

# "Opinion Leaders": The guides for youth moral education in the network environment

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**Abstract:** The concept of opinion leaders is a classic in the field of communication studies. Utilizing the role of online opinion leaders to enhance the guidance of moral education in the internet era for the moral development of adolescents holds significant importance for improving the effectiveness of school moral education. It is essential for school moral education practitioners not only to value this auxiliary force intellectually but also to actively create favorable conditions to maximize the positive impact of online opinion leaders. Moreover, it is imperative for opinion leaders themselves to improve their quality and enhance their influence on the moral development of adolescents in the online environment.

**Keywords:** Opinion Leaders, Internet Era, School Moral Education

## 1. Introduction

The "opinion leader" is one of the classic concepts in communication studies, first identified by communication scholar Paul Lazarsfeld in 1940 during the presidential campaign when he was conducting a survey on the impact of mass media on voters. The concept was formally proposed in the book "The People's Choice," stating that "concepts often flow from radio broadcasts and newspapers to the leaders of public opinion (i.e., opinion leaders), and then from these individuals to the less active parts of the population." [1] In 1957, in the article "Two-Step Flow of Communication: An Update Report on a Hypothesis" published by Elihu Katz, he found that opinion leaders have more influence on people's opinions, actions, and behaviors compared to the media. In "The Personal Influence" authored by Lazarsfeld and others, it is pointed out that opinion leaders widely exist in all social strata and various fields. This is no less true in today's information age, in the world of the internet, where some very active netizens are able to gain a lot of agreement and reposts, attracting people with different opinions for extensive discussions, possessing great diffusivity. Adolescents are referred to as the natives of the internet, with great enthusiasm they are involved in the online world, and the internet has become an important window for them to understand the world and the main source of information. Against this backdrop, the school's moral education work, while clarifying its guiding responsibility in the online world, if it can be fully aware of the radiation capacity of "opinion leaders" in the network, and purposefully cultivate the guiding ability for mainstream values and moral norms, it serves as a supplement to the methods of moral education under network environment.

## 2. "Role of online opinion leaders in school moral education"

### 2.1. Moral education: guidance and diverting

Improving the effectiveness of school moral education has always been a focal and challenging point of moral education work. Looking back at our current school moral education practice, it still tends to adopt methods of "prohibition" and "prevention" [2]. Teachers often use explicit rules combined with certain punitive measures to rigidly prohibit students' deviant behavior. Under this negative moral education approach, some students comply with discipline out of a sense of obedience to authority, but for other students, it increases their rebellious psychology. Regardless of which type of student, life and learning in this environment lack vitality and vibrancy; the impact on students' creativity and individual development is negative. Positive practical orientation of school moral education should adopt a method of guidance

through diversion. This method not only embodies the purpose of moral education to guide mainstream values but also conforms to the complex viewpoints and pluralistic values on the internet.

In the online space, there are no interest relationships, and adolescents do not have to suppress their emotions; they can fully express their views. From a positive perspective, this release of emotions is precisely the entry point for "opinion leaders" to exert influence, to discover some potential problems and contradictions, and to guide them. Especially after sudden events occur and become the focus of public opinion, various viewpoints are complex and intertwined. In such a case, any attempt by the guide to suppress public opinion and conceal problems will not work and will instead cause adolescents' aversion, weakening the influence of the guidance work. The guidance of "opinion leaders" is based on the foundation where adolescents have fully expressed their views and attitudes around certain hot issues, deeply analyzing the hidden value orientation behind them, carrying out targeted propagation and influence of mainstream values, and promoting the development of adolescents' thinking and behavior in the right direction.

## **2.2. Moral education transformation in the internet era**

The advent of the Internet era has led to the rapid growth of adolescents' developing self-awareness, and the cross-cultural communication of online media has also made their sense of democracy more pronounced than that of their parents. This has resulted in adolescents emphasizing equality and agency in both interpersonal relationships and acceptance of external influences. Therefore, when they perceive moral education workers as imposing certain social norms in an unequal and coercive manner that cannot be understood or identified with, the intensification of such coercive activities will make them increasingly unable to accept these principles, increasing their negative attitude towards these norms, thereby affecting their acceptability. "Traditional school moral education theory explains the teacher-student relationship with a dualistic model of subject and object, where educators hope to directly 'shape' students through existing relationships, demanding students to 'obey' and 'imitate'. Under this model, an external, heteronomous morality is formed, which students struggle to adhere to when faced with value choices" [3]. This monotonous, mechanical demand for morality appears even more inadequate when facing a network world where responsibility is weakened and agency is missing. There is a considerable divergence in the communication studies community regarding the characteristics of opinion leaders, but a relatively unified view is that opinion leaders are on an equal footing with those they influence, and their influence flows laterally rather than vertically. On one hand, they form an equal and interactive relationship, guiding others by adapting to circumstances in equal communication. It is this context of formed leadership that can truly play a guiding role for adolescents. On the other hand, the "decentralization" characteristic of the network has eroded the traditional image of moral education workers as authorities of knowledge. The educated are no longer seen as passive recipients of indoctrination; they are subjects of initiative, building their own moral theoretical framework through the movement of thought contradictions. This guidance is the result of the adolescents' voluntary choice, guided by the two-way interaction with the guide, changing the single-agency nature of the teacher in traditional moral education work, allowing both parties the right to express their viewpoints and opinions.

## **2.3. Moral education and online public opinion guidance**

In a society with stable development, adhering to and practicing social norms is in the interest of the majority and is more profitable than deviant behavior, forming a kind of ideological constraint. However, in a rapidly changing society, traditional systems are severely impacted while new systems are still forming, leading to the abnormal phenomenon where deviant behavior is more profitable, and those who adhere to the original moral standards are considered outdated and old-fashioned, with traditional moral norms constantly questioned. At this time, school moral education is in an awkward situation. On one hand, school moral education tries to purify the campus environment by ignoring or avoiding social issues and vigorously promoting traditional moral norms; on the other hand, the experiences formed by the educated in real life constantly challenge the mainstream values advocated by the school, which inevitably makes the educated feel lost and confused, and even consider moral education as empty talk not considering practicality. "Moral education like a castle in the air can only fossilize into a standardized term on the curriculum" [4]. Confining moral education to book knowledge loses the interaction between moral education and social life, making

moral education lose its vitality. The "moral education" model still advocates the moral education method that remains in the traditional teaching method, that is, the teacher solemnly speaks on the podium, and the students sit upright and listen below, the content of the speech may be a copy unchanged from moral education classes 20 or 30 years ago, or perhaps these topics have been repeated many times in their moral education classes as students grow up, making school moral education increasingly become an empty shell of "theoretical talk" lacking pertinence [5]. Guiding public opinion on the Internet caused by a certain social contradiction and giving full play to the guiding role of opinion leaders is the main way to overcome the "macro guidance" of traditional moral education in the online environment.

In the online society, various types of online groups form, and the members of the group interact frequently, with highly consistent viewpoints and value norms. The opinion leaders hold a core position in these groups, having a great influence on the value guidance and shaping of other members. The mutual influence between these groups will also go beyond specific online platforms, expanding their influence to a larger scope. Moral education can understand the moral development status of most netizens in the group with the opinion leader as the core by understanding the ideological tendencies and value orientation of a certain opinion leader. Value guidance for most members can be achieved through the opinion leader. This can not only improve the pertinence of moral education work but also reduce the resistance in the implementation process. In addition, the key to improving the pertinence of school moral education work is to understand the current status of adolescents' moral development, and the online public opinion formed based on various social contradictions can more truly reflect the current status of adolescents' moral development. Public opinion is the opinion of a group on a certain issue, and this opinion has a certain influence [6]. It is not the individual opinion of a few people, but the overall opinion of a group, reflecting the real ideas and development needs of adolescents, and is the directional sign of the current status of adolescents' moral development. By guiding these public opinions through opinion leaders, affirming and promoting some values, providing young people with a blueprint of basic moral norms, adolescents can improve their moral critical ability in contrast and reflection.

#### **2.4. Internet and moral education innovation**

The rise of the Internet cannot be ignored as one of the most prominent factors affecting the social environment of school moral education. It is highly sought after among adolescents, compelling school moral education efforts to confront this powerful new force, to base themselves on this reality, and to explore new means and content of moral education, incorporating this potential educational force into the guiding direction of school moral education. Cultivating opinion leaders involves considering the online world as an entirely new educational space where they actively participate in online life, setting guidance content based on the intellectual development and psychological changes of adolescents in different periods. Broadly speaking, these various spaces for information dissemination are also new venues for moral education. It is worth mentioning that the rapid rise of microblogging has brought new changes for "opinion leaders" to expand their influence. "The emergence of microblogging, by following this form, allows a large number of fans to come into contact with opinion leaders and makes zero-distance dialogue between them possible. This makes it very easy to resonate, and when they comment on social hot topics and public events, their views often influence a large number of fans and the direction of public opinion, and even change the direction of public events in reality, which greatly increases their appeal" [7]. School moral education work should be sensitive to these developments and changes, adhere to keeping pace with the times, and actively participate on the basis of grasping its characteristics, to bring out the moral education power of new things.

#### **2.5. Role model education and opinion leaders**

The exemplar demonstration method is an approach where educators use typical models to influence the thoughts and moral character of the educated through the exemplary qualities and imitable behaviors of others [8]. This method personifies and concretizes moral requirements and norms, guiding adolescents in their behavior and value choices in real life. Currently, there are some issues in the role model education within our school moral education, such as: poor appeal, formal propaganda, and the stereotyped image of role models. Opinion leaders to some extent make up for the shortcomings of role model teaching. First of all, opinion leaders are not pre-set by teachers, but actively chosen by the youth. The guidance of opinion

leaders is mostly achieved through written content, which is formed subtly and imperceptibly. In addition, there is an equal relationship between opinion leaders and adolescents. Opinion leaders to a certain extent represent the needs and ideas of adolescents; they are a window for moral educators to understand the moral development of young people. Finally, opinion leaders are not unapproachable; they should accept the youth's questioning and criticism. Their interactions are continuous, and as individuals, they are similar to adolescents in personality, which increases the acceptability and appeal of opinion leaders.

### **3. Online leaders and integration of moral education**

The Internet has provided a vast platform for discourse, differing from traditional opinion leaders who are characterized by high academic qualifications, abilities, and prominent social status. In the Internet era, opinion leaders have transcended traditional domains and have become more accessible and popularized among the public.

While utilizing online opinion leaders, schools must first clarify a critical issue: maintaining a stance that promotes good and suppresses evil, and managing the balance between active guidance and regulation. "Guiding online public opinion is not about having the guide dominate everything, but about eliminating wrong and negative views to make healthy and pragmatic discourse the mainstream of online public sentiment" [9]. The ultimate purpose of school moral education guidance is the moral development of young people. Therefore, the starting point for opinion leaders' guidance should be to actively promote the moral cognition of adolescents, improve their critical thinking skills, and ultimately transform them into moral actions. In this process, certain rules and regulations are necessary, combining self-restraint with external constraints, and integrating heteronomous and autonomous morality, without replacing one with the other.

There are many types of online opinion leaders, but the ones that ultimately become educational resources for schools are primarily well-known netizens, moderators, and Internet celebrities. Well-known netizens are those who post many articles in forums, get high click rates, replies, and reposts, and have a significant impact. They are particularly sensitive to social events and can respond quickly, and their content is often infectious, influencing people's positions and viewpoints with a first-mover advantage. Their registered names can have a star effect in online forums. Moderators are equivalent to managers and editors within the forum, whose influence mainly lies in the dissemination and control of information. They actively promote certain viewpoints by pinning certain posts or classifying them as excellent posts, and they act as "gatekeepers" of information by deleting and banning negative and harmful content. Internet celebrities are those who extend their influence from traditional mass media to the online world. Although it is not easy to integrate such opinion leaders into the school's moral education forces, they should not give up their responsibility to lead mainstream values as a support force in the external social environment. Moreover, given the inherent authority of traditional media in people's minds in our country, the influence of online guides, combined with the authority of traditional celebrities, can further enhance the influence of opinion leaders. In addition, actively incorporating offline personnel with different academic backgrounds, who are familiar with the network, enthusiastic about commentary, and have sharp writing skills, into the guidance team, and gradually improving their ability to guide public opinion is a way to broaden the sources of opinion leaders.

Schools should incorporate some opinion leaders into the moral work team, keep up-to-date with the ideological dynamics of opinion leaders, and improve their recognition of mainstream values through equal dialogue, successfully conveying mainstream values in the guidance activities. Schools should also create a smooth space for the expression of public opinion for value guidance activities, respecting students' freedom of speech, allowing them to fully express their views, opinions, or interests, and making the guidance activities of opinion leaders more targeted only after fully understanding the ideological tendencies of the other party. Improving the construction level of campus network platforms and enhancing the richness and vividness of their content to attract the attention of young people, meet the diverse needs of young people, and attract authoritative figures from the school to participate, to comment on the social ethos that affects the moral construction of young people for a period of time, and interact with the activities of opinion leaders, supporting each other and enhancing the effectiveness of guidance.

## **4. Opinion leaders should enhance their guiding abilities**

### **4.1. Online public opinion and value guidance**

The collection of adolescent online public opinion is the foundation for conducting effective value-oriented activities and directly affects the outcomes of guidance. The repetitive nature of online information makes it very difficult to obtain useful information. Mastering scientific and rational information collection techniques can improve the efficiency of the collection process. Before starting the collection work, analyzing the collection targets and objects and formulating a collection plan and strategy can ensure an orderly collection process.

Guiders must first adhere to the principle of people-oriented during the information collection process, fully respect the different opinions of adolescents, recognize individual differences, and respect the independent personality of adolescents. They should also learn to care and understand, actively helping adolescents to grow and appropriately satisfy their desire for social knowledge during specific developmental periods. Otherwise, such guidance activities will be superficial and lack persuasiveness.

Guiders should also clearly understand the spaces where juvenile public opinion is most concentrated, especially the forums most popular among young people. These places are where information exchange and dissemination are most complete, and various viewpoints and debates are clear at a glance. When collecting information, guides must be highly sensitive to the hot issues that young people care about, timely grasp the deep-seated values behind their different views on these issues, and be good at capturing representative and novel viewpoints for analysis and synthesis. This helps to catch information that is still in its infancy and improves the forward-looking nature of guidance. Adolescents' views on certain events are not unchanging and may change as the situation develops. Therefore, when collecting this kind of information, the guides should pay attention to the integrity and continuity of the information to adjust the guidance direction and strategy in time according to the different ideological states of different periods.

### **4.2. Information analysis and value shaping**

The higher the quality of information analysis, the greater its impact on guiding adolescents. Firstly, it is essential to make value judgments on the collected information, refining and sifting out the truth from falsehoods. Building on this, further grasp the general trend of adolescent thought reflected in this information and predict its direction of development. The purpose of scientifically analyzing information is to uncover the deep-seated value orientations and moral ideological issues that lie beneath the surface. Adolescents' criteria for distinguishing right from wrong no longer solely refer to the mainstream values publicized by society; instead, they exhibit a diversified set of values. Some values represent a creative application of traditional moral standards in new contexts, enriching mainstream values. However, other values may be a senseless promotion of decadent lifestyles. It is imperative for those guiding to be clear on what should be promoted and what resisted, subtly shaping adolescents' values through positive guidance.

### **4.3. Guiding topics and emotional resonance**

Adolescents often focus on social or campus events, and based on their importance, it is essential to proactively select guiding topics. In the process of setting up guiding topics, it's not just about addressing the issue at hand, but also about raising related questions surrounding the main issue to highlight the target content. There must be ongoing communication and interaction with the opinions of young people; when the content of their discussions deviates from the pre-set course by the guide, it is necessary to promptly correct it. When changes in social events lead to changes in the content of discussions, the guiding content must be adjusted in a timely manner. However, adolescents do not passively receive external influences as if they were mere targets; instead, they typically filter external information based on their existing experiences. Therefore, if the guide wishes to successfully internalize the advocated value orientation among adolescents, they must leverage emotional factors, arousing the young people's empathy, enabling them to feel deeply and reducing their resistance, consciously connecting with their existing experiences.

In summary, the influence of opinion leaders on the moral education of adolescents is a subtle and progressive process, not something achieved instantly. Cultivating opinion leaders is merely an auxiliary means of school moral education; their role should not be overemphasized. The effectiveness of this

guidance also requires the support of the school's hardware facilities, such as certain network devices, technology applications, and financial investment in information collection and analysis technology, etc.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper thoroughly discusses the significance and modes of action of opinion leaders in the context of the Internet era's impact on school moral education. As a key concept in communication studies, opinion leaders can influence the values and behaviors of adolescents through the Internet, which significantly contributes to the effectiveness of school moral education. The article begins by reviewing the origin and development of opinion leaders, highlighting their widespread presence across various societal domains, especially in the online world where they impact youth through active online engagement.

The paper then analyzes the multifaceted roles of opinion leaders in online moral education, including guiding through diversion, equal interaction, enhancing the relevance of moral education, and keeping up with the times. These roles help overcome the limitations of traditional moral education and enhance its appeal and effectiveness. Furthermore, the article emphasizes the importance for school moral educators to value and harness the power of opinion leaders, by creating favorable conditions and improving the leaders' own qualities to maximize their positive impact. Additionally, opinion leaders need to enhance their guiding abilities, including the capacity to collect and analyze online public opinion and to master guiding techniques, to more effectively promote the moral development of young people.

In conclusion, while opinion leaders play a vital role in school moral education, they are just one of several auxiliary means. The effectiveness of their guidance also depends on the support of hardware facilities and financial investment to ensure that their role can be fully realized. Through these measures, an educational environment that fosters the moral growth of adolescents can be established.

## 6. References

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