

A Study on the Alienation of Youth Public Participation in the Short Video Sphere and Issues of Communication Justice

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Abstract: In the pre-short-video era, young people primarily learned about public issues through newspapers or radio and television programs, and engaged in civic participation through voting, in-person complaints, or even online forums. Today, however, young people use short-video platforms to stay instantly informed about current events, interact with others, and engage through “likes” and comments on public platforms. The mode and form of communication have shifted from primarily face-to-face interpersonal communication to mediated communication on social media platforms. This transformation has triggered and exacerbated imbalances in communication justice. However, most existing studies have yet to develop an integrated analytical framework for “alienation and imbalance.” While there has been some research on algorithms, capital, society, and individuals, there remains a lack of insight into the interplay among these multiple factors. Building on this, this paper focuses on young people aged 16–35. Based on 204 valid questionnaire responses and drawing on existing literature, it explores the causes of alienation and the imbalance of communicative justice, as well as the resulting issues. The study employed questionnaire surveys, content analysis, and case studies. The findings reveal that the algorithmic traffic logic, platform rules, social environment, and young people’s own media cognition collectively contribute to the current phenomenon of alienation in behavior, discourse, values, and purposes. This study draws upon theoretical foundations in short-form video, public participation, alienation, and communicative justice to present its arguments and analysis. Consequently, it constructs two analytical frameworks tailored to the Chinese context—the “Four Dimensions of Alienation” and the “Five Dimensions of Justice”—providing both a theoretical basis and practical pathways for addressing the

aforementioned issues.

Keywords: Short Videos; Public Participation; Alienation; Communication Justice

1. Introduction

With advances in technology, short video platforms have evolved from mere entertainment media into platforms that permeate social affairs of all scales and influence trending topics. This paper focuses its research on the youth demographic. Some young people have experienced the evolution of the internet era—from regionally limited forum discussions to today’s short video platforms that facilitate communication both domestically and internationally—while others are native users of these platforms. Regardless of their level of experience, however, both groups—as central actors in social practice—exhibit behavioral patterns influenced by the media environment and demonstrate a high degree of dependence on short-video platforms. This leads young people to adhere closely to the platforms’ rules governing public opinion, making them more susceptible to deep penetration by platform algorithms and mechanisms.

Existing domestic research has focused on online political participation, discussions of social issues, and the effectiveness of government-produced short videos, acknowledging the platforms’ empowering role while also actively addressing issues such as the superficialization of user cognition. Regarding research on alienation, few studies have systematically explored the issue in conjunction with communication justice. There is insufficient research on imbalances in participation opportunities and discourse distribution within the short-video sphere, and a complete logical framework—encompassing “causes of alienation—manifestations—justice dilemmas—correction pathways”—is lacking. In international research, the primary criticism centers on how platforms’ commercial logic erodes the public sphere. Furthermore, most

research has centered on data justice and discursive equality, leading to the development of theories and legislative practices related to digital rights and platform responsibility. However, the differences between the Western context and China's media ecosystem—as well as the distinct characteristics of youth participation—are particularly pronounced, making direct application difficult; moreover, there is a scarcity of specialized, systematic research abroad on the alienation of public participation in short-video contexts.

In this study, we pose three core questions: First, what are the specific manifestations of alienation? Second, how can we uncover the internal logic of the mechanisms of imbalance? Third, through multi-stakeholder collaboration, how can we construct a viable governance framework? To answer these questions, we targeted young people in various Chinese cities with diverse educational backgrounds and career paths for our survey. This paper will draw upon 204 valid survey responses as the research data for the subsequent analysis.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Construction of the Analytical Framework

Some members of Generation Z, as well as certain young people who have witnessed the rise of the internet from its inception, often have a vague understanding of the impact of the short-video sphere on their lives; their ideologies and values are easily manipulated and conditioned by algorithmic recommendation technologies without their awareness [3]. However, before they realize they are being manipulated, they often believe that short-video platforms serve only an entertainment function and do not disseminate information or drive behavioral “trends.” Liu Xiaowen and Liu Xiufang argue that short videos—as a mainstream form of communication in the mobile internet era centered on algorithmic recommendations and integrating visual appeal, fragmented content, and strong interactivity—have seen their influence grow steadily alongside the continuous expansion of their user base [1]. Xu Lide has also summarized Levinson's theory: Levinson argues that when a new medium first enters society, it is often merely a form of entertainment, frequently operating on the margins of society; then, as technology advances, it becomes a realistic medium; and finally, through the combination of new media, it transforms into a rare work of art [2]. As media technology evolves, the relationship between

media and society is also changing. In the early stages of media's integration into social life, its public nature and social impact were relatively limited, manifesting primarily as entertainment or a marginal presence. However, as media has become increasingly technological and platform-based, its capabilities for communication, organization, and social mobilization have significantly strengthened, gradually transforming it into a key mechanism influencing the dissemination of public information and the construction of social values.

Public participation has also evolved alongside the changing role of new media. Media engagement in the digital age—particularly the use of social media—has sparked widespread discussion regarding political participation [4]. Wang Xinxi and Meng Tianguang argue that public participation refers to citizens' involvement in public affairs; traditional public participation manifests as public activities conducted by citizens in physical, offline spaces—that is, offline public participation [5]. However, as media has evolved, the channels and methods of public participation have shifted, and online participation has begun to emerge. At the same time, Kenneth M. Winneg contends that the opportunities for online participation provided by the internet have, to a certain extent, narrowed the disparities in public participation among different groups [6]. As young people have increasingly engaged with short-video platforms—a form of internet media—the role of the youth demographic has become increasingly prominent within the landscape of public participation. Actions such as “liking” and leaving comments trigger the platforms' traffic algorithms, pushing video content to users who share similar viewpoints. When homogeneous viewpoints accumulate and participatory behaviors gain strong group validation, young people become central figures in public issues and direct participants in social conflicts, particularly in certain mass incidents [7]. When discussing public participation, the concept of alienation inevitably comes to mind. Simply put, alienation refers to a stage in the development of a subject where it splits off its own opposite, transforming it into an external, alien force [8]. Hegel's concept of alienation is closely linked to his theory of the self-movement of the Spirit [9]; within his speculative system, this splitting is an intrinsic stage in the Spirit's self-development. Marx argued that “alienation” refers to the state in which a person and their object are in a real,

material state of opposition-that is, “objectification manifests as the loss of the object and enslavement by the object” [11][12]. Following this line of thought, Wang Shaokang and Yao Jianbin’s logic of alienation is based on “splitting”-that is, society splitting itself into increasingly smaller groups, each with its own specific “life experience” of victimization [10]. When this logic of alienation-with fragmentation at its core-is placed within the mediatic context of online public participation, the issue of informational alienation becomes even more pronounced among young people, whose values have not yet fully solidified and who are easily influenced by the sentiments of their social circles. Compared to alienation in the general philosophical sense, informational alienation carries a much stronger connotation of “the fundamental interests of the masses” [13], as it is directly linked to the online public sphere and the real rights and interests of these groups.

And when discussing the actual rights and interests of groups, one cannot help but mention the concept of “communication justice.” Guo Qingguang argues that “communication” refers to the transmission of social information or the operation of social information systems [14]; Shao Peiren defines communication as human activities in which information is exchanged through symbols and media with the aim of bringing about corresponding changes [15]; Peirce maintains that communication is the process of transmitting ideas or meaning (mental content) [14]; Alexander Gold proposed the “sharing theory,” arguing that communication is the process of transforming the exclusive into the shared [14]. The definitions offered by different scholars reflect the multifaceted nature of communication-it is not merely the transmission of information but also concerns information sharing, symbolic practices, social interaction, and more. Since communication involves these elements, it naturally gives rise to judgments regarding its justice or lack thereof. Justice is a value that resonates deeply with people, yet it is also a second-order value whose meaning is not self-evident and thus requires further definition [16]. Historically, there has long been a prevailing understanding of what justice is: namely, that justice is “giving a person what they deserve” [17], which rejects any privileges that exist outside the law or supersede established rules [18]. Combining these two concepts, communication justice involves projecting the principle of

“giving a person what they deserve” into the field of communication. Its core focus is on the equitable distribution of communication resources, opportunities for discourse, and information rights, requiring that all social actors be able to obtain the communication status and space for expression to which they are entitled. Existing research and academic papers have defined or interpreted the concepts mentioned in this paper and revealed the conditions under which youth public participation occurs; however, they have paid little attention to the negative dilemmas arising from participatory behavior. This paper will draw upon these theories to provide a critical perspective and construct a framework comprising four dimensions of alienation and five dimensions of justice.

3. Manifestations of Alienation and the Generative Logic of Youth Public Participation in the Short-Video Sphere

3.1 Overview of the Questionnaire Survey Sample

Regarding alienation, many scholars actually lack a unified and universally accepted standard definition. Based on Marx’s discussion of the alienation of products in the “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844”, we can understand that objects created through human practice become detached from the subject’s control and transform into an alien, dominant force that stands in opposition to the subject [19]. This paper does not strictly adhere to Marx’s framework of product alienation but, in light of the specific context of the short-video sphere, retains the core logic of alienation as “a departure from authenticity and a state of distortion.” Alienation is not merely a superficial description of performative phenomena; rather, it is a pathology of social public participation that requires in-depth diagnosis, logical analysis, and systematic solutions. Therefore, this paper defines the alienation of young people’s public participation in short videos as a deviation from the rationality, reflection, and public concern that such participation should embody, resulting in a certain degree of distortion and corruption of values.

General Secretary Xi Jinping has pointed out: “The internet has become the forefront of the current ideological struggle.” [20] Cyberspace not only harbors ideological risks at the macro level but also manifests as value divergences and

discursive conflicts in the daily public participation of ordinary users. Information permeates every aspect of young people's daily lives through the internet; differing opinions and values intertwine and clash on short-video platforms. When people engage in subjective opinion-sharing-compounded by factors such as differing stances and group polarization-numerous problems may arise. The contest of ideas is no longer confined to books and classrooms but now takes place within short video comments, content, and trending topics.

Furthermore, short video platforms represent a segment of the digital landscape in China where both user base and usage rates continue to grow[21]. In a digital and intelligent society, short videos have become the primary channel through which users access information and perceive reality[22]. Among the 204 valid questionnaires collected, 33.3% of respondents indicated that they use short-video platforms for more than three hours. 48.5% of respondents stated that, over the past year, they had participated in public discussions on short-video platforms between 1 and 10 times. Additionally, 58.8% of young people indicated that they typically express their agreement or disagreement by clicking "like" or "dislike." 75% of respondents said they actively participate in discussions about trending social issues, but at the same time, 53.4% believe that views and virality are valued more than facts and truth-a phenomenon that is very common in public discourse on short-video platforms. Young people's frequent interactions-such as "likes" and comments-serve as user behavior signals fed into algorithmic systems, further reinforcing the push of homogeneous content and amplifying the algorithm-driven traffic distribution logic unique to short-video platforms. Furthermore, the exaggerated sensory narratives and highly interactive social connections on these platforms indirectly erode the environment and characteristics of informational diversity, leading young people to become trapped in a single narrative logic. In today's world, where short-video platforms occupy a central place in people's lives and entertainment, young people serve as a typical research sample for the high incidence of ideological and behavioral alienation-some lack well-developed critical thinking skills and exhibit a strong tendency to conform. They often equate "likes" with truth and passively accept certain one-dimensional, distorted values, which is precisely what can lead to alienation.

3.2 Four-Dimensional Characteristics of Alienation in Youth Public Participation

Building on the preceding analysis of the behavioral characteristics and motivations of youth public participation in the short-video sphere, and drawing upon the four-dimensional analytical framework for alienation established in this paper, the following section will systematically examine the specific manifestations of alienation in youth public participation from four dimensions: behavioral alienation, discursive alienation, value alienation, and purpose alienation.

In terms of behavioral alienation, when engaging with public issues, young people tend to reduce certain topics to so-called "overused, crass memes". They blindly follow trends for entertainment's sake, ultimately resulting in distorted imitations. In China, many women have been murdered or subjected to unwarranted humiliation due to romantic disputes. These cases have spawned dark humor memes such as the "two-metric-ton water warning" and "three years is a steal; the death penalty is a bargain." Originally, these cases were publicized to warn and alert the public. Today, they elicit only meme-laced responses like "So what?" or "Let them suffer." While this may appear to be mere online trash culture, public participation is inherently meant to foster serious reflection, public awareness, and compassion for the vulnerable. Yet today's youth have reduced it to mockery and the commodification of real-life tragedies, trading suffering for viral memes and likes.

In terms of discursive alienation, many young people, when participating, feel as though they are right there on the scene. Consequently, they are unable to analyze public issues objectively or express personal opinions, instead venting their emotions in a subjective manner. As more young people join in, opposing views may be labeled by those who share the same opinion, even leading to the notion that "if you don't follow my viewpoint, then you must hold the opposite view." Bourdieu's field theory posits that "linguistic exchange within the rules of a field is not merely the exchange of information, but also a comparison of the rights and authority of discourse users" [23][24]. When certain youth groups consistently exhibit these characteristics, other young people may choose not to respond, argue, or communicate-either to conform or to avoid deeper conflicts.

The third point is the alienation of values. Today, some young people prioritize gaining exposure and traffic above all else, resulting in a reversal of value priorities. Adopting an entertainment-oriented style, they produce videos on public issues that undermine the original intended meaning of these topics and distort their significance—for example, meritocracy. In the past, videos that encouraged people to strive for better were defined online as “inspirational videos.” However, due to the exaggerated expressions of some young people and the amplification by traffic algorithms, much of this content has become unrealistic, misleading the public’s perception of hard work and success. Positive values are distorted during dissemination, ultimately leading to the alienation of values.

The final point is the alienation of purpose. In the short-video space, virtually all videos—once converted into traffic—can increase an individual’s exposure. Hundreds of thousands, millions, or even tens of millions of video views translate into commercial partnerships, forming the foundation for personal product sales. Some respondents indicated that, initially, they simply wanted to “document their wonderful lives,” but in order to gain more traffic, they shifted their focus to content that “the public wants to see” rather than what “I want to share.” The survey data also reveals a concerning disparity: in this sample, 41.2% of respondents still view “driving social change” as a key motivation for public engagement. However, another 31.4% of respondents explicitly cited “commercial monetization” as their purpose for participation—a proportion that, while lower than the former, is sufficient to indicate that nearly one-third of the young respondents now view discussions on public issues as a springboard for monetizing their online presence, signaling a clear divergence and shift from their original intentions. Their public participation may no longer be a purely social expression; its purpose may have shifted substantially from “for the public good” to “for personal gain.” We can also reasonably infer that when this 31.4% driven by commercial monetization intersects with the traffic-allocation logic of algorithmic recommendations, this motivation may be continuously amplified, ultimately eroding the space occupied by the 41.2% motivated by public concern—and this is precisely the mechanism of alienation that distinguishes the short-video sphere from traditional public spaces.

4. An Examination of Imbalances in Communication Justice in Public Participation within the Short-Video Sphere

It is difficult to avoid imbalances on the path to communication justice, as resources are inevitably skewed and opportunities are distributed sequentially. Based on an analysis of the dimensions of communication justice imbalances, this paper constructs a five-dimensional framework of justice, comprising opportunity justice, discursive justice, factual justice, procedural justice, and outcome justice.

4.1 Opportunity Justice

First, is the allocation of resources regarding participation rights and channels for information access equitable? In the short-video sphere, personalized recommendations or traffic push notifications lead to significant inconsistencies in the channels through which users receive information and the timeliness of that information. Platforms fully understand what users want to see and what they are likely to agree with. Consequently, the comments section always displays “what they want to see,” rather than “what they need to see.” For example, under a feminist video, young male users see criticism, while young female users see affirmation.

4.2 Discursive Justice

Second, in the short-video sphere, are the voices of minority groups and those with differing viewpoints heard equally? It is undeniable that when everyone supports the same opinion, the voices of the extreme minority are effectively silenced. When the song “The Third Hickey” went viral, it was accompanied by the viral spread of a sign language dance. People began to imitate it, but due to the niche nature and regional limitations of sign language, many lost the specific meanings intended by certain signs in the process of imitation. Before bloggers with large followings who truly understood sign language stepped forward to post videos offering explanations, the young people in the comment section who knew sign language were simply unable to stop the misinformation from spreading in this “movement.”

4.3 Factual Justice

Third, is the public information circulating truthful, accurate, objective, and comprehensive? Driven by algorithmic recommendations, a single

“fact” can be pushed to tens of millions of viewers, while the power to clarify the truth afterward lies in the hands of only a few. Circulating public information may be a rumor, yet its authenticity and source cannot be verified. For example, in the 2006 Peng Yu case, what many people remember most vividly-and what was summarized by marketing accounts-was the phrase accompanying his “injustice”: “If you didn’t push her, why did you take her to the hospital?” This phrase went viral overnight, ensuring that the 2006 case continued to be repeatedly referenced. When discussing the Nanjing Peng Yu case, the public easily projected themselves into the dilemma of “whether or not to help” [25], ultimately leaving young people with the belief that “helping an elderly person could lead to extortion.” What is little known, however, is that subsequent case files show Peng Yu had admitted to the collision. Combined with the media’s selective quoting and one-sided interpretation of the first-instance judgment’s reasoning based on common-sense presumptions, this further amplified the narrative of “being extorted for acting heroically.” The truth of the incident was clarified as early as 2012, but the selective reporting by marketing accounts has kept the truth of the Peng Yu case obscured. To this day, in the comment sections of related videos, many young people still believe Peng Yu is an innocent victim.

4.4 Procedural Justice

Fourth, are the platform’s algorithmic logic and operating rules transparent, fair, and impartial? On many short-video platforms, traffic promotion features-such as DOU+-allow videos to be pushed to target audiences as long as sufficient funds are invested. In comment sections, when users clash with one another, a common phrase circulates: ‘I saw your video first, so the platform ruled in your favor.’ This implies that because the platform pushed the video to a user first, that user chose to believe what that person said outright. But what if the video posted by someone who didn’t pay for traffic actually tells the truth? Lacking transparency in rules, unfair distribution, and a biased mechanism are the biggest problems with short-video platforms, yet users don’t consider this when using them-and thus, justice is obscured.

4.5 Outcome Justice

Fifth, does youth participation ultimately generate positive and equitable social impacts?

Many public issues are often accompanied by a flood of negative information or conspiracy theories. Younger adolescents, before they have formed sound values, are highly susceptible to being misled by certain comments on short-video platforms. This may cause their initially objective or purely expressive public participation to evolve into extreme ideas and behaviors, ultimately resulting in adverse social impacts. However, survey data shows that regarding the current environment for discussing public issues on short-video platforms, 38.7% of respondents strongly agree that current discussions can produce positive and equitable social impacts; 46.6% of young people also strongly agree that all users have equal rights to participate and express their views. Unfortunately, the sample fails to cover young people from different regions and age groups, resulting in certain limitations in its representativeness. Nevertheless, this suggests that some young people hold an optimistic subjective perception of the public participation environment on short-video platforms. Regrettably, there is a significant gap between this subjective perception and the objectively existing imbalance in communication justice on these platforms.

5. Diverse Governance Pathways Guided by Communication Justice

5.1 Governance Demands of the Youth Group Reflected in the Questionnaire

The preceding section analyzed the imbalance in communication justice regarding youth public participation in the short-video sphere from five dimensions: opportunity justice, discursive justice, factual justice, procedural justice, and outcome justice. At the same time, by examining the four dimensions of participation alienation-behavior, discourse, values, and purpose-we observed that the distortion and alienation of youth public participation result from the interplay of multiple factors, including algorithmic distribution logic, insufficient individual media competence, gaps in social education, and inadequate external regulatory constraints. Correcting this alienation in public participation and achieving communication justice cannot be accomplished by a single actor alone. Among the 204 survey responses, some young people also offered recommendations regarding the three parties involved: platforms, young individuals, and government policies.

5.2 Optimizing Algorithms and Vetting Mechanism

First, platforms should adjust their algorithmic mechanisms and implement automated filtering technologies to display only appropriate comments after screening. Second, they should provide more reasonable lists of restricted terms to prevent users from using abbreviations to circumvent platform moderation and post insulting remarks. Third, platforms need to combine human and automated moderation and improve their reporting and review mechanisms to ensure no problematic content slips through the cracks. Fourth, they should establish fact-verification mechanisms and refine their moderation processes to avoid simplistic, “one-size-fits-all” approaches. In addition, platforms must uphold a diverse public discourse space in accordance with the law, distinguishing between legitimate criticism and suggestions and inflammatory, harmful speech. Finally, platforms must strengthen moderation of content from marketing accounts and extremists that spread rumors, slander, distort facts, or sensationalize issues.

5.3 Improving Institutional Regulations and Strengthening External Constraints

Some young people have suggested that the government should provide a better environment for discussion while preserving sufficient space for free speech. The government also needs to improve relevant institutional regulations, striving to strengthen penalties for violations in addition to real-name authentication. Secondly, the government must prioritize ensuring the accuracy of information to prevent marketing accounts from misleading the public by excessively exaggerating or rewriting facts; it should also introduce policies requiring the disclosure of traffic recommendation mechanism. In addition, relevant departments need to enact policies to appropriately restrict extreme expressions and refine penalty mechanisms for acts such as distorting facts. During periods when rumors are spreading, official media accounts should be used to closely monitor developments. Relevant laws and regulations should be enacted regarding the publication of videos.

5.4 Enhancing Media Criticism Skills and Returning to the Essence of Public Participation

As for young people themselves, the government and platforms must collaborate on public awareness campaigns and education to improve the overall quality of the citizenry and foster a healthier environment and atmosphere for discussion. Young people must also actively participate in discussions to collectively drive social reform, refine institutional frameworks, and safeguard people’s livelihoods. When posting videos, they should minimize inflammatory topics and promote the correct core socialist values and sound ideological principles.

In summary, the alienation of youth public participation in the short-video sphere is intertwined with multidimensional imbalances in communication justice. The logic of algorithmic traffic, platform rules, the social environment, and young people’s own media cognition collectively contribute to the current participation dilemma. Improving this situation cannot be achieved by a single entity alone; it requires concerted efforts from platforms, regulators, society, and young people to steer the short-video sphere toward a more rational and equitable environment for public participation.

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