



Social Media Conformity: The Role of Individual Traits and Peer Relationship Quality

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Abstract. Against the background that social media has deeply integrated into adolescents' lives, social media conformity (SMC) has become a typical digital-era psychological phenomenon. Compared with offline conformity, social media's anonymity, instant communication and virtual interaction lead to wider influence and stronger group pressure. This study takes self-esteem, social anxiety and independent thinking ability as individual traits, and uses intimacy, supportiveness and interaction frequency to measure peer relationship quality, exploring their effects on SMC. Research shows that low self-esteem and high social anxiety increase conformity, while independent thinking reduces it. High-quality peer relationships strengthen conformity. Interactions exist between individual traits and peer relationships. The findings provide references for guiding adolescents to use social media rationally and improve information literacy.

Keywords: Social Media Conformity; Individual Traits; Peer Relationship Quality; Self-Esteem; Social Anxiety

1 Introduction

With the widespread popularization of mobile Internet and social platforms, social media has become a major field for the public to obtain information, conduct social interactions, express themselves and seek value recognition. In a highly interactive, community-based and emotionally charged online environment, individual opinions and behavioral choices are easily affected by group opinions, mainstream trends and social atmospheres. Consequently, individuals abandon independent judgments and align themselves with the group, a phenomenon defined as social media conformity (SMC). Research indicates that low self-esteem and elevated social anxiety are positively associated with conformity tendencies, whereas the capacity for independent thinking serves as a meaningful buffer against blind conformity [1-3]. Furthermore, high-quality peer relationships may intensify conformity through mechanisms such as emotional bonding, positive reinforcement, and group atmosphere effects. Notable interaction effects have also been identified between individual characteristics and the quality of peer relationships [4,5]. Typical manifestations include imitative creation on short-video

platforms, echoic comments in social media threads, homogeneous sharing on social media feeds, and convergent stances toward trending events [6]. Such behaviors not only impair individuals' information processing and decision-making independence, but also may promote the spread of online rumors, group polarization, irrational consumption and cyberbullying. Therefore, systematic research on its influencing factors and internal mechanisms carries important theoretical and practical significance.

Existing research indicates that conformity is not determined by a single factor, but results from the combined effects of internal psychological traits and external environments [4,7]. Individual traits determine sensitivity to group pressure, the stability of independent decision-making and information processing styles, forming the internal basis of conformity. As the most influential social relationship during adolescence, peer relationships continue and strengthen their shaping effects on individual behavior in cyberspace, becoming an important external condition for the diffusion of conformity [5]. At present, scholars have separately explored the impacts of individual traits or peer relationships on online conformity. Related research still lacks systematic integration regarding interactive mechanisms, boundaries and contextual differences [4]. Accordingly, this study focuses on the two core variables of individual traits and peer relationship quality, clarifies their separate and interactive influences on SMC, improves the theoretical framework for explaining SMC, and provides a basis for guiding healthy online socialization among adolescents.

2 Definition of Core Concepts

2.1 Social Media Conformity

The social media conformity effect refers to the psychological and behavioral phenomenon in which individuals give up their original opinions, judgments or behavioral choices under the influence of group opinions, behavioral tendencies and online atmospheres on social media. People will eventually align with mainstream group trends [6]. Compared with offline conformity, the anonymity of online scenarios, instant communication and virtual group characteristics make social media conformity featured by wide coverage, rapid emergence and low cost of individual cognitive processing. It also tends to trigger group polarization [6,8,9].

2.2 Individual Traits

This study focuses on self-esteem and social anxiety, two core individual traits closely related to social media behavior, and treats independent thinking ability as a moderating variable [5]. Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall evaluation and emotional experience of self-worth. It can be divided into high and low levels, and directly affects self-expression and decision-making independence in online contexts. Social anxiety refers to negative emotions such as tension, unease and fear of being evaluated during social interactions, which manifests on social media as excessive concern about others' feedback and hypersensitivity to negative comments. Independent thinking ability refers to individuals' capacity to screen, analyze and judge online information independently, serving as an important protective factor against blind conformity [1-3].

2.3 Peer Relationship Quality

Peer relationship quality on social media refers to a comprehensive indicator evaluating emotional bonds, interaction status and relational experience formed between individuals and peers in virtual social networks. Different from offline peer relationships, online peer relationships center on digital interaction. Their quality is mainly measured by three dimensions: intimacy, supportiveness and interaction frequency. Intimacy reflects emotional trust and privacy-sharing among peers; supportiveness refers to emotional comfort, opinion recognition and behavioral support obtained from peers on social media; interaction frequency indicates the regularity of online interactions such as liking, commenting and private messaging [4,5]. The three dimensions are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, forming an evaluation system of peer relationship quality and acting as a vital external contextual factor influencing individual online behavioral choices.

3 Influence of Individual Traits on Social Media Conformity

Individual traits constitute the internal driving force of social media conformity. They directly shape the occurrence and expression of conformity by influencing online psychological cognition, social needs and decision-making styles, with different trait dimensions showing distinct effects [1,10].

3.1 Self-esteem

As a core indicator of self-value cognition, self-esteem is clearly correlated with social media conformity. Low self-esteem significantly strengthens conformity tendency, while individuals with high self-esteem are more resistant to conformity [7]. Individuals with low self-esteem often experience strong identity anxiety on social media and seek recognition and acceptance by aligning with group opinions and behaviors to compensate for diminished self-worth. Therefore, they tend to abandon personal judgments and follow the crowd when facing mainstream online trends. In contrast, individuals with high self-esteem hold stable self-perception and do not need group approval to prove self-worth, so they are more likely to uphold independent views with a lower probability of conformity [7]. Meanwhile, the impact of self-esteem is context-dependent: in unfamiliar online communities, conformity among low-self-esteem individuals is further intensified, while resistance to conformity among high-self-esteem individuals becomes more evident [7].

3.2 Social Anxiety

Social anxiety is another key individual trait promoting social media conformity. Individuals with high social anxiety display higher frequencies of conformity on social media. A central psychological feature of such individuals is excessive concern about others' evaluations and fear of social exclusion caused by non-conformity. On social media, this mindset translates into excessive compliance with mainstream group views [1,2]. Specifically, when posting comments or creating content, highly socially anxious individuals prioritize group acceptability, deliberately avoid expressions contradicting

mainstream views, and even imitate popular group behaviors to mitigate the perceived risk of social disapproval. Relevant studies reveal that social media usage duration produces a superimposed effect with social anxiety. Individuals with high social anxiety and frequent social media use show significantly stronger and more sustained conformity than other groups, as intensive online socialization increases their dependence on group evaluations [1]. Individuals with low social anxiety tend to feel less apprehensive in online interactions, are less sensitive to others' judgments, and are more willing to express genuine opinions, thereby reducing the likelihood of blind conformity [2].

3.3 Independent Thinking Ability as a Moderator

As a moderating variable, independent thinking ability significantly buffers the relationships between self-esteem, social anxiety and conformity [5]. For individuals with low self-esteem or high social anxiety, strong independent thinking ability improves online information analysis and evaluation skills, enabling rational judgment of mainstream trends rather than blind compliance, thereby effectively suppressing conformity. Conversely, those with low self-esteem, high social anxiety and weak independent thinking form a dual pattern of "low self-identity + lack of autonomous judgment", becoming the main group of blind conformity on social media [5]. For individuals with high self-esteem and low social anxiety, independent thinking ability does not fundamentally alter their general resistance to conformity, but affects how rationally they perceive group opinions and prevents extreme anti-conformity bias [5].

Existing studies on individual traits and social media conformity reach highly consistent conclusions: low self-esteem and high social anxiety act as positive predictors of conformity, while independent thinking ability functions as a negative moderator [3,5,6]. Collectively, individual traits follow a clear pattern: the more stable self-value cognition, the lower social anxiety and the stronger independent thinking ability, the weaker conformity tendency on social media. Conversely, the probability and intensity of conformity increase, and the superimposition of traits further amplifies this pattern [3].

4 Influence of Peer Relationship Quality on Social Media Conformity

Peer relationship quality serves as a crucial external contextual factor in the development of social media conformity. Compared with offline relationships, online peer bonds centered on digital interaction exert more diffusive and immediate impacts on individual behavior, shaping online conformity through emotional bonding, behavioral support and group atmosphere construction [4,5]. In social media contexts, the core dimensions of peer relationship quality including intimacy, supportiveness and interaction frequency influence conformity differently yet interrelatedly from emotional foundation, behavioral motivation and interactive atmosphere, with particularly prominent effects among adolescents [4].

4.1 Intimacy

Peer intimacy provides the emotional basis for social media conformity; higher levels of intimacy are associated with stronger conformity tendencies within the social circle [4]. Highly intimate online peer relationships are accompanied by frequent privacy sharing, strong emotional trust and stable group belonging. In such circles, individuals prioritize relationship maintenance and adjust their online decisions to align with group expectations to avoid relationship conflicts and isolation, representing behavioral adaptation for sustaining emotional bonds [4]. In low-intimacy relationships, weak emotional connections and lack of belonging reduce the need for compliance, resulting in significantly lower conformity [4].

4.2 Supportiveness

Peer supportiveness constitutes the core motivational driver of social media conformity. Highly supportive relationships strengthen conformity tendency with noticeable positive feedback effects [5]. On social media, peer supportiveness mainly appears as positive feedback such as likes, comments and approval. High supportiveness fosters the psychological expectation that conforming behaviors will elicit positive peer responses. When individuals imitate peer behaviors or echo mainstream views, they quickly receive positive reinforcement, which further motivates conformity [5,6]. Relevant studies note that highly supportive peer relationships create a group climate that imposes implicit pressure, potentially leading even relatively independent individuals to display mild conformity under dominant trends.

4.3 Interaction Frequency

Interaction frequency provides an important atmospheric condition for social media conformity. Frequent online interaction accelerates the diffusion of conformity and expands its scope and intensity [8]. The instant nature of social media allows highly interactive peer circles to rapidly form unified mainstream trends continuously strengthened by likes, comments and shares. Compared with low-frequency circles, groups with frequent interaction spread opinions and behaviors faster and more widely, making individuals more susceptible to group atmosphere and quicker to conform [8]. Meanwhile, frequent interaction deepens group integration, enhances identification and dependence, and indirectly strengthens conformity [8]. From a holistic community perspective, peer relationship quality affects social media conformity through dimensional superposition and group transmission [3]. Within a single social media community, intimacy, supportiveness and interaction frequency operate in a mutually reinforcing manner: high-intimacy communities tend to develop high-supportiveness climates, which in turn promote higher interaction frequency. Their combined effect generates strong group conformity pressure [4]. Conformity further transmits within the community, with core members' behaviors quickly influencing others and spreading as dominant group actions [4].

5 Interaction and Research Implications

Individual traits and peer relationship quality do not independently influence social media conformity, but interact significantly [4]. Internal traits determine sensitivity to external relationships, while relationship quality amplifies or weakens trait-related behavioral tendencies. Conformity among individuals with low self-esteem and high social anxiety is notably strengthened in high-quality peer relationships. By contrast, individuals with strong independent thinking ability maintain considerable decision-making rationality and reduce blind imitation even in highly intimate, supportive and frequently interactive peer circles [4,5].

These findings provide clear directions for practical intervention. When guiding adolescents to use social media rationally, efforts should be made to enhance self-esteem, alleviate social anxiety and cultivate critical thinking, while also improving online peer climate. Optimizing both internal individual traits and external social environments jointly reduces the risk of irrational conformity.

6 Conclusion

Social media conformity represents a typical group phenomenon in the digital era, shaped jointly by internal individual traits and external peer relationships. Self-esteem, social anxiety and independent thinking ability determine internal conformity tendency, while intimacy, supportiveness and interaction frequency externally drive the diffusion of conformity. Their interaction defines the intensity and manifestation of social media conformity. Future research may conduct empirical tests across different platform types, topic attributes and group characteristics to more accurately reveal the mechanisms of social media conformity and provide more targeted theoretical support and practical strategies for constructing a healthy and rational online ecosystem.

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