

Research Article

Analysis of Root Causes of Ethical Misconduct in Adolescent Internet Language and Educational Countermeasures

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Abstract

This paper delves into the origins and development of internet language among Chinese adolescents born after the year 2000, a cohort commonly referred to as Generation Z or the "post-00s" generation. The study meticulously examines the multifaceted factors that shape their unique linguistic practices online. Research shows that social environment, mental exhaustion, educational deficiencies, and inter-generational "digital divides" contribute to ethical misconduct in their internet language. To address this, comprehensive countermeasures are proposed, including artificial intelligence (AI) monitoring, campus-based self-media for party history, embodied perception technology in education, and the "cultural feedback" mechanism. These measures collectively aim to purify the online environment, elevate adolescents' internet literacy, and promote standardized and ethical language use among the post-00s generation.

Keywords

Adolescents, Internet Language, Subculture, Language Ethics, Language Education

1. Introduction

The youth demographic is avidly engaged in surfing internet, adept at uncovering trending topics and creating and adopting novel linguistic expressions to replace traditional language, integrating them into their everyday communications. With the vigorous development of internet subculture, internet buzzwords, which are popular terms or phrases that gain prominence during a specific period in internet, have increasingly permeated into the lives of the masses, exerting profound influences. On the one hand, these internet buzzwords mirror the diverse and vibrant online world, manifesting the ideological perspectives of young people under the influence of postmodernism and reflecting the underlying

value orientations and ideological trends. On the other hand, the linguistic anomie, which refers to the state of ethical misconduct or normlessness in the use of language, particularly in the online context among adolescents, poses a challenge to Chinese philology and significantly influences online public opinion orientation.

This study employs a combination of online and offline questionnaire surveys, complemented by web-based big data mining and analytical techniques, to comprehensively collect and analyze data related to the youth demographic. With "post-00s" individuals as the primary focus, the study divides this age group into three stages: (1) 12-15 years old; (2) 16-19

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years old; and (3) 20-24 years old. The questionnaire survey was conducted both online and offline, receiving a total of 730 responses. Among these, 705 were valid responses. *Specifically, 450 responses were collected online and 255 were collected offline.* These valid responses include 178 from adolescents aged 12-15, 220 from those aged 16-19, and 307 from those aged 20-24. The questionnaire content covers aspects such as entertainment behaviors, living habits, and spiritual and ideological orientations of the youth, aiming to delve into the daily behaviors and psychological characteristics of this population, explore the root causes of linguistic anomie in internet language, and propose corresponding countermeasures.

2. Overview of the Adolescent Characteristics

The group of adolescent internet users represented by the “post-00s” generation is concentrated mainly in the age range of 12 to 24. As natives of the digital age, they have a natural affinity and dependency on the internet. According to the “5th National Survey Report on Internet Usage by Minors” released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) in 2023 [1], the internet penetration rate among adolescents has reached an astonishing 97.2%. This statistic not only reveals the high level of internet popularization among adolescents in China but also indicates that the internet has become an indispensable part of their daily lives and learning.

As natives of the internet era, Generation Z or the “post-00s” generation demonstrates a clear trend of younger first-time internet users. With the proliferation of smart devices such as smartphones and tablets, an increasing number of preschool children are being exposed to and attempting to use the internet. This phenomenon not only accelerates the acquisition and dissemination of information but also exerts a profound impact on the cognitive development of adolescents. Their way of thinking, values, and even behavioral habits are subtly changing under the influence of the internet.

The internet provides adolescents with a virtually world rich in information and convenient communication, satisfying their psychological need to explore the unknown and pursue novelty. However, this virtual world is also filled with temptations and challenges. On the one hand, the vast amount of information on the internet offers adolescents valuable opportunities to learn new knowledge and broaden their horizons. On the other hand, fragmented and visual-oriented information can easily lead to distractions among adolescents, affecting the cultivation of deep thinking and critical thinking. Furthermore, issues such as cyberbullying, privacy breaches, and online fraud also occur frequently, posing potential threats to the physical and mental health of adolescents [2]. Additionally, due to their lack of independent thinking and

judgment abilities, adolescents are more susceptible to the influence of online public opinion. This group may also neglect interpersonal interactions and emotional experiences in real life due to their excessive dependence on the internet.

3. Root Causes of Internet Language Emergence

3.1. Continuous Evolution of Internet Subculture

Based on the theory of “urban ecology”, sub-culture phenomena are the spontaneous formations and products influenced by specific spatial environments among people [3]. In the current era of comprehensive information and digitization penetration, the “post-00s” or Generation Z adolescents, as natives of the digital age, possess unique lifestyles and construct a “post-subculture” within the digital space using a series of symbolic internet jargon, distinguishing it from traditional mainstream culture. This culture not only reflects the psychological demands and emotional states of adolescents in China but also represents a self-identified lifestyle that fulfills their pursuit of personalized expression [4]. From 2013 to 2023, significant changes have occurred in adolescents’ internet application behaviors and interest focuses, particularly within Chinese platforms such as Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), Kuaishou, and Bilibili (see Figure 1). Adolescent subculture has gradually shifted from areas such as popular culture, online variety shows, and fan culture to emerging domains like participatory culture, native culture (a type of culture that embodies rural, folksy, and often humorously unrefined characteristics), kichiku culture (a unique form of online entertainment that involves the creation of surreal and humorous video remixes), and others, making fan culture, emoji packs, short video live streaming, etc., new focal points [5]. However, when subcultures are numerous and lack standardization, the incidence of non-normative behaviors may increase accordingly, turning adolescent sub-cultural circles into a hotbed for the proliferation of Internet language [6]. With the support of the internet and emerging media, adolescents have achieved the acceptance, local innovation, and rapid dissemination of internal and external cultures in an open, free, and multimedia virtual space. This dissemination of culture via digital media not only expands adolescents’ exposure to diverse cultural perspectives but also promotes cultural diversification among them. As they interact with various cultural content online, adolescents are more likely to develop a broader understanding and appreciation of different cultures, thereby enhancing their cultural diversity.

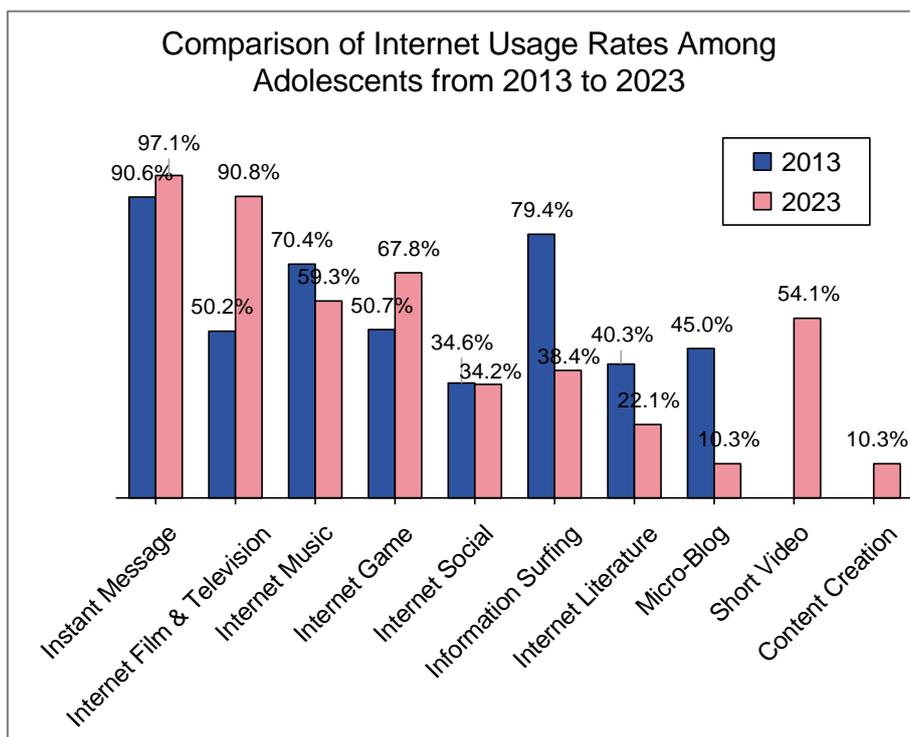


Figure 1. Comparison of Internet Usage Rates Among Adolescents.

3.2. Immersive Media and the “Information Cocoon” Effect

The internet has surpassed television as the primary channel for adolescents to obtain information, with short videos becoming a favored emerging cultural form among them due to their strong interactivity and rapid information

dissemination [7]. Major short video platforms utilize big data algorithms to push content that interests adolescents, causing them to become deeply engrossed in it as their preferred choice for daily entertainment. Survey data indicates that 91.4% of adolescents in China obtain news or significant information through platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and Bilibili (the data are derived from the 705 valid survey questionnaires we collected, see Figure 2).

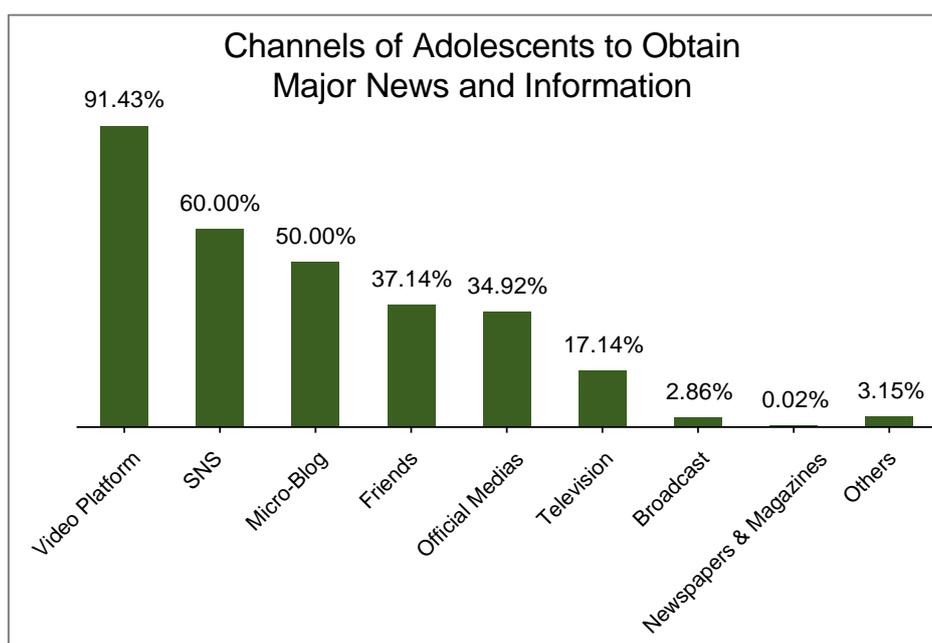


Figure 2. Channels to obtain major news and Information by adolescents.

However, some pan-entertainment short videos slice or splice original information into vulgar content, continuously disseminating negative values, aesthetics, and morals through trans-temporal media, gradually constructing an “information cocoon” within these emerging media [8]. This phenomenon continually spawns the generation of inappropriate network language and leads to comprehension biases among adolescents in China. Meanwhile, adolescents express their thoughts equally, vigorously, and immersively through topic entries within these freely unstructured platforms. Some adolescents have weak discernment abilities regarding network language, and over time, these network expressions become their everyday catchphrases, serving as a means for adolescents to confront traditional mainstream expressions [9], possessing unique styles and symbolic meanings.

3.3. The Normalization of Online Social Interaction

Online social interaction has become an indispensable lifestyle in contemporary society. On numerous online platforms, internet users attract attention by sharing their daily lives and psychological thoughts or achieve social purposes by following others’ content sharing and user interactions. Research results on the behavioral patterns and characteristics of adolescents’ online social interactions reveal that “seeking entertainment” is the primary motive for users to engage with social media, which is concluded from the 705 valid survey questionnaires we collected (see Figure 3). On the internet, anything can become a joke, and originally meaningful content is transformed into a collection of laughs through collage and parody, thereby forming emerging online subcultures such as “meme culture” [10], “kichiku literature” (a unique literary genre inspired by Japanese “Otomads” culture, characterized by rapid editing, repetition, and speed changes of audio-visual materials to create humorous, satirical, or visually striking effects), and “crazy culture” (an online phenomenon of expressing emotions in an erratic and hysterical manner). Secondly, “achieving a sense of belonging” is the second most significant reason, as adolescents seek out like-minded communities to join, thereby obtaining a sense of security and collectiveness. For example, many adolescents frequently engage in themed forums on Bilibili (B-station) due to their shared love of “anime” culture and works, using the unique language styles and symbols of this group to communicate. However, driven by profit, social content and methods often exhibit exaggeration and irrationality, focusing on humorous and absurd phenomena in daily life, becoming tools for adolescents to obtain entertainment, love, and a sense of belonging, as well as effective avenues for them to relieve stress and vent their emotions [11].

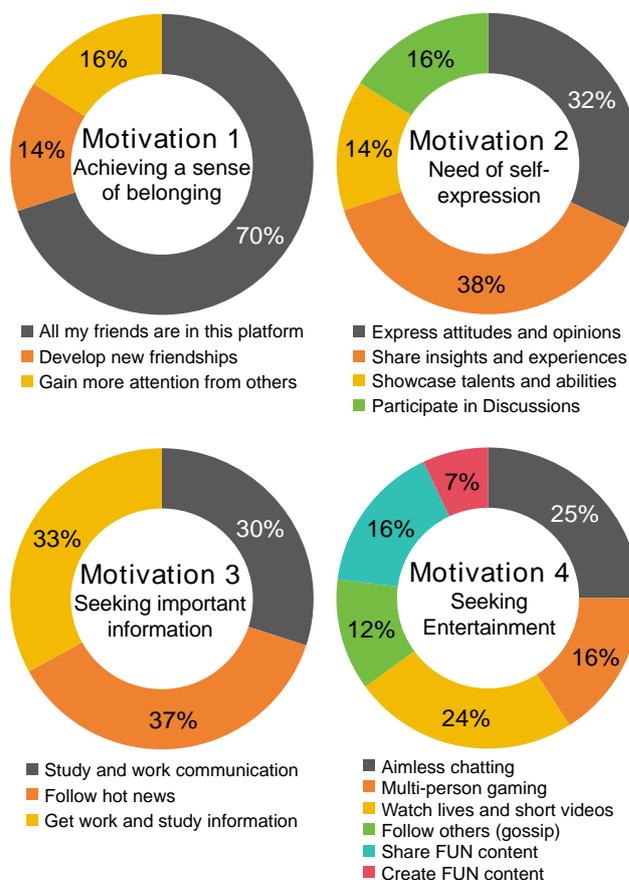


Figure 3. Motivations of the adolescent using SNS: classifications and proportions.

4. Development and Evolutionary Characteristics of Internet Language

4.1. Simplified Spread of Internet Language

Internet language has undergone numerous transformations, resulting in various lexical variations, including homophonic words, numeric words, abbreviations, and more. For instance, the abbreviation “LOL” (laughing out loud) has become widespread on the internet and is commonly used by adolescents to express happiness. Additionally, words like “YYDS” (the greatest of all time) have rapidly spread among adolescents due to their simplicity and expressive power.

Some short phrases enjoy brief popularity among adolescents before falling into obscurity [12]. Medium-to-long words, due to their complex structures, limited applicability, and hindrance to quick use, have relatively short lifespans. Research has found that Chinese adolescents prefer to use emoticons and abbreviated internet language because they can “express more interesting and vivid

content through simple taps” and “achieve rapid communication within one second” [9, 11]. This aligns with adolescents’ preference for concise and intuitive expression habits. However, the rapid iteration of internet language in China has also led to vulgarity, poor standardization, and slowed public acceptance.

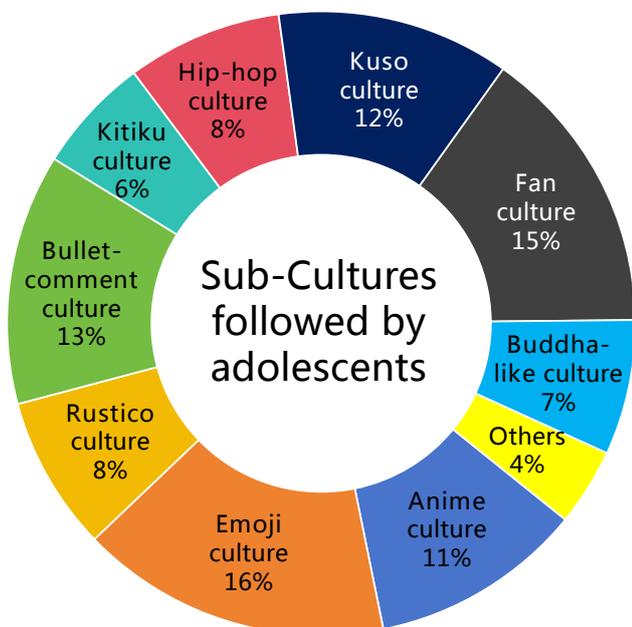


Figure 4. Sub-cultures followed by adolescents.

4.2. Stratified Development of Internet Language

Early internet language was mostly related to social hot events and participated in by the public. In recent years, the stratification of internet language in China has become increasingly prominent, shifting from language understood by the public to terminology comprehensible only within small circles. For example, within the anime subculture, terms like “German orthopedics” (an internet meme originated from a rumor about incest, used to humorously refer to situations involving inappropriate relationships) and “eating grains” (a popular phenomenon in adolescents referring to collecting anime figurines or merchandise) are created by adolescents based on the cultural values and shared beliefs within the circle, triggering frequent interactions within the anime community. Through these examples, we can observe how internet language continues to evolve and stratify along with the development of subcultures.

As shown in the statistical results in Figure 4, compared to other groups, adolescents are enthusiastic about participating in sub-cultural circle activities such as “emoji”, “anime”, “bullet-comments” and “kuso” using internal language to trigger frequent intra-circle interactions. For example, terms like “German orthopedics” and “eating grains” within the

anime subculture are created by adolescents using the cultural values and shared beliefs within their circles to develop their own social culture. However, this phenomenon exacerbates the closeness of adolescent circles and deepens the generational gap with other groups, transforming mass communication into stratified communication [13].

4.3. High-Frequency Usage of Internet Language

Social media platforms in China continuously generate a vast amount of language, with each new language trend potentially becoming an opportunity for internet language development [14]. Statistics on the internet language frequently used by adolescents in daily life reveal that they constantly pay attention to what’s new and disseminate it through their respective fields of interest or social platforms, often becoming the creators of trending internet buzzwords. Events in life, after being aggregated, discussed, and focused on by the public, may evolve into trending slang. Taking the Huawei phone of Mate 60 as an example, netizens have adopted “far ahead of the rest” as a promotional phrase for the phone. Additionally, “x-gate” is used to describe an extraordinary liking for something. These trending internet slang all originate from ordinary topics related to people’s livelihood, with adolescents employing distinctive and symbolic words to increase the attention on these events.

4.4. Self-Deprecating Evolution of Internet Language

In China, contemporary adolescents increasingly express their attitudes towards life and mental states through the internet. Facing real-life issues such as academic pressure and intense competition, adolescents seek ways to relieve stress and unwind online. Various popular “xxx literatures” reflect the real negative emotions and repressed psychology of adolescents in China, serving as microcosms of social phenomena. For example, the rise of “animal literature” has seen adolescents use words like “Ma-lou” and “Shu-shu” to virtually immerse themselves in the animal world, seeking humble reflections of themselves. “Ma-lou” is a term derived from the dialect of Guangdong and Guangxi regions, meaning “monkey”, often used by young people to refer to themselves humorously as if they were busy monkeys; and “Shu-shu” refers to a humorous and self-deprecating term used to express dissatisfaction or frustration in internet slang. “Crazy literature” simulates a “crazy” state through repeated and illogical subjective mocking statements, giving rise to popular internet languages such as “the mental state of contemporary young people” and “no college student is without going crazy” [15]. Furthermore, humorous “nonsense literature” and “giving-up literature” have also become labels for young people that are difficult to shed.

5. Root Causes of Ethical Deviations in Internet Language

5.1. The Dimension of Social Environment

Firstly, the widespread popularity and influence of social media. The online media in modern society continues to expand its boundaries, greatly broadening the application scenarios of internet language and providing adolescents with an unrestrained, frank, and buzzword-rich expressive space. The rapid dissemination of internet language cannot be separated from the support of online media, and the continuous advancement of media technology directly affects the speed, efficiency, and coverage of information dissemination [16]. As media increasingly integrate into public life, various inappropriate internet languages frequently break through their original circles, exerting a profound impact on younger generations.

Secondly, the openness of popular thought and the lack of discernment. Although contemporary adolescents are curious about new things and have strong acceptance abilities, they still lack sufficient discernment in distinguishing the authenticity and quality of information. Faced with the prevalence of vulgar culture within online subcultures, they often adopt a novelty attitude, seeking to experience different sensations [17]. Meanwhile, due to imperfections in the regulatory mechanisms of online platforms, an increasing number of marginalized discourse and negative viewpoints are freely disseminated in cyberspace.

Furthermore, the turbulence in social trends caused by diverse values. During the stage when adolescents' worldviews, values, and outlooks on life are not yet mature, they are susceptible to the influence of various social groups. Different social trends intertwine in turbulence, gradually infiltrating unhealthy values such as money worship, hedonism, ego-centrism, and lying flat. New media platforms such as live streaming and short videos, in order to attract attention and earn traffic, disseminate a large amount of inappropriate content, severely lowering adolescents' aesthetic standards and moral levels, leading to the vulgarization and infantilization of internet language. A large number of negative internet "meme" cultures not only impose a heavy burden on society but also distort adolescents' values and negatively impact their in-depth social behaviors.

5.2. The Perspective of Adolescents' Mental Exhaustion

Internet language is not only a reflection of social reality but also a symbolic manifestation of social mentality [18]. Its creation and use deeply reveal the psychological characteristics of adolescent internet users. The intensification of adolescents' mental exhaustion is the result of the interaction of multiple factors such as the characteristics of the times,

group characteristics, social trends, and media environments [19]. They face pressures from various aspects such as academics, interpersonal relationships, anxiety states, and gaming failures, being forced into a "rat race" dilemma. The negative emotions accumulated in these dilemmas gradually transform into mental exhaustion. When there is a huge gap between ideals and reality, adolescents often feel frustrated and doubt their abilities. The entertainment dailyization and revelry catharsis psychology arising from generational gaps and lack of help prompt them to seek spiritual comfort and expressive needs through playful and "kuso" (malicious humor) language. This trend leads online platforms to gradually lose the constraints of social order, traditional moral concepts, and behavioral norms, thereby fostering unhealthy social trends.

5.3. The Deficiency in the Educational System

The phenomenon of ethical deviations in adolescents' internet language is also closely related to the imperfections in the current educational system. Firstly, the lack of digital literacy education for adolescents. Schools have failed to fully prioritize the cultivation of digital literacy, including skills for effective communication in cyberspace. Adolescents lack the ability to use internet language correctly and the judgment to choose appropriate internet language in different situations. Secondly, the inadequacy of internet morality education for adolescents. For a long time, schools have mainly focused on students' academic performance, lacking systematic educational programs in internet morality and etiquette. This results in adolescents lacking a sense of responsibility for their online speech and the basic moral norms that should be followed in cyberspace. Finally, the weakness in education related to literary and linguistic norms for adolescents. The existing educational system fails to adequately convey the importance of Chinese language and literature and linguistic norms, making it difficult for adolescents to distinguish between formal and informal language usage scenarios and to make appropriate expressive choices in different contexts.

5.4. The Challenge of Inter-generational "Digital Divide"

In contemporary families, a significant inter-generational divide has formed due to educational limitations among parents. Numerous studies have shown that there is a noticeable digital divide in the use of new media among three generations: grandparents, parents, and grandchildren [20, 21]. Previous generations, such as the post-80s, post-70s, and post-60s grandparents or parents, due to inadequate cultural and educational backgrounds, conservative mindsets, and low social activity levels, have poor online and offline interactivity with post-00s adolescents. An increasing number of middle-aged and older individuals are confused by internet language. Faced with rapid information dissemination and cul-

tural changes, the older generation can only passively adapt, gradually becoming a “vulnerable group”. Parents’ negligence in managing adolescents’ internet usage time and their lack of understanding of the latest internet language make it difficult for them to effectively regulate and educate adolescents on the proper use of internet language.

6. Comprehensive Countermeasures to Address the Anomie in Internet Language

Language serves as the symbolic carrier of thought and the crucial tool for interpersonal communication, and its evolution constantly reflects the characteristics of the times and social landscape. The variability, casualness, and vulgarity of online language, coupled with its boundary-less dissemination, pose communication barriers and health risks. Currently, domestic and international research involving “online language deviance and governance” is mostly confined to the linguistic scope, with relatively broad countermeasures proposed. Given that online language evolves dynamically with advancements in internet technology and changes in population structure, its governance strategies also need continuous updating and optimization.

6.1. Establishing an Intelligent AI Monitoring System to Purify the Language Environment of Short Video Platforms

In the realm of short videos, which are highly focused on by adolescents, issues such as vulgar, homogeneous content, and copyright protection frequently arise. Short videos, characterized by their fragmentation and immediacy, spread rapidly through the internet, but the uneven quality of content and diversified information pollution have a significant impact on adolescents. To effectively curb negative information and vulgar language, it is urgent to establish and improve an online language supervision and management system. Specifically, intelligent AI speech systems can be utilized to implement real-time monitoring on major short video platforms, leveraging advanced content recognition and speech recognition technologies to accurately identify and filter out verbal attacks, hate speech, and other inappropriate remarks. At the same time, strengthening collaboration with legal departments and parent users to form a multi-party co-governance structure ensures that adolescents are protected from harmful content.

6.2. Building a Campus Self-Media Platform on Party History to Inspire Adolescents’ Struggle Spirit

In the current social situation of intense competition, ado-

lescents are prone to negative mindsets such as “depressed culture”, “lying flat”, and “giving up” rooted in the lack of a strong struggle spirit. Over the past century, the Communist Party of China has achieved a great leap from standing up, becoming prosperous, to becoming strong. Promoting the party’s struggle spirit is of great significance in inspiring adolescents to take responsibility in the face of difficulties. Therefore, schools should rely on adolescents’ preferences to build a campus red self-media platform on party history, utilizing new media forms such as short videos to enable adolescents to learn about the party’s spirit and inherit its struggle traditions during leisure time. This not only guides adolescents away from harmful short video content but also inspires their creative inspiration and clarifies their life direction and value pursuits.

6.3. Integrating Embodied Cognition Technology to Innovate Adolescents’ Online Literacy Education

In the comprehensive development of adolescents’ morality, intelligence, physique, aesthetics, and labor, the cultivation of online literacy is particularly crucial. As the main force of online language, adolescents need to enhance their ability to discern online language deviance, harmful information, and online etiquette. Schools should incorporate adolescents’ daily language into the moral education assessment system and explicitly prohibit the dissemination of harmful information and rumors on the internet in school regulations. At the same time, strengthen the learning atmosphere of Chinese language and literature, organize Chinese language and literature competitions, promote learning through competitions, and reward students for correctly identifying online language deviance. Additionally, through situational immersive case analysis courses, guide adolescents to select the best and discard the worst when using online language, thereby enhancing their online literacy.

6.4. Leveraging the “Cultural Feedback” Mechanism to Narrow the Digital Divide Between Adolescents and Parents

Factors such as family structure, environment, parents education level, children age, and school attributes contribute to varying degrees of digital divide between parents and children. Facing adolescents’ advantages in information and technology, schools and communities should provide necessary resources and support, such as organizing lectures on family digital literacy enhancement and providing consulting services, to facilitate the overall improvement of family digital literacy. Educational institutions should encourage parents and children to participate together in activities to enhance online literacy, such as watching beneficial online content and discussing online phenomena together, thereby enhancing parent-child relationships and narrowing the digital divide.

Furthermore, through channels such as parent schools and online courses, popularize online knowledge to parents, enhance their ability to discern online language deviance and prevent online risks, and through parent classes, digital science popularization, and other promotional education, improve parents' discernment of online language and internet usage literacy, thereby strengthening supervision and guidance of adolescents.

7. Limitations and Future Work

While this study primarily focuses on ethical misconduct in internet language use among Chinese adolescents, it is worth noting that the global dissemination and variation of internet language also exhibit certain cultural differences. For instance, in China, adolescents may be more inclined to use ironic and humorous buzzwords to express their opinions and emotions, which may not be common in other cultures and platforms. In future, we will further explore the similarities and differences in internet language across different cultures and platforms, as well as the impact of these differences on adolescents' moral cognition and behavior.

8. Conclusions

Through an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of ethical misconduct in adolescents' online language, this paper unveils the multifaceted underlying causes, primarily encompassing the rapid transformation of online culture against a lagging regulatory backdrop in the social environment, the unique psychological development of adolescents, and the limitations of their moral cognition. To address this issue, we propose a series of comprehensive educational countermeasures aimed at fostering online ethics education, optimizing the online ecosystem, strengthening family guidance, and encouraging adolescents to engage in social practices. These countermeasures collectively strive to build an online environment conducive to the healthy growth of adolescents. They not only focus on alleviating current problems but also on laying out strategies for long-term development, ultimately aiming to fundamentally enhance adolescents' online literacy and moral judgment. In the future, as network technology continues to advance and the social environment evolves, we should maintain a keen insight into the ethical issues surrounding adolescents' online language, constantly adjusting and refining educational strategies. Our goal is to provide firmer support and safeguards for the comprehensive development of adolescents in the digital age.

Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
SNS	Social Network Service

Author Contributions

Xiaolong Lou: Conceptualization, Resources, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing

Xinran Zhuang: Data curation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft

Xiaofan Hu: Formal Analysis, Investigation, Resource

Xueer Fan: Formal Analysis, Investigation, Software

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Data Availability Statement

The data is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



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Research Field

Xiaolong Lou: Natural user interface, Natural interaction techniques, Perceptual computing and user interfaces, Ergonomic evaluations in universal systems and applications.

Xinran Zhuang: User experience design in internet products, Design psychology and social research.

Xiaofan Hu: Machine learning, Natural language process, Immersive media, Communicating intelligence.

Xueer Fan: Big data - based internet product design, Human-computer interaction design.