exploring these mechanisms is key to targeted educational strategies.

### **5.1 Technological Mechanism**

Digital platforms operate on "attention economy", prioritizing emotionally charged, clear-positioned content for higher engagement. Recommendation algorithms push such content, subtly shaping young students' cognitive and expressive habits, laying a technological foundation for non-rational expression.

Without correct guidance, platform functions like reporting and blocking may be misused to exclude dissenting views. Helping young students understand algorithm logic and platform rules is essential for improving digital literacy.

## 5.2 Environmental Mechanism

### 5.2.1 Family Socialization and Communication Patterns

Family communication patterns and education concepts profoundly influence young students' expression habits. Democratic families encourage expression and reasoned discussion, fostering rational expression and respect for others' views.

In contrast, families emphasizing absolute obedience and lacking open communication make children appeal to authority over negotiation, reflecting in online non-rational responses to dissent. Strengthening home-school cooperation and guiding scientific family education is foundational.

### 5.2.2 Gaps in School Education

School education plays a leading role, but gaps exist in legal and media literacy education. Legal education focuses on knowledge indoctrination, lacking practical training in rights exercise. Media literacy education is not systematically integrated, leaving students unprepared to navigate algorithmic logic and online expression boundaries.

These gaps make young students susceptible to false information and emotional content, leading to non-rational expression.

## 5.3 Psychological Mechanism

### 5.3.1 Cognitive Closure Needs and Simplistic Narrative Preference

In information-saturated online environments, young students face great cognitive pressure. Kruglanski & Webster's (1996) "need for cognitive closure" theory notes individuals pursue clear answers to avoid ambiguity. Those with high needs are attracted to simplistic online narratives, reducing cognitive uncertainty.

Combined with algorithmic homogeneous push, this forms a mutual reinforcement mechanism, strengthening narrow cognitive patterns and reducing tolerance for diverse views.

### 5.3.2 Group Identity and Polarization Dynamics

Young students have strong needs for group belonging and identity. Online communities with clear values meet this need; members emphasize internal consistency and external difference to maintain group boundaries, leading to polarization and emotional expression.

Guiding young students to balance group identity and individual independence, and cultivate inclusive perspective-taking, is key to rational online expression.

## 6 Educational Pathways

Guiding young students to rational, civilized online expression is essential for digital civility and youth education. Targeted strategies should address formative mechanisms.

### 6.1 Integrate Algorithmic Literacy into Core Competencies

Higher education institutions should integrate algorithmic literacy into core competencies, offering general courses and lectures on algorithm principles, platform logic and information access impacts. They should strengthen information literacy training, helping students recognize "information cocoons", verify information and develop critical thinking.

### 6.2 Promote Dialogical Ideological and Legal Education

Innovate ideological and legal education methods, transforming indoctrination into dialogical practice. Use hot online events for case analysis, guiding rational discussion and clarifying legal boundaries and procedural requirements. Conduct simulated discussions and debates to practice rational expression, and incorporate online performance into course evaluation.

### 6.3 Strengthen Rights Boundary Awareness Education

Strengthen rights and obligations education, helping young students establish correct rights views. Guide them to cherish expression rights and exercise them without violating others' rights or laws. Clarify reporting mechanism purposes, distinguish "legitimate supervision" from "instrumentalized reporting", and emphasize procedural justice.

### 6.4 Foster a Rational, Inclusive Campus Culture

Foster a rational, inclusive campus culture, formulating online behavior norms against cyber violence. Support diverse academic activities and student organizations, providing spaces for diverse views. Strengthen mental health services, helping students manage online emotional pressure and find real-life value channels.

## 7 Conclusion

Young students' non-rational online expression is a complex digital age phenomenon, shaped by technological, environmental and psychological factors—a developmental challenge, not personality defects.

Higher education institutions should assume educational responsibilities, combining value guidance and ability cultivation. By integrating algorithmic literacy, innovating education modes, strengthening rights education and fostering campus culture, they can help young students develop critical media literacy, critical thinking, empathy and legal awareness.

This guides young students to become rational, civilized digital citizens, contributing to clean cyberspace and social progress. This research enriches youth digital behavior research and provides practical reference for educational guidance.

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