The image construction of online opinion leaders from the perspective of "Cultural Discount"

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Abstract: *Under the current epidemic, "Cultural Discount" has deeply influenced the global public opinion system. In the era of online information, facing the complicated international public opinion field, the image construction of online opinion leaders has significant value. We should start from three aspects: actively building a communication platform system, promoting cultural value-added, and accurately targeting communication, to reduce the negative impact of "Cultural Discount", resisting the decisive interference of Western politics in the international public opinion field, promoting Chinese online opinion leaders to the international stage, and constructing a new pattern of international public opinion system.*

Keywords: *Cultural Discount; International Public Opinion; Online Opinion Leaders; Public Opinion Guidance*

1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 epidemic, the international community has been in upheaval and uncertainty. The "China threat theory" and the "China responsibility theory", which have been promoted by the US-led Western countries on the Internet, have emerged one after another. The international world discourse system, which was previously "strong in the West and weak in the East", has further intensified in the cyber world. It is crucial for opinion leaders in cyberspace to resolve the risk of crisis brought by online public opinion and to construct timely and practical online public opinion guidance in the unbalanced sequence.

2. The current state of international public opinion in the context of the epidemic

The international public opinion field is complicated at the moment of the epidemic. China has made remarkable efforts to prevent and control the epidemic and has also demonstrated its role as a great power in the global campaign against the epidemic by providing humanitarian aid. However, politicians in Western countries do not seem to buy it. They are driven by interests to continuously denigrate and smear China, trying to suppress China's development through the pressure of public opinion. The following two main discourses have emerged in the international public opinion field.

2.1. "Thucydides Trap"

The expression "Thucydides' trap" was first proposed by the American scholar Graham Allison based on the ancient Greek historian Thucydides' expression in his History of the Peloponnesian War, who argued that the rise of great power would inevitably compete with the established ruling hegemon and that the settlement between the two sides would mostly be ended in war. Western society has been very much convinced of this iron proposition that "if a country is strong, it will be hegemonic".[1] And in the mindset of "zero-sum game", it has again pointed the finger at China, creating an atmosphere of anxiety about China's rising.

2.2. "China Responsibility Theory"

On the other hand, Western countries, led by the U.S., have been inadequate in dealing with the epidemic. In order to divert the attention of the public, many opinion leaders have been spouting the "China responsibility theory" on the Internet, blaming China for the damage of the epidemic. As a result of the weak gate-keeping nature of the self-media era and the lack of information discrimination

capability of ordinary netizens, the public opinion in the West has gradually become a synergy, which has deepened the misunderstanding of the international community towards China.

3. Online opinion leaders under the influence of "Cultural Discount"

The "Cultural Discount" phenomenon is a manifestation of "acceptance-cognition" bias in cross-cultural communication. In today's Internet era, information is delivered to audiences through the processing and fermentation of different online opinion leaders, which further amplifies the bias of information.

3.1. The connotation and significance of "Cultural Discount"

Hoskins and Milos, the originators of the concept of "Cultural Discount", pointed out in *Reasons for the U.S.Dominance of the International Trade in Television Programs* that cultural productions in international markets are not recognized or perceived by audiences in other regions due to cultural distinctions, resulting in a diminished value. [2] With the increasing global communication, we discovered that the impact of cultural discounting is reflected in the commodity economy and in the process of cross-cultural communication, which can cause deviations in the efficiency and effectiveness of information transmission. As Internet users are engaged audiences, they have different cognitive abilities and ways of thinking, which can lead to "secondary discounting" in interpreting information. The difference in cultural structure will cause the same information to convey a completely different meaning after two discounting deviations.

3.2. The Negative Aspects of Online Opinion Leaders in "Cultural Discount"

3.2.1. Public opinion control in Western society

The most intuitive value damage that our online opinion leaders endure in the cultural discount is Western societies' control of public opinion. Western societies have always held a more significant share of the international communication discourse, interpreting information in online media, thus making the dissemination of information on the internet increasingly dominated by Western politics. The general netizens in Western societies, who cannot discriminate, have gradually become a tool to "fire" at China under power politics and pressure public opinion to influence China's image in the international community. At the same time, Western countries use political tactics such as trade wars to block China's external cultural communication to ensure their absolute control over online public opinion.

3.2.2. Self-imagination of "otherized"

Over time, Western society's interpretation of China has been full of "otherized" imagery, i.e., Western society itself has defined a set of images of where China should be under their social value system, which is essentially a biased interpretation. As cross-cultural communication deepens in the information era, Chinese netizen audiences are increasingly exposed to the radiation of the mainstream " otherized" voices in the international community, leading them to gradually and subconsciously accept such otherized interpretations after cultural discounting and fall into the trap of self-imposed "otherized" imagination. The concrete manifestation of this phenomenon is being led by the wrong opinion of the West on the Internet, losing the ability to screen information, and even generating negative feelings of self-denial.

4. Image interpretation of online opinion leaders

The term "opinion leader" is a classic concept in communication science, used by the famous communication scholar Lazarsfeld to refer to the particular group of people who are the first to access information in interpersonal communication and then transmit it to other audiences and influence others' opinions after their processing. [3] In the age of rapid development of information technology, the subjects of online opinion leaders have gradually shown the developing tendency of diverse subjects from the macro authoritative official media to the micro self-media bloggers. The concept of opinion leaders has gone beyond the original limitation of information transmission intermediaries and emphasizes the influence of being "leaders" in cyberspace. The value of online opinion leaders is further highlighted in the complex and diversified international communication opinion field. Meanwhile, higher requirements are put forward for online opinion leaders.

4.1. Public opinion guidance by online opinion leaders

The development of the Internet and social networking platforms has given people more space for discourse. Nevertheless, at the same time, if online public opinion is permitted to ferment without practical guidance, it will quickly lead to the eruption of online public opinion. As the influencers of people's attitudes, opinions, and behaviors, online opinion leaders are expected to play a good role in guiding public opinion. However, many opinion leaders in Western societies do not take an active role in guiding public opinion; they often disregard the informative value of the information they receive but rather capture the political value, which leads to a tremendous challenge to the objectivity and authenticity of the information. Facing the " Cultural Discount" in international communication and the " Secondary Discount" in the audience's interpretation, opinion leaders in cyberspace should make full use of the social resources at their disposal to explore as much objective information as possible and guide public opinion to focus more on the restoration of the truth and amplify the informative value of the original core of the issue, instead of degenerating into a communication tool of power politics.

4.2. Value review of online opinion leaders

The core requirement of online opinion leaders is to establish, maintain, and develop connections and personalized interactions with each other and with the audiences. Behind these personalized interactions, there are often intense and profound social motivations, which exist in a social format and build the online communication ecology. [4] We can review the value of online opinion leaders from both internal and external dimensions: for the domestic audience, the proper guidance from the online opinion leaders can reinforce their own value identity and improve their ability to discern information, simultaneously allowing the opinion leaders and the audience to form a synergy to resist the risk challenges in the online ideological field collaboratively; for the external aspect, we can initially provide a productive way to spread good Chinese voices. Meanwhile, we can also provide an adequate response to the discrediting arguments from Western society. Also, we can show an objective and authentic voice to the Western audience and break the "one-word" situation of the Western Internet opinion leaders. Thus, we could grasp the initiative of shaping our international image and enhancing our international discourse and cultural influence.

5. Countermeasures for image construction of online opinion leaders

In order to better cope with the "Cultural Discount" in international communication and the challenges that come with it, China should pay more attention to the construction of the image of online opinion leaders so that more opinion leaders that could deliver good Chinese voices are able to be integrated into the international communication discourse system. At the same time, we should pay more attention to the practical use of new technologies, explore the construction of a "harmonious space" for cross-cultural communication led by online opinion leaders and mutual understanding, and promote "Cultural Appreciation", so that China's voice can have a broader scope to be heard and spread to every corner of the world.

5.1. Create a narrative platform and establish a dissemination system

As the spokesman for China's international communication, online opinion leaders need to build a three-dimensional, multi-level, in-depth, all-around narrative platform compatible with the international community. With the development of new technologies such as 5G, the popularization of mobile terminals, and the widespread penetration of innovative technologies, China also needs to pay more attention to the application of new media, new technologies, and new terminals in international communication, integrating traditional media with the internet to create an intelligent media platform. When facing unwarranted accusations from Western society and remarks with intense political overtones to smear China, online opinion leaders could make timely, authoritative, and influential statements through the platform. At the same time, it is necessary to further promote the three-dimensional construction and synergistic development of China's international communication system, with the official media and the public resonating in the same frequency to spread China's voice to the world in multiple dimensions. For example, CGTN released an English-language news documentary on YouTube, the largest video site in Western society, entitled "Wuhan's Fight Against the Epidemic", which shows the whole process of Wuhan's epidemic from the outbreak to its containment from a professional perspective, and suppresses the "stigmatization" of Western society through a "combination" of authority

and professionalism. The documentary is a combination of authority and professionalism to curb the "stigmatization" of Western society. Meanwhile, in the private sector, Grandpa Amu, Dianxi Xiaoge, and other self-media bloggers also present a fascinating image of authentic China in their ways. With the further optimization and improvement of the international communication system, more and more online opinion leaders in China will be integrated into it, forming a synergy in the international community and improving China's image in the international community and the international discourse.

5.2. Promote cultural appreciation and enhance reciprocal understanding

"Cultural Discount" is an essential hindering factor in cross-cultural communication. Internet opinion leaders should go beyond the original rigid and programmatic cognitive framework in cultural communication and further explore the overlap and commonality between different cultures from the superficial "ethnicity". Using common perceptions to reduce "Cultural Discount" and Western society's way of thinking and cognition promotes "Cultural Appreciation". The explosion of "Li Ziqi's short video" on overseas platforms is a typical example of resonating the same emotional and cognitive levels between different cultural backgrounds. It satisfies the fantasy vision of returning to nature in Eastern culture and also fits the "poetic realm" in Western aesthetics. This combination of fluidity and dialogue reduces the "Cultural Discount" and makes it much easier for Western society to understand and embrace Chinese culture. At the same time, when facing the critical or hostile vision of the Western society, our opinion leaders should try to fit the universal values of the Western society, to present the Chinese position in a way that is familiar to the audience of the Western society, and to better help them understand the Chinese position from the Western perspective. [5] In an interview with a Russian journalist, CGTN host Liu Xin talked about the importance of presenting views to Western society through English in the way Western society thinks. Through this way of "thinking differently," that Liu Xin has achieved remarkable results in several "debates" with Western media through the Internet, gaining the comprehension and recognition of Western audiences. In the process of cultural de-embedding and re-embedding, Li Ziqi's and Liu Xin's images have accomplished cultural value-added and enhanced the reciprocal understanding between international communication exchanges.

5.3. Expanding the discourse space and accurate audience dissemination

Faced with the international discourse system in which the West is strong and the East is weak, China's online opinion leaders need to fight for more discourse space so their voices would not be drowned in the "flood of opinions" of Western opinion leaders. China has played a role as a responsible power in the prevention and control of the epidemic, actively advocating a sense of community of human destiny, in contrast to the Western society's practice of blaming each other for inaction. During this period, online opinion leaders exported Chinese values to Western societies and the world through diverse communication channels such as media reports, foreign publications, and think tank exchanges, thus winning more space for discourse in the international community and expanding the influence of communication. At the same time, online opinion leaders should also make use of data analysis to carry out accurate and segmented broadcasting in the process of completing communication, create cross-cultural products that are easily accepted by the target audience with close thinking, and realize accurate promotion through data analysis and intelligent algorithms. As the youth group is in the stage of shaping values, opinion leaders in China should pay more attention to the communication work and provide valuable guidance for the youth group in western society. For instance, the current international versions of TikTok for Doyin and Kwai for Kuaishou have entered the international market and are highly favored by foreign netizens. These short video apps are precisely placed according to overseas users' preferences, which is a concrete manifestation of online opinion leaders' adaptation to segmented communication. Some short video bloggers share Chinese traditional cultures such as Guzheng, pottery, and others that have gained countless fans and become the network opinion leaders of the Oriental culture section in short videos. This sort of overseas communication relies on the civilian subject of short video bloggers, avoiding the grand narrative of official mainstream media, and using a living tone to make cross-cultural communication more practical, so that foreign audiences could have the opportunity to intuitively understand and feel the charm of Chinese traditional culture, effectively reducing the value loss brought by " Cultural Discount". It also broadens the space for China's online opinion leaders in the international discourse system and enhances the value judgment of Western audiences when politicians make malicious statements.

6. Conclusions

At present, the relationship between China and the world has entered a new stage of development. With the rapid development of the Internet information era and the challenges in international communication brought by the "Cultural Discount", it is essential to build constructive online opinion leaders and gain more discourse power in the international discourse system. Through the efforts of many parties and collaborative development, Chinese cyberspace opinion leaders can take the international stage and promote the new construction of China's foreign communication pattern.

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