



A Study on the Agenda Setting of Academic Misconduct in Chinese Universities under the New Media Environment

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Abstract. This paper will explore the influence of social media on adolescent social behavior. With the popularization of social media, more and more young people are using these platforms to communicate with their peers, which has raised concerns about their social development and behavior. This study focuses on the characteristics of media coverage of academic misconduct in Chinese universities over the past four years, using the agenda-setting theory and descriptive and inferential statistical analysis methods. By analyzing the characteristics of media reports on academic misconduct, this paper aims to provide suggestions for improving media coverage of academic misconduct and promoting a more positive academic environment.

Keywords: Academic misconduct; New media; Agenda research

1 Background

In recent years, there have been numerous incidents of academic misconduct in Chinese universities, which has drawn widespread attention to the issue of academic integrity and ethical conduct in higher education. Academic integrity is not only essential for promoting the overall quality of the academic community and the talent pool, but also plays a crucial role in enhancing the nation's capacity for independent innovation and improving its international image. In May 2016, President Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of promoting a positive academic culture based on quality, rigor, integrity, and responsibility, in a speech at a conference on philosophy and social sciences ^[1].

In the era of new media, online communication has become more timely and interactive than traditional media, allowing the public to share information and express their views at any time. In recent years, the majority of reports on academic misconduct in Chinese universities have originated from individuals on online platforms such as Zhihu, Weibo, and WeChat. These reports are often rapidly disseminated across various

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online platforms and gain significant attention after media coverage and public discussion. In response to public pressure, universities typically release statements on the investigation and verification of these incidents the day after the reports are published. It is worth noting that media coverage of academic misconduct can shape public opinion and attitudes towards this issue. By using descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, and case analysis, this paper analyzes media coverage of academic misconduct in Chinese universities from 2019 to 2022, and suggests ways to improve media coverage of academic misconduct, thereby promoting more positive academic behavior and values.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Academic Misconduct in Chinese Universities

The normative definition of "academic misconduct" comes from relevant documents of government departments. For example, the "Code of Ethics for Science and Technology Workers ^[2]" issued by the 7th Executive Committee of the China Association for Science and Technology in 2007 defines academic misconduct as "all kinds of falsification, plagiarism, academic theft, and other behaviors that violate scientific community conventions in scientific research and academic activities"^[2]. The "academic misconduct in Chinese universities" referred to in this paper mainly refers to the misconduct of scholars in academic research, project applications, achievement evaluations, and scientific research rewards in undergraduate colleges, specialized colleges, and vocational colleges in China, involving plagiarism, academic theft, fabrication, and other unethical behaviors in scientific research.

As of March 30, 2023, a search for "academic misconduct" using the CNKI database in China resulted in approximately 1,931 relevant papers. From the current research status in China, most studies focus on exploring the reasons, impacts, suggestions, and countermeasures of academic misconduct in universities and mainly concentrate on the fields of sociology and education, with a relatively single research perspective.

2.2 Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda setting theory suggests that the mass media can influence the public's perception of the importance of a particular issue by increasing the amount of coverage or highlighting certain issues. The origin of this theory can be traced back to Lippmann, who pointed out that media coverage could influence our mental image of the world ^[3]. In 1972, McCombs and Shaw formally proposed the hypothesis of agenda setting theory. Subsequently, the theory gradually received widespread attention from the academic community and became one of the most important theories in the field of communication studies.

As a study of communication effects, agenda setting theory not only reveals that the media can rank issues by importance, but also inspires news media to make full use of the functions of agenda setting, to play a role in information dissemination, public opinion guidance, and supervision. As of March 30, 2023, a search for "agenda setting" in the CNKI database in China yielded approximately 4,259 relevant papers. From the

literature theme perspective, the research status of agenda setting has shifted from theoretical research to applied research. Most studies start with existing news case studies and use agenda setting theory to analyze specific characteristics and impacts, providing effective experience for future news practice activities. This paper further expands the perspective of applied research based on the theoretical research of predecessors, focusing on news case studies in the academic field.

2.3 Research Innovation from the Perspective of New Media

New media refers to the media based on digital technology and mobile communication technology in the Internet age, which has the characteristics of immediacy, universality, interactivity, and diversification. With the continuous development of new media technology, the main channels for the public to obtain news information have shifted from traditional print media to new media platforms. The connection between the media and the public has become closer, and the public is no longer just a passive information receiver, but can also be a sender of information. People can comment on news information anytime and anywhere, participate in online discussions, and express their opinions through various channels. This has brought new opportunities and challenges to the news media. The news media needs to innovate continuously, integrate new media technologies and concepts, and keep pace with the times to better serve the public.

3 Research Design

3.1 Research Methods and Objectives

This study adopts the methods of content analysis and literature research to investigate the current mainstream new media's coverage of academic misconduct and related topics in academia. Firstly, news reports related to the topic are collected from the website and WeChat public account of the China Youth Daily, and irrelevant or repetitive reports are filtered out. Then, the reports are classified and organized according to the issues raised. Finally, conclusions are drawn through descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, and case analysis.

In selecting new media platforms, this study has chosen China Youth Daily as one of the eight major official media and WeChat, the largest social media platform in China, as the main source of news for this study. China Youth Daily is a comprehensive daily newspaper that attaches great importance to reporting on science and technology news, while the WeChat public platform plays an important role in information dissemination as an important channel for information acquisition^[4]. At the same time, most of the news reports in China Youth Daily and WeChat platform are from various media such as Beiqing Net and Legal Daily, so the selection of China Youth Daily and WeChat is representative and extensive to a certain extent. The main keywords selected for news reports are "academic misconduct", "academic plagiarism", "academic piracy", and "academic fraud", which cover the reports related to academic misconduct in the field of university scientific research. Compared with other social network public opinions, this topic has strong specificity^[5]. At the same time, this study focuses on the

issue setting of news reports in order to explore the impact of the media's issue selection on the effectiveness of the reports.

3.2 Sample Selection and Classification

This study focuses on news reports with keywords such as "academic misconduct", "academic plagiarism", "academic piracy", and "academic fraud", with a scope limited to events related to domestic universities or scholars, covering news from January 1, 2019 to August 1, 2022, a period of approximately four years. The media platform chosen for this study is China Youth Daily's official website and WeChat public articles. Among them, advanced searches using keywords such as "academic misconduct" were conducted on China Youth Daily's official website, and articles with over 10,000 reads were selected from WeChat public accounts. After filtering out duplicate and weakly related (such as academic misconduct incidents occurring abroad and having little relevance to domestic university scholars) news reports, a total of 39 articles from China Youth Daily and 85 articles from WeChat public accounts, totaling 124 news reports, were selected. Subsequently, the news reports were classified into event reports, personality reports, and event + personality reports; by genre, into news, commentary, and communication; by content perspective, into event reports, impact reports, cause reports, and countermeasure reports; and by reporting bias and effectiveness, into positive news and negative news.

4 Research Findings

4.1 Descriptive Statistical Analysis

4.1.1 Types of Reports.

In the collected samples, the vast majority were event reports or event + person reports, with almost no pure person reports. As shown in Figure 1, event reports accounted for approximately 36% of the total reports, while event + person reports accounted for 64% and were the more common type of report. Among them, event reports focused on the process and disposal results of academic misconduct events, while event + person reports introduced a brief overview of the individuals involved in the reports. For example, in the article "Academic misconduct by academician Li Zhaoshen exposed on the internet; Chinese Academy of Engineering and Navy Medical University have launched investigations," the first half of the article serves as an event report, giving a general introduction to the academic misconduct of academician Li Zhaoshen, while the second half serves as a person report, introducing Li Zhaoshen's research direction and achievements.

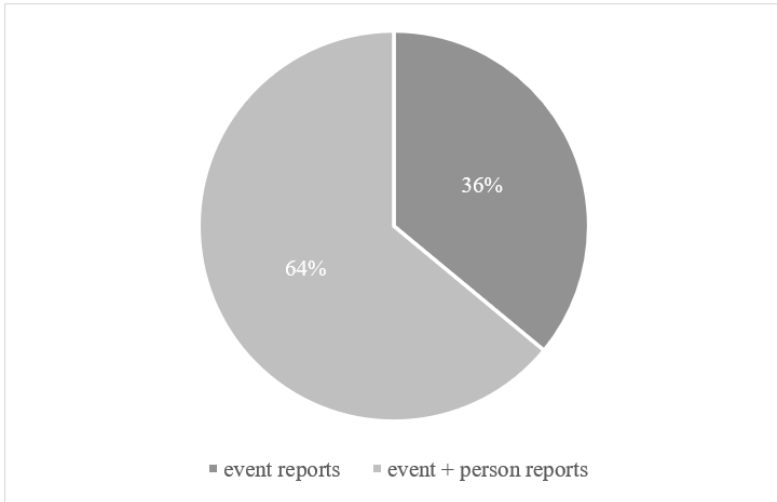


Fig. 1. Report Types (Data collection and statistics by authors)

4.1.2 Report Year.

As shown in Figure 2, 2019 was the year with the highest number of reports, accounting for 52% of the total reports. In early 2019, a large number of news reports focused on the Zhai Tianlin incident. Perhaps due to the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of reports in 2020 saw a drastic drop to the lowest point of 16%. Subsequently, reports on academic misconduct rose to 31% in 2021. As of August 1, 2022, the proportion of reports for 2022 is currently 25%. With the upcoming admission season, the overall trend of reports for 2022 still remains highly variable.

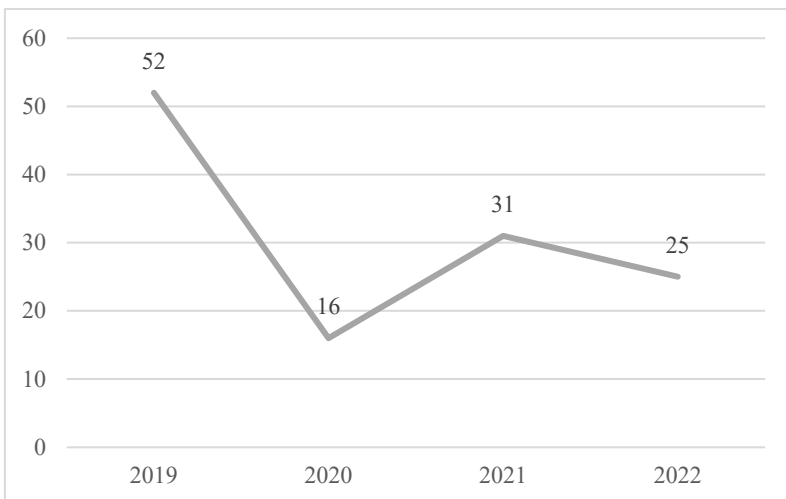


Fig. 2. Reporting Year (Data collection and statistics by authors)

4.1.3 The primary goal of report genre.

News takes the dissemination of news facts as the primary goal, communication emphasizes the in-depth interpretation of facts, and commentary is the interpretation of opinions on the objects involved on the basis of facts [6]. News is the most commonly used genre of news which is a kind of accurate and concise report of typical facts of social significance that have recently happened at home and abroad by means of general narration and concise words. News should have sufficient factual basis that is the source of the news. Secondly, we should pay attention to the prescription, keep new and fast. The third is to be short and concise. Communication is a kind of news genre which mainly uses narration and description to report typical characters, meaningful time and fresh experience concretely and vividly. Compared with information, communication has the characteristics of news, image and commentary. Commentary is an article subject that evaluates and discusses a certain phenomenon or problem in news commentary. It is often used in conjunction with news. For the same writing subject, criticism focuses on narrative, while criticism focuses on discussion. Among the three genres, news, as a quick and brief account of events, is the most numerous. That's 54% of the total, as shown in Figure 3. There are also a lot of commentaries, about 29% of the reports will have a deeper discussion on the phenomenon of academic misconduct. Communication, 19%, reports the event with a brief analysis and interpretation.

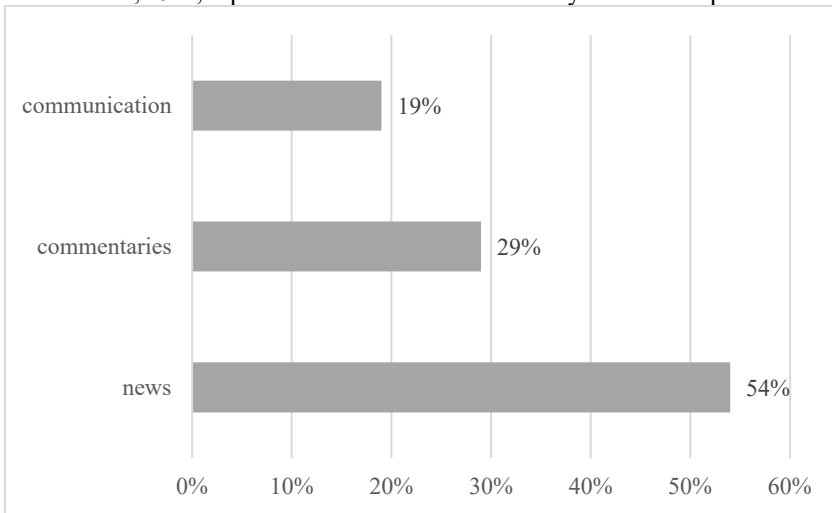


Fig. 3. Reporting genre (Data collection and statistics by authors)

4.1.4 Coverage Content.

As shown in Figure 4, 56% of the news reports are event reports. In the aspects of countermeasures, it is related to academic misconduct, including stipulating the scope of academic misconduct, formulating punishment methods and other news reports, accounting for 23% of the total number of reports. 19% of the news reports are related to the impact of academic misconduct. Only 10% of the news reports analyzed the causes of academic misconduct.

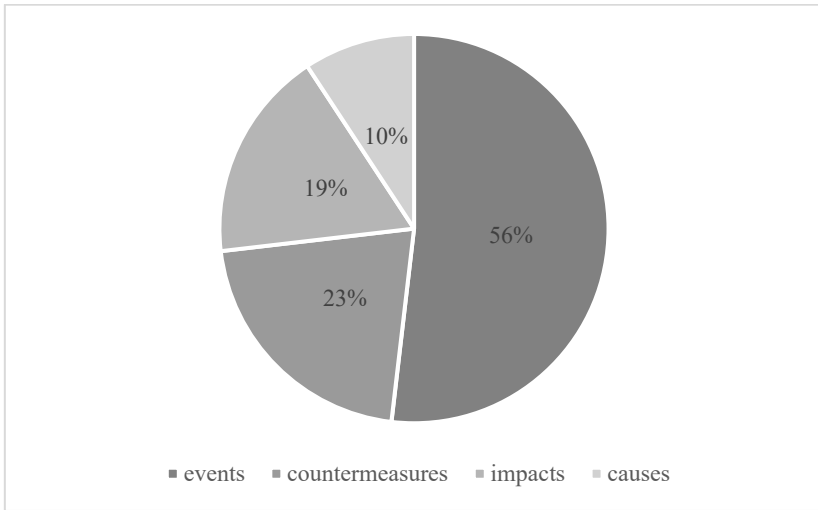


Fig. 4. Report content (Data collection and statistics by authors)

4.1.5 Report tendency.

Measured by the effect of reporting, those who deal with academic misconduct positively and respond positively are classified as positive reports, while those who expose or criticize academic misconduct are classified as negative reports. As shown in Figure 5, 80% of the news reports are positive, while 20% of the negative ones are mostly thought-provoking and of great significance.

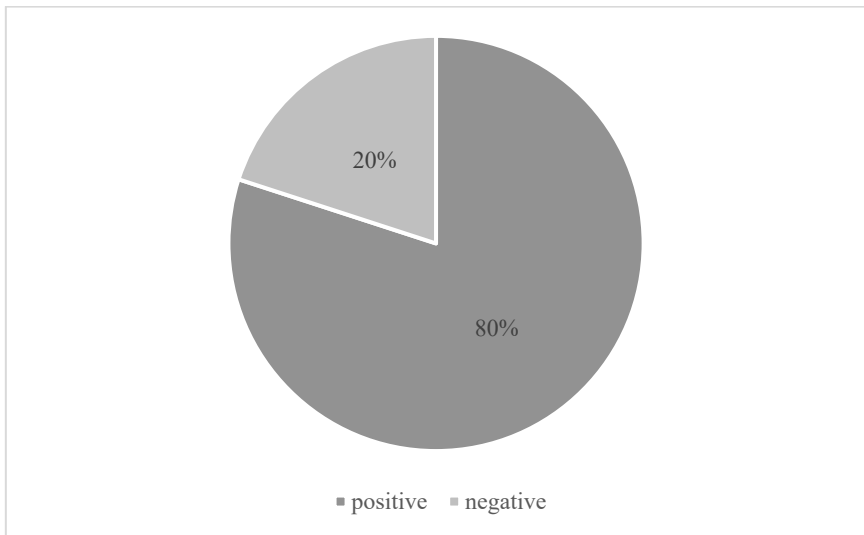


Fig. 5. Report tendency (Data collection and statistics by authors)

4.2 Inferential statistical analysis

4.2.1 Different platforms have different communication influences in the new media environment.

Compared with traditional media, new media builds a diversified platform integrating subject, channel, resource and form with the help of internet and computer technology. The most direct manifestation is that everyone can establish his or her own we-media account on the media platform to realize information dissemination. As shown in Figure 6, in nearly four years of reports on academic misconduct in universities, the number of articles reported on the official website of China Youth Daily is significantly lower than the number of articles displayed on the WeChat official accounts. In terms of popularity, China Youth Daily website doesn't set up a comment section function, the reading volume can't show, the audience is still the previous information recipients, the spread of relatively small; The interaction in the comment section of WeChat public accounts (including the official public account of China Youth Daily), the display of reading volume, and the function of forwarding can well reflect the influence of public opinion on news reports. Based on the mass communication in the circle of friends, the spread scope can be expanded and the communication effect can realize the cracking growth. It can be seen that different new media platforms have certain differences in the communication influence. News media should taking advantage of the high efficiency of we-media communication to promote the wide circulation of information.

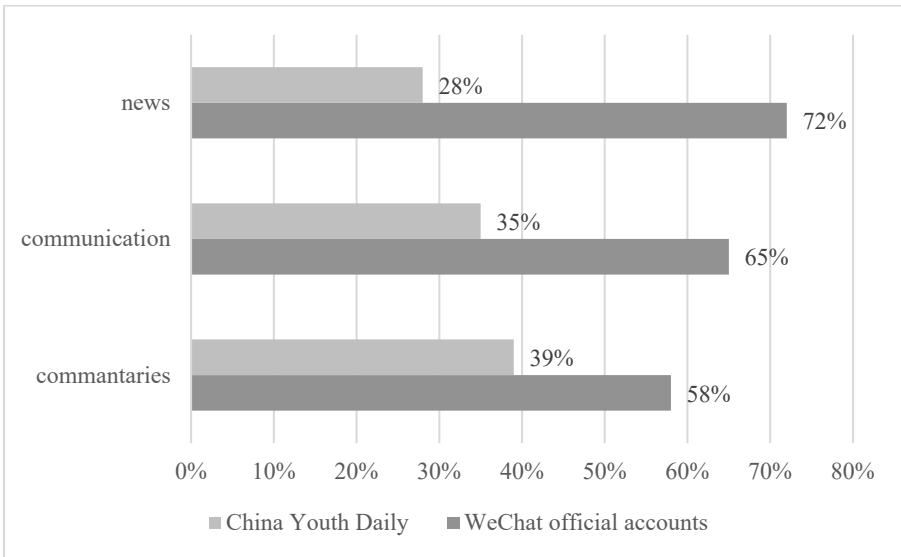


Fig. 6. The proportion of report genres between China Youth Daily and WeChat official accounts (Data collection and statistics by authors)

4.2.2 Agenda setting varies with different report genres.

Most of the news reports in China Youth Daily and WeChat belong to the news, which reflects the authenticity, simplicity and timeliness of the news. Although there are few news reports in China Youth Daily, the proportion of comments and communications in the website is higher than the WeChat, as shown in Figure 7. For example, China Youth Daily published several critical reports after Zhai Tianlin's case in early 2019. More styles of news reports will appear on WeChat platform, and even some symbolic reality construction will be carried out. For example, Zhai Tianlin Academic fraud truth exposed: < *We all blame him wrong!*>. This article satirizes the impact of Zhai Tianlin incident on universities through artistic processing.

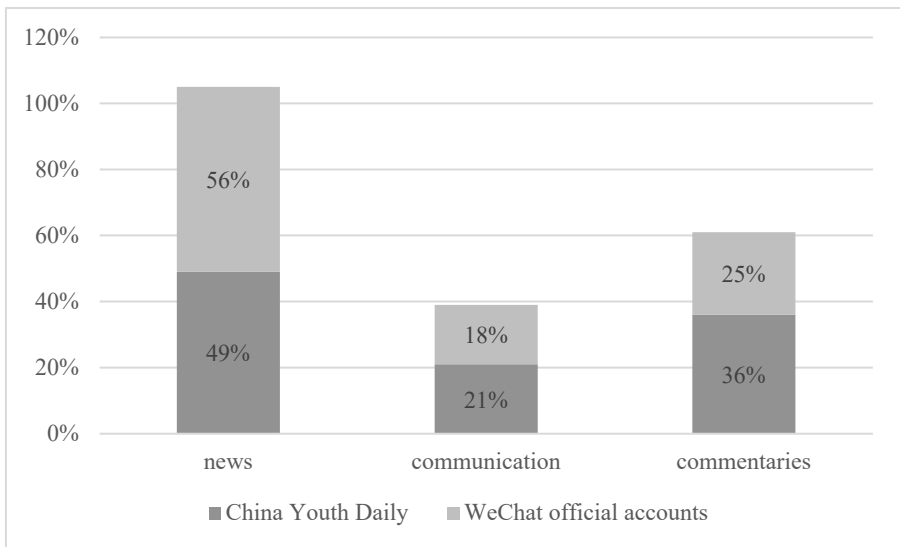


Fig. 7. The proportion of three genres in China Youth Daily and WeChat official accounts (Data collection and statistics by authors)

As shown in Figure 8, China Youth Daily has more impact reports and countermeasure reports, mostly about the results of academic misconduct incidents and the release of guidance documents related to academic misconduct. Due to the relatively free public opinion environment, We-media on WeChat platform will make corresponding comments on the causes of academic misconduct incidents, and generate in-depth analysis reports on the causes of high reading.

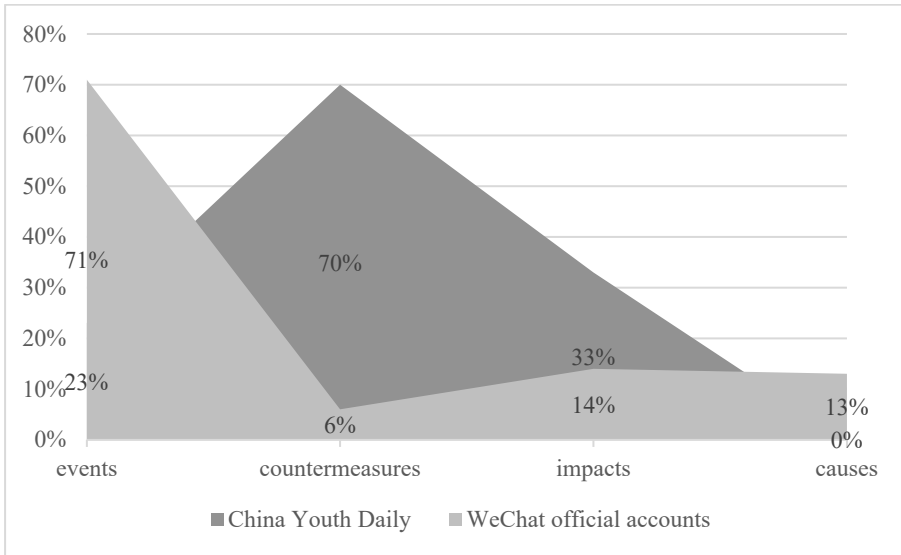


Fig. 8. Proportion of content reported by China Youth Daily and WeChat official accounts (Data collection and statistics by authors)

4.2.3 Different report contents may bring different effects.

In the media reports, except the event reports, the countermeasure reports are mostly positive reports, as shown in Figure 9. There are fewer reports on causes and effects, but more negative ones. In the middle and late stages of the development of academic misconduct incidents, the cause and influence reports will gradually increase. At this stage, there may be a crisis of public opinion, which attention should be paid when reporting. Some corresponding countermeasures can be discussed in the reports of causes and effects. For example, after the article *<Academician title is not a shield for academic misconduct>* introduced the “academic strange phenomenon” and its influence, it introduced the new measures taken by the Ministry of Science and Technology to deal with the problem of scientific integrity in recent years, which has achieved good results.

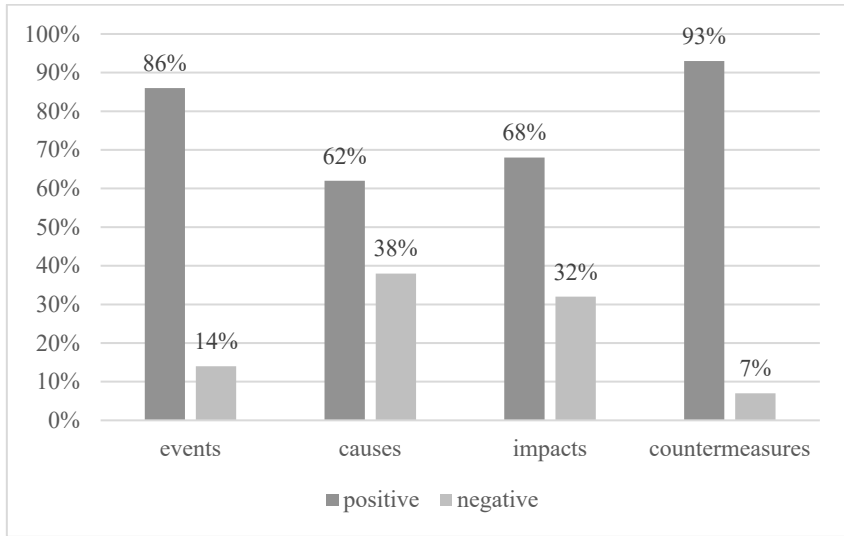


Fig. 9. Positive and negative reports of different report contents (Data collection and statistics by authors)

5 Suggestions for current reports of academic misconduct in colleges and universities

5.1 Realize efficient interaction with universities and grasp the opportunity of reporting

The exposure of academic misconduct in universities generally involves the public's discussion on whether the ideological and political education of the university is in place, whether the review mechanism of the academic committee of the university is strict, whether the construction of academic style is perfect and other issues. If handled improperly, it is easy to lead to the wide spread of negative information and damage the reputation of the university. Therefore, many universities are reluctant to let the media get involved in reporting academic misconduct incidents. They are usually under pressure from public opinion after being reported.

However, during the period of universities' investigation to verify whether the news transmitted online is true, the online public opinion will become more and more intense. It can be seen that the public relations treatment after the emergence of an emergency can't effectively solve the public opinion crisis. Only when universities reveal their academic misconduct by themselves and then the media intervenes in the report, can there be generally positive public opinion.

Taking <*Soochow University Publicity: A clinical Doctor's degree Revoked due to academic Misconduct*> published by Thepaper.cn on May 11, 2021 as an example, Soochow University directly publicized the academic misconduct information on its official website, which was widely recognized by netizens. Many netizens expressed

that “this is a good school if handled well”. Although Soochow University maintained the principle of transparency and openness in dealing with the academic misconduct incident, and received positive feedback from public opinion, the news was not very popular, with only 15 comments, which failed to achieve the best communication and social effects. The main reason lies in the inaccurate timing and imperfect reporting mode of the media. After knowing why it is inconvenient to disclose the academic misconduct of the parties involved in the publicity period, the media should choose the university after the publicity period to carry out follow-up reports, interview the academic committee of the university, explore the specific reasons for the academic misconduct of the parties involved, publicize the detailed results of the investigation, and discuss it as a social phenomenon. At the same time, interview well-known experts in the academic field. It gives a pertinent evaluation on universities' open handling of academic misconduct by means of transparent information, so as to show more public the effectiveness of universities' rectification of academic misconduct and enhance their credibility.

5.2 Strengthen in-depth reporting and optimize attribute agenda setting

As for the investigation results and punishments of academic misconduct cases published by universities, most media reprint the information reports published by universities, such as <*Xidian University assigned two people to do graduation academic work on behalf of one of them*> was cancelled published by Thepaper.cn on May 20, 2022, and <*Two graduates of China University of Mining and Xiamen Institute of Technology have their Master's Degrees Revoked for plagiarizing Others' Work*> was cancelled published by Thepaper.cn on July 28, 2022. The report was short in length and only described the cause of the incident and the results of the university from an objective and neutral standpoint, without in-depth investigation and interview of the incident, and it was difficult to discern the attitude and viewpoint of the media. As a result, the public sentiment of netizens dissatisfied with or even questioning the results of the report will appear in the comments section.

Secondary agenda setting is also known as attribute agenda setting. Compared with the object or macro issue concerned by primary agenda setting, attribute agenda setting emphasizes multiple attributes of a certain object or issue. When the objects reported by the media have quantitative differences in different attributes, the public will also have different views on different attributes of the objects at the cognitive level. Due to the wide range of academic misconduct involving school reputation, academic integrity and individual copyright, and the importance of the issue itself, it is particularly important for the media to optimize the attribute agenda setting to promote the solution of public opinion crisis. <*Hubei University of Economics Responds to the “Plagiarism” Incident : Not “Academic Misconduct”*>, published by China Youth Daily on August 10, 2018. Instead of directly publishing the notice of university investigation results by reprinting, this news reports the development process of the whole incident in detail, the specific content of the investigation and the basis of the investigation results, and actively, comprehensively and deeply responds to the online question of “plagiarism”.

At the same time, the author finally put forward that “Can the current academic committee review mechanism of the university ensure that the review of complaints is fair enough?” Through interviews with two authoritative representatives in the industry, opinions and suggestions on academic review were obtained. From the perspective of the effect of in-depth reporting, the setting of the attribute agenda of “academic misconduct” events, such as the collection of causes, investigation progress, processing results, analysis and comments, on the one hand, helps the public to understand the cause of the event, effectively control the direction of public opinion, guide public opinion to focus on the reflection and revelation of academic misconduct events, and avoid universities blindly falling into the image crisis. On the other hand, it also reflects the media's adherence to the principle of balanced, comprehensive and accurate news reporting and its emphasis on academic misconduct, which helps to maintain the credibility of the media.[7]

5.3 Make full use of new media platforms to play a positive role in paving the way

Nowadays, WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, B station and other new media platforms have become the key positions for the public to express their views, obtain information, share information and interact with people in real time. In view of academic misconduct in colleges and universities, the government has promulgated relevant rules and regulations, defined the definition and types of academic misconduct, determined the treatment methods, and standardized the requirements of postgraduate examination enrollment and training management. In this regard, the media should make full use of a variety of new media platforms to achieve full coverage of the policies and regulations issued by the government and increase the proportion of the agenda setting to deal with academic misconduct incidents. In addition to reporting the academic misconduct incident in a university, the content of the report should include relevant national policies and regulations on academic misconduct, so as to facilitate the public to be informed. Better supervision of the review mechanism of colleges and universities and understanding of the processing results of colleges and universities can avoid the expansion of negative public opinion caused by excessive exposure reporting. At the same time, it can make the public know the government's active response and determination to strengthen the construction of academic style, and guide the healthy development of academia.

6 Conclusion

Under the new media environment, different agenda Settings in media reports will bring different reporting effects. By studying the performance of different media on different issues in the reports related to academic misconduct, this study summarizes the characteristics of domestic media reports in recent years and provides feasible suggestions. The innovation of this paper is to combine new media research methods with relevant

reports on academic misconduct in universities, focus on academic misconduct incidents from the perspective of new media, and explore the possible impact of new media reports on the incidents. This study still has some shortcomings and needs to be improved. First of all, the data source of the sample is relatively single and the total capacity is not large. Secondly, the classification of samples mainly relies on manual discrimination, which may bring some subjective colors. In the future, more platforms (such as Weibo, Zhihu, etc.) can be expanded as information sources, and reasonable statistical methods can be used for data processing.

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