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The Influence of Highlighted Comments on User Cognition in Social Media from an Agenda-Setting Perspective

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Abstract. With the continuous development of the Internet and digital technology, the way people obtain information has undergone significant changes. Social media has gradually become an important channel for news and information acquisition, and has changed the traditional media-dominated information dissemination model. Meanwhile, social media comment sections allow users to express opinions, interact with others, and participate in discussions. On platforms like Weibo, Douyin, Bilibili, YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, some comments gain higher visibility due to being pinned, receiving a large number of likes or being recommended by algorithms, becoming the information that users are more likely to encounter after entering the comment section, and may influence users' understanding and attitude formation regarding related events. Based on the agenda-setting theory, through literature analysis and case discussions, this study investigates how highlighted comments influence users' cognition through attention guidance, social influence and comment sorting mechanisms. The results indicate that highlighted comments can increase the attention to specific issues, guide users to form a specific information understanding framework, and reinforce users' cognitive judgments through likes, interactive feedback and group opinions, etc. Moreover, the presentation order and repeated exposure of comments may also affect users' subsequent information interpretation and opinion formation. This paper believes that in the social media environment, highlighted comments have become a new agenda-setting mechanism, playing an important role in shaping public attention, online public opinion and online discussion structures.

Keywords: Social Media, Highlighted Comments, Agenda-Setting Theory, Conformity Effect, User Cognition

1. Introduction

The way people produce, share, and access information has been transformed by social media. In this context, agenda-setting research initially explored how traditional news media influenced the public's judgment of the importance of various issues [1]. Later studies extended agenda-setting research to social media, thereby highlighting how user interactions shape public attention [2, 3]. IIn online environments, information diffusion depends on platform design, network structure, and early user feedback, which can shape later evaluations of online content [4-6]. Similarly, Asch's experiments showed that people's judgments can be influenced by majority opinions [7]. Further

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research examined how social influence and conformity can bring individual opinions closer to those of a group [8, 9]. These studies help explain how information spreads and how social influence shapes opinions. However, they leave open the question of how these processes operate together in social media comment sections. Some comments receive greater visibility because they are pinned, highly liked, or recommended by algorithms. This paper refers to them as highlighted comments and examines how their visibility and the feedback they receive may influence users' understanding of the original content. Based on agenda-setting theory, this paper asks how highlighted comments guide users' attention and how social feedback and comment order may affect their judgments. It also considers whether repeated exposure to these comments may contribute to opinion convergence over time. The analysis draws on existing literature and discusses the case of Zheng Linghua, using social influence, conformity, and cognitive anchoring to examine these processes. It aims to explain how highlighted comments may shape users' understanding and attitudes and to provide a basis for further research on comment ranking and online discussion.

2. The influence of highlighted comments on attention and attitudes

2.1. Visibility and the allocation of attention

The volume of daily information exposure has exceeded individuals' cognitive processing capacity. In information overload environments, users cannot fully process all available content and often prioritize highly visible information, including platform recommendations, social media trends, and news headlines. Accordingly, highlighted comments belong to high-visibility information, which are usually located at the top of the comment section and receive more likes and interactions. Such comments lower filtering costs and attract more attention in information-dense environments. More broadly, Lerman and Ghosh demonstrate that the dissemination of information on social networks is shaped by both platform design and network structure, with different sorting mechanisms leading to distinct dissemination patterns [4]. This finding suggests that the way information is presented by the platform may affect the exposure level and dissemination effect of the content. Based on this, this paper argues that highlighted comments, as a sorting and display mechanism, may change the order of users' information exposure and affect their cognitive process.

For most users, highlighted comments are often the first information encountered when entering a comment section. Since the primary information has a strong cognitive guiding effect, users may use it as a reference framework for understanding the original post, allowing specific viewpoints or positions to receive more attention and further influencing subsequent judgments and content interpretation. It should be noted that there is no inevitable connection between the position of the information and its credibility. Although highlighted comments usually have a high number of likes and interactions, their high visibility does not mean that the viewpoints are more reliable. Users may have a trust bias due to their ranking position and interaction indicators, and thus tend to accept the viewpoints within them.

2.2. Constructing issue importance through agenda setting

The agenda-setting theory proposed by McCosks and Shaw holds that the media affect the public's perception of the significance of certain issues by increasing their exposure [1]. Though this theory was initially developed to explain the influence mechanism of traditional media, its core logic is also applicable to the social media environment. Traditional media guide public attention through news selection and layout arrangements, while social media increase the visibility of certain content

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through mechanisms such as sorting algorithms, top-posting of comments, and interaction metrics. Both influence users' judgments of issue importance via different information presentation formats.

Highlighted comments also exhibit a similar agenda-setting effect. Specifically, when comments receive prioritized visibility due to being pinned, accumulating high numbers of likes, or generating high levels of interaction, their viewpoints are more likely to enter users' information exposure scope and be perceived as more representative or significant content. This is consistent with Yang et al.'s finding that social media has become a new agenda-setting space, where different groups can influence the direction of public attention by increasing the visibility of specific information [2]. Therefore, high-visibility comments not only reflect user opinions but may also affect the formation and evolution of discussion topics. For example, in 2022, Zheng Linghua shared her experience of being admitted to graduate school and a photo with her grandfather on Xiaohongshu. However, the highly active content in the comment section gradually shifted from discussions of her academic achievements to her pink hair and appearance. Besides, some negative comments further intensified this focus. As a result, as related comments received increasing interactions, public attention shifted accordingly. This case indicates that highlighted comments can influence users' judgment of the event's significance through changing the visibility of information, and shape the way the public understands the issue.

2.3. The influence of attention on attitude formation

The mechanism by which comments influence users' judgment mainly manifests in two aspects: the anchoring effect and social identification. The anchoring effect suggests that individuals' judgments are shaped by initial information [10]. In the comment area environment, the first comments that users come across may become an important reference framework for understanding the content of the original post and affect the subsequent information processing. At the same time, the social identification theory suggests that interaction indicators such as the number of likes can convey a signal of group recognition, making users tend to accept the viewpoints that have received support from others [5, 6]. Therefore, the combination of initial information and social feedback may jointly influence users' perception of events and the formation of their attitudes.

Muchnik et al.'s large-scale experiment conducted on social news websites further verified the impact of early feedback on users' judgments. The study randomly added a like to some comments, and the results showed that this minor change significantly increased the probability of subsequent positive feedback for the comments. This shows that users' evaluation behaviors are not completely independent but are influenced by existing interaction information. Users are more likely to accept viewpoints with higher support, that is, social feedback can enhance the dissemination advantage of specific opinions [5].

Similarly, Glenski and Weninger's study on the rating of Reddit comments found that the initial rating differences would influence the degree of support that the comments received subsequently. Compared to the original post, the content of the comments is more dependent on user feedback to achieve a dissemination effect, and thus is more susceptible to the combined influence of visibility and social evaluation [6]. Thus, highlighted comments affect users' information interpretation by providing cognitive reference frames, while interaction metrics like the number of likes reinforce their social validation. These factors shape users' attitudes and opinion formation.

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3. The role of social influence in user judgment

3.1. Likes as a form of social proof

In the social media environment, the amount of information has exceeded the effective processing capacity of users. Users often rely on simplified information judgment methods. When there is a lack of time or sufficient basis to verify the content of comments, the number of likes may become a social proof signal, allowing users to judge the credibility and importance of a comment through the interactive feedback of others. Therefore, likes are no longer merely a quantitative indicator of user participation, but also an important clue influencing the evaluation of information.

The social identity theory can explain this phenomenon. According to this theory, in uncertain situations, individuals tend to refer to the behaviors of others and use the group feedback as an important basis for judging the validity of the information. Although the number of likes may be influenced by likes manipulation, algorithm recommendations, or other external factors and cannot accurately represent the true public consensus, in the case of uncertain information, users may still regard it as a reference indicator for the degree of social recognition and adjust their own judgments accordingly.

From the perspective of the platform mechanism, likes are usually one of the important factors influencing the sorting of comments, making the comments that receive more interactions more likely to be accessed by users first. Since some users tend to associate high numbers of likes with widespread approval, high-liked comments may thus gain additional credibility and dissemination advantages. Although likes cannot directly prove the authenticity of an opinion or represent the overall consensus, they may still affect users' perception of group opinions and further participate in shaping their attitude formation.

3.2. Conformity and the influence of majority opinions

The number of likes not only reflects the level of interaction in the comments but may strengthen users' perception of the "majority opinion." In online discussions, highlighted comments usually receive more likes and user interactions, making them more likely to be perceived as representative of collective approval. This phenomenon is closely related to the herd mentality. Herd mentality refers to the process in which individuals adjust their judgments or behaviors due to the influence of group opinions. Since the highlighted comments exhibit strong characteristics of social support, their influence mechanism is similar to that of the traditional herd effect.

The classic conformity experiment conducted by Solomon Asch in the 1950s suggested that even if an individual could clearly identify the correct answer, they might still change their judgment due to the opinions of the majority group [7]. This result indicates that when individuals are faced with group pressure, they may tend to avoid conflict and accept the majority opinion. In the social media context, algorithmic ranking, comment prioritization, and engagement indicators further facilitate this process. When users enter the comment section, they often prioritize accessing comments with higher likes or more discussion volume, and these visible interaction data may form similar "group pressure" social cues. Additionally, the anonymity of the internet reduces users' ability to identify the identities and motives of others, making users more reliant on external indicators such as likes and replies for information judgment.

Further research supports the influence of the majority opinion on the formation of individual viewpoints. Musaideh et al. found that the majority opinion has the effect of drawing individual viewpoints towards the group direction. Even individuals who initially hold different opinions may

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gradually adjust their positions after repeated exposure to majority views [8]. Similarly, Jawarone's research on the dynamics of opinions also indicates that the compliance mechanism plays an important role in the formation of group opinions and promotes the formation of social consensus [9]. Therefore, the influence of prominent comments not only stems from their high visibility, but also from the social recognition signals they convey. When users repeatedly come into contact with viewpoints that are widely supported, they may gradually increase their trust in that viewpoint and adjust their attitudes to a certain extent.

3.3. The influence of emotional responses on information evaluation

Users' judgments of information are shaped by a combination of cognitive, social, and emotional factors. Comments with emotional characteristics like anger, sympathy, humor or satire are usually more likely to attract attention and increase users' willingness to interact. Compared to information without emotional expression, emotional content often has stronger dissemination ability because it can quickly trigger users' emotional responses and influence their way of understanding the event. When such comments gain greater visibility, their emotional influence is amplified, leading more users to process information through the same emotional lens.

From the perspective of information processing, emotions can influence users' judgments on the importance and credibility of information. In information-rich environments, users often rely on emotional cues as cognitive shortcuts. For example, comments expressing anger or moral criticism may enhance perceptions of event importance, whereas sympathetic or supportive comments may shape users' attitudes toward the individuals involved. Therefore, the prominence of emotional cues in comments can influence users' immediate responses and further shape their later interpretation of information and attitude formation.

Bakshy et al. conducted a large-scale experiment based on Facebook, which found that even simple social signals could enhance users' information engagement and interaction probability [11]. This indicates that social connections and emotional factors can jointly influence users' information exposure and dissemination behaviors. On social media platforms, ranking mechanisms amplify this process by increasing the visibility of emotionally charged comments with high engagement, thus creating a cycle of "visibility-emotional arousal-further engagement." Therefore, the influence of prominent comments stems not only from social identification and conformity mechanisms but also from the emotional responses they evoke. Besides, platform display mechanisms, social feedback, and emotional diffusion jointly shape users' information evaluation processes and influence their understanding of events and attitude formation.

4. The influence of comment order on opinion convergence

4.1. The anchoring effect of early comments

When users enter the comment section, they usually first come across the highlighted comments at the top. This initial information may affect the way users understand the original content and become an important reference framework for subsequent evaluations. This phenomenon is related to attention allocation and cognitive processing, and the anchoring effect provides an explanation mechanism.

The anchoring effect was proposed by Tversky and Kahneman, which states that individuals tend to overly rely on the initial information they obtain and use it as a reference point for subsequent evaluations [11]. Even after encountering new information later on, the initial information may still

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continue to influence the judgment results. In the social media environment, highlighted comments may serve as cognitive anchors: before fully understanding the event background or exploring other viewpoints, users may rely on the interpretive framework provided by the comment to understand related content. Thus, even for the same original information, different users may form different initial judgments due to the different highlighted comments they encounter.

However, the anchoring effect mainly explains immediate judgment bias, while path dependence explains its long-term reinforcement. In online discussions, early popular comments may maintain greater exposure through likes, replies, and algorithmic ranking, allowing certain viewpoints to gain prominence. As more users engage with existing feedback, early opinion advantages may gradually shape the direction of discussion and constrain later viewpoints. The effect of highlighted comments lies not only in their ability to anchor users' initial judgments but also in their potential to create path dependence through continued exposure and social feedback. The former explains the early influence of specific viewpoints, while the latter explains how certain viewpoints gain prominence over time and shape broader discussion trends.

4.2. Path dependence and the order of information exposure

Unlike anchoring, which focuses on the immediate impact of initial information, path dependence emphasizes how early exposure shapes later information processing through repeated interactions. In social media environments, ranking systems and content displays influence users' information paths, allowing certain viewpoints to gain continued exposure and become reinforced over time.

Lerman and Ghosh indicate that the information sorting mechanism greatly affects the process of network information dissemination. Even if the content is the same, different sorting methods may lead to different dissemination outcomes [4]. This indicates that information presentation order influences both users' exposure to content and their subsequent interpretation and evaluation. For example, in the comment section of YouTube, the platform usually displays comments based on relevance and interaction level, giving priority to high-interaction comments. When users first come into contact with comments of a certain stance, subsequent information processing may be shaped by that viewpoint and tend to focus on information consistent with it, while ignoring opposing viewpoints. This process is consistent with confirmation bias, whereby individuals preferentially attend to information that reinforces their prior beliefs. As users continue to come into contact with similar viewpoints and receive further confirmation through social feedback such as likes and replies, the initially formed understanding framework may gradually stabilize and facilitate the formation of group consensus.

Therefore, highlighted comments not only shape users' initial information exposure but also may create path dependence via repeated exposure and feedback. By constantly enhancing the visibility of certain viewpoints, the platform's sorting mechanism may gradually favor a specific interpretive framework and shape users' understanding and evaluation of subsequent information.

4.3. Opinion convergence through repeated exposure

Apart from the herd mentality and path dependence, repeated exposure to the same information may also influence the formation of users' viewpoints. The repetition exposure effect indicates that an increase in the frequency of information occurrence can enhance an individual's familiarity with the content, and through enhancing processing fluency, it affects their judgment of the credibility of the content. Fazio et al. demonstrated that repeated exposure can enhance perceived credibility, even when individuals possess relevant domain knowledge. And this indicates that the familiarity and

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processing fluency of the information can influence an individual's judgment of its authenticity [12]. In other words, repeated information is more likely to be understood and accepted, and may be regarded by users as more credible content.

This mechanism explains the potential impact of prominent comments. In particular, prominent comments have higher visibility, making the expressed viewpoints more likely to be repeatedly exposed to users. As the number of exposures increases, users may, due to the enhanced familiarity, reduce their skepticism towards the information and gradually increase their acceptance of the related viewpoints. However, it should be noted that this inference is not a direct verification of the experimental results of Fazio et al., but rather a theoretical explanation based on the mechanism of repeated exposure regarding the influence of social media comments.

5. Conclusion

This study applies Agenda-Setting Theory to examine how highlighted comments influence user cognition and explores the roles of visibility, social influence, and comment ranking in this process. The findings suggest that highlighted comments can shape where users direct their attention. The study also shows that likes and group feedback can affect how users form opinions. The order in which comments appear can influence how users understand later information. The influence of highlighted comments also reflects a broader change in the media environment. In the past, agenda setting was mainly associated with traditional news organizations. Today, platform algorithms, comment ranking systems, and user interactions all contribute to shaping public attention. This study focused mainly on existing literature and examined the theoretical relationship between highlighted comments and user cognition. Future research could use surveys, experiments, and real platform data to explore these questions in greater detail and compare the effects across different social media platforms. In the end, the influence of highlighted comments comes from more than the content of the comments themselves. Their visibility, the social signals they carry, and their position within a comment section all shape how users interpret information. Understanding these effects can help us better understand how opinions form online and how public discussions develop in the age of social media.

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