

The Causes and Solution of Paid Internet Commenters Phenomenon Based on Communication Studies and Social Psychology

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Abstract. Paid Internet Commenters (PICs) constitute a cohort of professionally employed individuals within structured networks dedicated to systematic opinion manipulation. These coordinated entities manipulate public discourse through the strategic dissemination of manufactured content, serving either corporate branding agendas or reputation management objectives. Systematic dissemination of fabricated content by PICs not only contaminates information ecosystems but also erodes institutional trust in digital platforms, necessitating immediate governance interventions. This article examines the popularity of PIC from perspectives of communication studies and social psychology through qualitative analysis, focusing on three key theories: the Spiral of Silence, Persuasive Argument Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory. The study highlights how PIC exploits algorithmic biases and psychological vulnerabilities to distort public opinions. Potential solutions include algorithmic adjustment, minority opinion encouragement, and media literacy education to enhance critical thinking. The findings emphasize the need for multidimensional interventions to preserve a balanced and authentic online environment. Future research should explore intersections with cyberbullying and AI-driven disinformation.

Keywords: Paid Internet Commenters, communication studies, social psychology, media literacy, public opinion

1. Introduction

On December 1st, 2021, a Chinese series named *Feng qi Luo Yang* was released online at 9:00 p.m., an hour later than originally scheduled. However, on Douban, a well-known movie and TV series rating platform, comments concerning the series had already overwhelmed at the original time. This discrepancy prompted investigative reporting from major Chinese media outlets including *The Paper* and *Caixin*, generating significant public discourse. By December 14, Douban's transparency report indicated the removal of 20,097 non-organic evaluations, comprising 12,366 (61.5%) perfect 5-star ratings and 6,610 (32.9%) minimum 1-star ratings [1]. This event demonstrated the proliferation of online misinformation and disinformation. One of the biggest sources is the Paid Internet Commenters.

The Paid Internet Commenters(PIC), also known as “internet navy” or “internet trolls”, refers to those hired by certain organizations or individuals and engaging in internet hype [2]. PIC usually publish massive, homogenous and fabricated contents designed by their employers to manipulate public opinions, assisting their employers to reach specific targets, such as commercial benefits or reputation remedy. They sometimes even simulate authentic user behaviors, such as replying to comments, initiating posts, or tagging popular figures, to reinforce their authenticity. When PIC emerge, normal opinion interaction and communication will usually be disrupted, enhancing the difficulty of recognizing the facts about specific events or individuals. There will be more obstacles for netizens to judge and recognize authentic information in social events or product reviews with the intervention from PIC. Hence, PIC is often considered as an unstable factor that needs to be immediately resolved.

The academic research toward PIC mainly focuses on communication (PIC may affect public perception by constructing false public opinion atmosphere [3]), social psychology (individuals may be influenced by PIC and be cheated [4]), and technology governance perspectives (PIC has evolved through technological progress like AI, making traditional solutions less effective [5]). This article will analyze the two issues based on communication studies and social psychology: the reasons behind the popularity of PIC, and the solutions toward it. The article utilizes qualitative research method and will provide new theoretical reference in terms of online environment protection and maintenance.

2. Theoretical framework: communication perspectives on PIC prevalence

2.1. The spiral of silence and agenda setting theory

“The Spiral of Silence” theory states that individuals’ perception toward the public opinion affects their willingness to express their own opinions. When noticing that their opinions are mainstream, they are more likely to share their ideas; when theirs are not welcomed, they tend to be silent [6]. The majority will be more willing to voice to expand the mainstream position and continue leading it, while the minority will be more silent to avoid criticism and isolation. The polarization indicates the Matthew Effect: In terms of voice, “the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer”. This is the target of PIC when they construct so-called “mainstream” and oppress the voice from authentic users.

The theory is based on another one named Agenda Setting Theory, referring to the case where mass media can influence the setting of certain image on the public’s mind [7]. For example, the media can manipulate the public’s judgment toward the importance of issues through selective reporting. When a topic or an assumption frequently appears in mass media, the information receiver, that is the public, will automatically consider it an important or reasonable one. The PIC phenomenon operationalizes this mechanism through coordinated topic flooding, wherein artificially amplified narratives displace organic discourse. After manufacturing the false opinion atmosphere, PIC initiates nonstop voice publishment to preserve and broaden their advantages. This repetitive process forms a spiral, in which voice from PIC becomes increasingly powerful, while that from the authentic users becomes increasingly silent.

2.2. Persuasive argument theory

Persuasive Argument Theory claims that group discussions will foster the initial inclination, rather than encouraging rational debates [8]. This theory explains that the arguments before group

exposure usually predict and lay the foundation for members' attitude in subsequent discussions. PIC surrounds online discussion with fake "mainstream opinions" by controlling online comments, making true thoughts excluded due to the lack of exposure.

The cosmetic product review is a typical example. PIC will scan through comments with most likes, seek out common keywords in those comments, and combine keywords they noticed previously with the template of "emotional words + scene description + effect exclamation" [9]. They construct "initial tendency" by generating fraudulent positive reviews. Because the algorithm prioritizes highly interactive content, negative reviews from real users are downgraded by the system, forming an information cocoon. With the initial trend that benefit PIC's employers, the subsequent discussions will mainly foster that trend, tricking more consumers to purchase products. The manipulation is effective not merely on account of the volume of content, but because it strategically put fabricated voices on the "leaders" position in online public discussions.

2.3. Uses and gratifications theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory is widely used when researching issues in communication and social studies. This theory describes certain reasons and means people use media to satisfy specific needs [10]. Under the background that Internet culture is a category of popular culture, people tend to chase personal pleasure. Everyone in the society built on popular culture enjoys entertainment, to be precise, something that always contains novelty, humor, and vulgarity. The entertainment aspect of news and online hype has gradually permeated every aspect of social life. Moreover, the increasing reliance on short-form contents limits the depth of thought. Audiences addicted to such contents are easily provoked by emotional and superficial comments, which is undoubtedly a great opportunity for PIC.

Neil Postman warns in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that when a society becomes preoccupied with trivial entertainment, when cultural discourse is reduced to endless amusement, and when serious public debate degenerates into childish simplification, the nation ultimately faces the danger of cultural demise [11]. The hype and pranks from PIC are often highly emotional and visually appealing, with the specialty that the content can be rapidly consumed without much attention. This hits exactly on the public's interest and satisfy people's demand for superficial and emotional information, making it more challenging to eliminate PIC.

3. Potential solutions

3.1. Adjust the algorithm weightage

Algorithmic systems should recalibrate the weighting mechanism of user engagement metrics rather than maintaining predominant or exclusive reliance on them. In most social media algorithm, user interaction, such as likes and comments, are prioritized. Content recommendation probability exhibits positive correlation with the volume of likes and comments under current algorithmic paradigms. The emergence of PIC, however, is a loophole in the algorithm system. PICs' orchestrated interaction patterns exploit algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, thereby accelerating the diffusion of inauthentic content. As established in agenda-setting theory, mass media algorithms significantly shape public perception of social issues. This necessitates algorithmic reengineering to de-emphasize engagement metrics while augmenting authenticity valuation parameters. Systems such as "ratings of information authenticity" can be introduced and executed in social media. Information authenticity ratings should incorporate safeguards against unilateral

reviewer assignment to prevent bias. If a large number of identical ratings are received within a short period of time, the system will automatically filter and limit the ratings to ensure the authenticity of the reviews. With clear and correct guide in terms of authenticity, what mass media appropriately affect the public, rather than becoming PIC's tool.

3.2. Encourage the minority to publish their voice

The true voice from the minority will challenge PIC by replacing homogenization with diversity. Under the impact of the Spiral of Silence, the minority are less active in publishing their opinions. They tend to be silent or simply click on “dislike”, instead of leaving comments. To sustain a balance of opinion, visualizing the true opinions from diverse perspectives is essential. The function of “sort by controversy” on Reddit is an example. In this mode, comments under a post will still be arranged through the total number of upvotes and downvotes from most to least. However, comments whose upvotes and downvotes are nearly equal will be recommended first. This means that such comments are usually debated by different opinions, rather than completely occupied by a single side. The function can ensure equal exposure of various judgment and prevent the monopoly of PIC.

3.3. Promote media literacy education

Addressing this issue requires not only mitigating negative impacts but also enhancing the general public's media literacy competencies. Uses and Gratifications theory demonstrates that current public only pursues personal enjoyment while ignoring the harm of online chaos, including PIC. To enhance the awareness and ability of tackling PIC, the promotion of media literacy education is inevitable. Media literacy is “the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms” [10]. PIC disturb media users in “analyze” and “evaluate” procedure. Media literacy curricula should prioritize instructional modules focused on developing robust information authentication and critical evaluation skills. Pedagogical frameworks must equip learners with evidence-based techniques for identifying PIC-driven misinformation/disinformation and facilitate constructive digital discourse participation. Improving netizens' media literacy will enable them to rationally analyze and judge the false claims fabricated by PIC. When PIC's messages are ignored, they will be unable to survive, and their presence will naturally fade away.

4. Conclusion

This study analyses the reasons behind and potential solutions toward Paid Internet Commenters. The popularity of PIC results from “The Spiral of Silence”, “Persuasive Argument Theory”, and “Uses and Gratifications Theory”. In the Internet era, the public prefer personal enjoyment. Generally, netizens put authenticity behind novelty, and morality behind vulgarity. PIC always attempt to intervene the public and repeat their success by leading the initial tendency and trap the public in opinion illusion brought by PIC. In order to combat them, we are supposed to inhibit negative effects above by introducing and implementing advanced systems and measurements. Solutions from diverse perspective are needed. Increasing the weightage of information authenticity will help break the effects from “the Spiral of Silence”; raising the voice from minority will help that from “Persuasive Argument Theory”; promoting media literacy education will help that from “Uses and Gratifications Theory”. On one hand, PIC will occupy less online space in front of algorithm evolution; on the other hand, the public with advanced media literacy will become more

sensible concerning PIC contents and ignore their messages. These two changes will combat PIC effectively and conserve the secure, balanced and authentic network environment.

In the future, research concerning the internet issues can be extended to phenomena such as cyberbullying. Future research should empirically examine the operational overlap between cyberbullying infrastructures and PIC networks, particularly regarding shared bot architectures and amplification tactics. Meanwhile, the abuse of online AI technologies, such as Deepfake, may also exacerbate the opinion manipulation. Defensive systems should be deployed in advance.

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