ISSN: 2710-0723

Institutional Supply Lag in University Student Management under the Networked Social Environment and Directions for Adjustment

Wei Xu, Shuo Guo

North China University of Science And Technology, Tangshan 063210, China

Abstract

Networked social media has become deeply embedded in university students' daily interaction, opinion expression and identity construction, forming a dual discourse space of "official–unofficial" and a circle-based interaction structure. Existing student management institutions still carry strong features of bureaucratic hierarchy and "on-site management" in their generative logic. Facing anonymous, decentralized and cross-platform social behaviors, they exhibit supply lag in vague regulatory objects, delayed response rhythm, blurred public–private boundaries and single governance instruments. Drawing on Habermas's theory of the public sphere and Goffman's dramaturgical theory as an analytical framework, this paper reveals the underlying mechanisms of institutional lag and proposes a shift from "control-oriented supply" to "rule-based co-governance supply," and from "ex post punishment" to "process resilience and scenario-based governance," providing a theoretical reference for the digital transformation of university student management institutions.

Keywords

Networked Social Media; University Student Management; Institutional Supply; Lag; Public Sphere; Dramaturgical Theory.

1. Introduction

Since the Internet evolved from an "information publishing channel" into an "infrastructure of social interaction," university students' social life is no longer bounded solely by the physical campus. Campus walls, WeChat groups, QQ channels, Xiaohongshu check-ins, anonymous submission accounts and interest circles together constitute a "networked social field" parallel to student registration management and class-based organization. In this field, students are simultaneously content producers, public opinion nodes and value re-producers; their expressive behavior combines private confiding, public deliberation, group identity and emotional release.

Correspondingly, university student management institutions have long followed a bureaucratic logic premised on "enrolled, identifiable and accountable": class and Youth League structures, disciplinary regulations, dormitory management rules and public opinion emergency plans mostly presuppose clear responsible subjects and linear communication paths. When networked social media breaks these premises through anonymous submission, screenshot forwarding, circle resonance and cross-platform amplification, institutional supply exhibits a structural misalignment in which "what is visible cannot be regulated, and what is regulated cannot be clarified."

The core question, therefore, is not "whether to regulate" but: why do existing student management institutions appear lagging in the networked social environment? How is this lag manifested at the normative, procedural and value levels? How should institutional supply

ISSN: 2710-0723

reset boundaries and mechanisms so as to balance campus order maintenance with respect for students' digital rights?

2. Theoretical Perspective and Analytical Framework

2.1. Networked Public Sphere: Changes in the Spatial Nature of Student Social Interaction.

The public sphere in Habermas's sense is a space between private life and public authority, characterized by rational discussion of public affairs. Wang Xian points out that while the networked public sphere continues the basic structure of "public–public affairs–critical opinion," it exhibits new patterns of wide coverage, high freedom and mutual penetration between public and private spheres: on the one hand, the public participates extensively; on the other, it faces the tension of "privatization of the public sphere" and "publicization of the private sphere"[1].

University "campus walls" and "anonymous tree holes" are typical microcosms: when students speak about canteen prices, dormitory allocation or award fairness, these are public issues; yet discussion often slides into doxxing, personal mockery and privacy exposure. If institutions treat such matters only as "campus speech," they underestimate their public nature; if they handle them as "online public opinion," they easily overlook their function as private confiding.

2.2. Dramaturgical Theory: Self-Presentation in Networked Social Interaction and Institutional Misjudgment.

Goffman's dramaturgical theory emphasizes that people perform on the front stage according to social expectations while retaining their true selves backstage. Zhou Yuanyuan's study of university students' WeChat self-presentation shows that students manage audiences and visibility through strategies such as "idealized," "mystified" and "contrarian" presentations, with front/back stage boundaries reconstructed by platform functions[2].

This means that "deviant remarks" on social platforms are sometimes identity performances within a circle rather than determinate intentions accountable offline. Traditional institutions simply equate "speaking is stance" with "behavior is violation," theoretically neglecting the performative and situational nature of online self-presentation, resulting in excessive punishment or ineffective guidance.

2.3. Integrated Framework.

This paper understands institutional lag as a threefold misalignment: first, spatial misalignment between physical campus institutions and cross-platform networked public spheres; second, subject misalignment between bureaucratically identifiable subjects and anonymous or semi-anonymous nodes; third, temporal misalignment between periodic static rules and real-time evolving public opinion.

3. Manifestations of Supply Lag in University Student Management Institutions

3.1. Vague Regulatory Objects: From "Student Behavior" to "Network Traces".

Traditional institutions target observable behavior: absenteeism, fighting, plagiarism, illegal use of electricity. In networked social interaction, the disputed objects are "screenshots," "reposts and comments," "anonymous submissions" and "leaked private chat records," whose degree of completion and subjective malice are difficult to reconstruct.

For example, a student complaining about a counselor on the campus wall may be merely venting emotions, or may trigger group antagonism. Existing disciplinary regulations often lack

ISSN: 2710-0723

a “contextual gradient”: minor expression, excessive expression, organized mobilization and defamation are mixed in a single catch-all clause, which neither protects legitimate criticism nor precisely regulates substantive harm.

3.2. Gaps in Regulatory Content: Circles, Algorithms and Data Rights.

University students' networked social interaction shows obvious clustering. Zhou Chenxi points out that networked clustering brings ethical risks such as moral anomie, cognitive bias and difficulties in disseminating mainstream discourse, while platform mechanisms, capital logic and technological affordances often exceed the existing regulatory vision of universities[3].

The deeper gap lies in “data rights”: who has the authority to scrape campus wall content for public opinion analysis? Is it compliant for counselors to add students on WeChat and then take screenshots as evidence? How can bias be prevented when labeling “key students” using social data? Current institutions mostly equate online behavior management with “public opinion stability maintenance,” lacking detailed rules on digital traces, algorithmic recommendation, emotional labor and privacy protection[5].

3.3. Delayed Response Mechanisms: Bureaucratic Rhythm versus Network Speed.

Online public opinion ferments within hours, whereas institutional response in universities usually passes through a bureaucratic process of “discovery–reporting–meeting–characterization–document issuance.” Relevant studies have noted that universities exhibit lag, passivity and emergency-oriented deficiencies in responding to virtual community risks, and that grassroots Party and Youth League organizations and student affairs systems are often absent from real-time guidance[6].

Two biases result: first, no rules beforehand, followed by one-size-fits-all account bans, post deletions and punishments afterwards; second, to avoid risk, all online expression is incorporated into a stability-maintenance logic, compressing legitimate space for students' public discussion.

3.4. Tension in Value Logic: Order Priority versus Growth Autonomy.

Existing institutions imply an assumption of “order priority,” treating networked social interaction as a variable to be constrained. Yet networked social interaction also undertakes the function of youth socialization: practicing public expression, building peer identity and testing value boundaries.

When institutions see only the risk side, they turn “management” into “containment”; students then migrate authentic expression to more hidden anonymous spaces, which in turn reduces institutional accessibility. Li Jiaming et al.'s study of campus walls also finds that official discourse transmission lags and discourse power in unofficial spaces rises, forcing universities to shift from one-way control to dual discourse interaction[4].

4. Underlying Causes of Institutional Lag

4.1. Path Dependence in Institutional Generation.

University student management institutions originated from closed schooling and class-based management; their legitimacy derives from superior documents and internal administrative authorization, with long revision cycles, extensive expert argumentation and limited student participation. Facing platform iteration (from BBS to Weibo, WeChat, Xiaohongshu and anonymous walls), institutions are naturally half a step behind. This is not a matter of individual institutional capacity but a general contradiction between “steady-state institutions” and a “fluid society.”[7]

ISSN: 2710-0723

4.2. Theoretical Confusion over Public–Private Boundaries.

Networked social interaction merges "private chat" with "public deliberation": WeChat Moments appear private, yet a screenshot makes them public; anonymous walls appear public, yet submitters expect their emotions to be treated as a private domain. If institutions follow the physical-space public/private dichotomy, they will either over-intervene in private expression or leave public harm unaddressed. The fundamental difficulty is that the boundary of networked social interaction is not geographical but based on "visibility."[8]

4.3. Management Philosophy Has Not Completed Its Paradigm Shift.

Traditional management follows a "discipline–punishment" model: prohibitions listed in advance, matching afterwards. Networked social interaction requires a "guidance–resilience" model: identifying risks amid uncertainty and cultivating rationality through expression. Most current institutions still write "network literacy" as a slogan without internalizing it into procedural rights and obligations, and write "joint participation" as an activity form without implementing it as a rule-making mechanism.

5. Directions for Institutional Adjustment

5.1. From "Prohibition Lists" to "Scenario-Based Rule Supply".

The illusion of covering all situations with a single "Code of Online Conduct" should be abandoned in favor of scenario stratification. Rule formulations should shift from "strictly prohibiting improper remarks" to discretionary "context–consequence" standards, distinguishing, for example, emotional expression, factual accusation and organized mobilization.

Table 1. Scenario-Based Rule Supply

Scenario	Institutional Focus
Private chat / Moments	Privacy protection, non-mandatory disclosure, anti-cyberbullying
Campus wall / anonymous zone	Boundaries of real-name tracing, submission responsibility, anti-doxxing
Official accounts / community issues	Public discussion etiquette, rumor correction, dissent feedback
Cross-platform public opinion	Timely response, minimum harm, review and remedy

5.2. From "One-Way Control" to "Rule-Based Co-Governance".

Drawing on the theory of the networked public sphere, students should be regarded as subjects of public discussion rather than mere objects of management. Institutional revision should establish a four-party consultation mechanism involving student representatives, counselors, legal affairs and platform operators; community conventions may be established for campus-wall-type spaces and maintained jointly by users. This does not abandon managerial authority but shifts it from "command" to "procedural justice": what students observe are not unfamiliar prohibitions but boundaries they have participated in generating.

5.3. From "Ex Post Punishment" to "Process Resilience and Early Warning".

A three-tier response should be established: first, the daily tier, covering media literacy courses, expression training and circle observation; second, the early-warning tier, identifying abnormal emotional aggregation, self-harm risk and group antagonism signals, with assistance as the priority; third, the disposal tier, where illegal infringement enters formal procedures with guarantees of statement, defense and review. The key is to place "education" before "punishment" and avoid escalating social missteps directly into disciplinary sanctions.

ISSN: 2710-0723

5.4. Clarifying Digital Rights Boundaries and Preventing "Over-Governance".

Institutions must stipulate: student affairs systems shall not collect social data without notification; public criticism of the university shall not be presumed to be a violation; tracing in anonymous spaces must comply with laws and regulations, avoiding generalized surveillance; counselors' online intervention requires professional boundaries to reduce emotional labor and trust erosion. The separation principle between "supportive analysis" and "disciplinary monitoring" may be followed: the former serves care, the latter is constrained by procedure.

5.5. Reconstructing the Interface between Official Discourse and Networked Social Interaction.

Universities should regard official websites, public accounts, campus walls and student communities as a continuum: official release should not only "notify" but also "explain and listen"; a feedback loop should be established for reasonable criticism; peer-level opinion leaders should be cultivated rather than relying solely on administrative voice. Only in this way can institutions become soft rules embedded in students' daily interaction rather than suspended texts.

6. Conclusion

University student management in the networked social environment is essentially not a technical question but a question of institutional philosophy: when "student" is simultaneously "netizen," "expression" is simultaneously "performance," and "campus" is simultaneously "networked public sphere," old institutions inevitably appear lagging. Such lag cannot be remedied by "strengthening punishment" but requires a reconstruction of supply logic-replacing blanket prohibitions with scenario-based rules, one-way commands with co-governance procedures, generalized surveillance with digital rights baselines, and reactive containment with educational resilience. Only thus can university student management institutions both safeguard the baseline of order and accommodate the possibilities of youth growth in a space where the virtual and the real intertwine.

References

[1] Wang, X. (2024). Theoretical basis, manifestation patterns and construction measures of the networked public sphere: From the perspective of Habermas's public sphere theory. *Social Scientist*, (3), 90–95. (in Chinese)

[2] Zhou, Y. Y. (2016). A study of university students' WeChat self-presentation from the perspective of dramaturgical theory. *Ideological and Theoretical Education*, (9), 84–88. (in Chinese)

[3] Zhou, C. X. (2025). Ethical risks of university students' networked clustering and their governance. *Journal of Huaibei Vocational and Technical College*, 24(5), 77–81. (in Chinese)

[4] Li, J. M., & Zhi, X. Q. (2026). Problem review and guidance strategies of student opinion expression in university "campus wall" virtual communities. *Journal of Youth Studies*. (in Chinese)

[5] Wu, X. Q. (2022). From Weibo to WeChat: The impact of social network affordances on university students' moral development. *Qinghai Social Sciences*, (5), 131–136. (in Chinese)

[6] Zhou, R. (2022). On the risk control of university students' online collective behavior by grassroots party and youth league organizations. *Journal of University of Shanghai for Science and Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, 44(1), 97–102. (in Chinese)

[7] Habermas, J. (1999). *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (W. D. Cao, Trans.). Xuelin Publishing House. (in Chinese translation)

[8] Goffman, E. (1990). *Encounters: Two studies in the sociology of interaction*. Huaxia Publishing House. (in Chinese translation)