

Social Media Engagement Influencing Public Agenda Setting

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ABSTRACT

Classical agenda-setting theory faces growing challenges in the age of social media. The objectives of this research are to explore the development of public agendas in digital media environments and to examine the influences of social media engagement on the formation of public agendas. Together with the literature reviews on agenda setting theory in communication study, quantitative research with online questionnaire survey was used for primary data collection from younger generation aged 18–35 years who have active social media usage habits and regularly follow social movements. The research findings are that mass media continue to be recognized as a principal institution, valued for their professional authority in shaping public issues, even as social media have emerged as the dominant medium for accessing, monitoring, and responding to contemporary social change, the engagement in social media usage has become a vital force driving the generation and development of public agendas in contemporary society, and that platform algorithms and user's engagement habits in browsing, sharing, and liking of trendy topics, generate viral momentum and thereby constitute the dual forces converting user-generated content on social platforms into the public agenda. Cross-platform circulation, multi-layered participation, and audience perception become both the threats and the opportunities for transforming fragmented individual views into collective public voices within the framework of agenda-setting theory. Finally, the interplay of media access, user perceptions, and algorithmic governance delineates the contemporary paradigm of public agenda setting.

KEYWORDS: Agenda Setting Theory, Public Agenda, Social Media Engagement, User Generated Content.

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1. INTRODUCTION

With the comprehensive penetration of digital network and mobile intelligent technologies, social media has become the core carrier of information acquisition and daily social interaction for the public, reshaping the mainstream mode of media consumption from a supplementary information channel into the arena where public agendas emerge and widely spread. At this time, public agenda is increasingly constrained by the narrowing visibility of issues within information cocoons and by the accelerated lifecycle of agenda formation, dissemination, and decline (Wang, 2025). By collapsing private interaction into the sphere of public opinion and operationalizing algorithmic distribution of information feeds, social media platforms have restructured the modalities of media power, dispersing authority from professional institutions to diverse actors, ranging from algorithmic systems to ordinary users, thus producing a distributed landscape of influence. The change affects not only the way content is distributed but also the production and consumption of content drive the rise of user generated content (UGC) shifting the dominant role in content creation from professional media entities to individual users (Zhou, 2022).

In the age of social media, the co-existence between platform-centered and user-centered has reshaped theoretical framework of agenda setting. Users generally perceive social media contents as technically biased and fragmented, consequently, the importance of issues is justified on the clues of content relevance, social friend recommendation, and cross-verify information through multiple channels (Liu & Zhao, 2025). Coverage patterns that traditionally echoed public perceptions of issue importance, conditioned by source credibility, have evolved into a more immediate, interactive, and diverse form, driving faster and broader information flows. A large number of social events first trigger public discussion on social platforms, then attract the attention of mass media, and finally enter the vision of government governance, forming a reverse agenda-setting path from public agenda to media agenda and then to policy agenda (Zhang & Feng, 2023). According to Man et al. (2026), within social media environment, information

production is developed towards diversification, personalization, and emotionalization whereas audience viewing habits are shifting towards fragmentation, interactivity, and personalization. User behaviors are also changeable for personalized demands and subjective cognition, forming a diversified, interactive and fragmented media consumption (Wang & Liu, 2024). Consequently, social media platforms have broken the monopoly of traditional mass media over public information production and distribution, enabling ordinary individuals, civil society groups and non-institutional actors to participate in the construction of public agendas (Johnson et al., 2022b). It has turned passive media audiences into active participants and creators of public issues along with their social media engagement. In particular, public agenda setting is increasingly constrained by the narrowing visibility of issues within information cocoons and by the accelerated lifecycle of agenda formation, dissemination, and decline. This transformation changes the typical public-agenda setting, affecting the direction and scale of public issue iteration, rendering a critical research gap for exploring the correlation mechanism between audience engagement in social media consumption and public agenda setting.

2. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda-setting theory is one of the frameworks in communication study focusing on the significance of mass media to construct, guide, and organize public attention (Martin & Harris, 2022). In the traditional theoretical framework, agenda setting includes three priorities; media agenda, public agenda, and policy agenda. Each represents a distinct stage in the flow of issue salience from institutional production to public cognition and, ultimately, to policy deliberation. The government produces policy agendas through public governance actions and official information dissemination. Mass media serve as professional gatekeepers that select, frame and arrange issue coverage on public discourse while the civil society forms its cognitive priority of social movements based on media content, completing the one-way salience transfer from institutional subjects to public perception (McCombs et al., 2022). The structure of these three domains covers the one-way dominant transmission path of ‘government – mass media – public’ takes shape against the background of mass communication and media responsibility, with clear functional division and relatively stable power relations among all subjects, supporting the repeated verification of agenda-setting effects across various national contexts.

1) Government Agenda: As the initiator of public governance, the government occupies the starting position in public policy formulation, building social consensus, and providing institutional issue sources for the operation of the entire public agenda setting that need social attention. The agendas on national-level legislative processes, industrial policy adjustments, public health prevention and control measures, and livelihood security plans are disseminated through official press conferences, policy document releases, and public speeches of leaders, which constitute the primary candidate pool for media agenda selection. As such, policy agendas initiated by the government, and transformed through the professional gatekeeping of mass media, then delivered to the public explain how public attention is guided and organized in the mass media era shaping the priority ranking of public cognitive agendas. In the traditional context, the government holds the final power to define the boundary of public agendas, and can decide which issues are eligible for public discussion and which issues need to be guided or diluted. However, in the digital context, the varied expression of public opinion places greater pressure on governments to address policy agendas in a timely manner (Tang, 2022). In this respect, information authenticity and social impact remain prioritized for the government agenda.

2) Media Agenda: In digital context, the hierarchical distribution of communication power is no longer determined by institutional media dominance alone, but is substantially realized through individual media consumption behaviors (Fuchs, 2021). Within the framework of mass communication, professional news media have traditionally functioned as the sole legitimate agenda-setting authorities, monopolizing the distribution of issue salience through their capacity to select and disseminate information (Man et al, 2026). Yet, with the rise of cross-platform integration, the production of customized content in mass media increasingly depends upon UGC materials and audience participation—manifested in interactive comment sections and the circulation of views and feedback via ‘share,’ ‘like,’ and ‘repost’ mechanisms (Lee & Park, 2023). In the age of social platforms, mass media have faced challenges of false information and erroneous reporting, underscoring the importance of authenticity and authority in shaping agendas against the flood of UGC materials. The platform content strategically amplifies trending topics, virality, and interactive feedback, thereby enhancing audience engagement—particularly in the coverage of social issues and major events in conjunction with emotional appeal and narrative expression. Referring to Kaplan and Haenlein (2020), the influencer’s content can better convey information and provoke viewer reflection. In other words, driven by social media affordance, the single mass media agenda system gradually differentiates into three coexisting agenda forms: ‘public agenda’, ‘individual agenda’, and ‘algorithm agenda’ (Chen & Wang, 2024).

As professional news institutions, mass media eventually assert their agenda-setting power by releasing authoritative information, verifying facts, distributing content across platforms, and guiding public issue definition, value orientation and discourse direction (Reese, 2022). The impact of UGC agendas is extensive and profound, introducing various social and ethical challenges such as the spread of false information, privacy concerns, and algorithmic biases those relevant to individual or platform-based agendas. Meanwhile, Zhang and Feng (2023) point out that the classical agenda-setting theory fails to fully interpret the decentralized, dynamic, and multi-agent agenda operation, and Zhang and Cao’s research (2023) conclude that mainstream media still occupy a

dominant position in the stages of agenda deepening and framing. The gaps primarily stem from the fundamental transformation of media consumption behaviors driven by social media penetration, which fosters multi-dimensional audience engagement and, in turn, reshapes patterns of interaction, affective identification, and cognitive judgment throughout the entire process of public agenda setting. As such, the two typical media forms, mass media and platform media, show completely different power structures and agenda-setting modes, and create differentiated spaces for audience participation.

Public Agenda: Amidst the digital wave, the construction of public agenda has undergone diversification and digitization reflecting the increasing role of social media content, especially UGC narratives have moved to the forefront, central to public discourse, supplanting traditional agenda-setting with a complex, interactive network of information transmission (Zhang & Feng, 2023). The rise of social media and digital communication technologies has reshaped the position of the public in the agenda-setting system, moving the public from the passive end of information transmission to active participants in agenda construction (Johnson et al., 2022a). In terms of public agenda on social platforms, users with shallow participation mostly complete the initial exposure of events through simple disclosure and forwarding, while users with deep participation participate in the qualitative definition of events through in-depth interpretation and fact-checking. (Chen & Wang, 2024). When influencers or key opinion leaders (KOLs) in society recognize that ordinary users predominantly perform the initial triggering function of event disclosure, the stage of agenda formation is thereby reinforced through the emotionalization of individual agendas. Also, the amplification of highly interactive message attributes further intensifies the algorithmic agenda through platform-recommended mechanisms (Zhang & Cao, 2023). In conclusion, public agenda is a collection of social movements that gain widespread attention and form a unified priority order within the society, reflecting the collective focus and common concerns among the public.

2.2 Social Media Engagement

The growth of social media consumption covers all age groups and deeply embeds itself in all aspects of people's daily lives enabling users to construct self-representations and to interact, collaborate, and communicate with others, thereby fostering virtual social bonds. Over time, these bonds establish community networks within which sharing occurs both at the individual level and through online media facilitating broader dissemination without the need for direct targeting of specific individuals (Wang & Liu, 2024). It has overtaken traditional mass media outlet and become the primary channel for global media consumption and reshaping mainstream audience information-seeking behaviors across all age groups, thereby intensifying the frequency of audience contact and reinforcing user stickiness and loyalty (Chen et al., 2026). These not only enhance audience engagement and a sense of belonging but also significantly alters the ways of public opinion formation, dissemination and manipulation.

According to Fuchs (2021), social media platforms offer extensive opportunities for personalized, interactive, and fragmented participation in the information dissemination process, with audiences engaging in likes, comments, shares, and content creation. This interactivity changes the pathways and speed of information dissemination and increases its immediacy and diversity of content formats, altering the ways information is produced, disseminated, and consumed. Thus, behavioral and psychological engagement with social platforms is typically motivated by the pursuit of information, opportunities for social interaction, entertainment, and the exchange of viewpoints. It includes passively browsing algorithm-recommended content, actively searching for trending topics, watching videos, reading posts, viewing comments, sharing and like-click. Aside from generating posts designed to foster persuasive dialogue, such performances help avoiding outward interactive behaviors in topic discussion. Moreover, social media engagement can strategically frame targeted issue communication, elevating diverse individual concerns and algorithm-driven topics into the public agenda, thereby reshaping traditional cycles of agenda iteration. In platform-recommended channels, highly interactive message attributes get further amplified, thereby exacerbating the emotionalization tendency of agendas. The engagement also makes information dissemination more fragmented and emotional, complicating the formation and spread of public opinion (Zhang & Cao, 2023). These multifaceted roles of social media emphasize its dual nature as both a catalyst for empowerment and a source of public agenda setting. However, the unclear interaction mechanism between message attributes and channel characteristics are prominent in terms of public agenda setting (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2022).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Materials and Method

This study begins with a review of classical agenda-setting theory, which struggled to explain the decentralized and participatory dynamics of public agendas shaped by social media engagement in the digital life. A quantitative research method was applied with a standardized questionnaire survey to examine the influence of social media engagement on public agenda construction. Referring to Chen et al. (2026) revealing that media user groups with different interest and value positions are exposed to different agendas, the survey targeted China's tech-savvy youth, aged 18-35, who actively use social media in consistent engagement in order to systematically discover their practical patterns and the perceptions towards the generation and development of public agendas. To ensure the validity of the research data, the Taro Yamane formula, applied at a 95% confidence level for population over one million, was employed to determine the sample size, resulting in the collection of 400 valid questionnaires distributed across major Chinese platforms (WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Bilibili) as representatives of the overall characteristics of social media

users. Their inclusion reflects the diverse modes of engagement among the younger generation and mitigates the research limitations inherent in focusing on a single platform.

3.2 Data Collection Process

Open and close-ended questions were first conducted for measuring user characteristics, habits on social media engagement regarding how and why Chinese young generation utilized the platforms, and the UGC content creation, consumption and distribution. Together, a five-point Likert's scale from the lowest to highest levels was applied for close-ended questions surveying their public-agenda setting perceptions and influenced by social media consumption. Formal questionnaire links were released through multiple channels, covering public social platforms and private social circles to balance the coverage breadth of research data. Reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha yielded a coefficient of 0.766 for the social media engagement items and 0.922 for the public agenda-setting items, both exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.75 confirm strong internal consistency and data quality. In addition, the validity assessment through the Index of Objective Congruence (IOC) produced a value over the limit of 0.50, indicating acceptable congruence between the items and the intended constructs, and thereby supporting the adequacy of the questions for further empirical analysis.

The platform's duplicate-entry detection mechanism and IP-based screening function were fully employed to primarily filter questionnaire respondents under the conditions that they are 18–35 years old and maintain more than five official accounts, which serve as a fundamental medium through which Chinese digital-native generation connects, communicates and collaborates within society (Chen et al., 2026). This enabled eliminating repeated and invalid submissions and enhancing the authenticity, accuracy, and reliability of the collective dataset. Then, descriptive statistical analysis was employed for data processing, transforming, and interpretation. Non-parametric statistic, specifically the Chi-square test, was also included to examine the independence between the variables of social media engagement and public agenda setting.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Perception to Public Agenda in Digital Media Environment

The findings from the Chinese youth on public agenda-setting within digital media contexts can be categorized into two dimensions: first, the perceptions of the agenda-setting index across government, mass media, and UGC on social platforms; and second, the threats and opportunities of social media involving public agenda setting.

1) Perception to Public Agendas Across Three Domains

The research found that the perceptions of Chinese young generation towards public agendas, compared across three domains, are discernible through the sensitivity of mean values measured against eight indicators: trending topics of societal interest, professional verification of information authenticity, social impact on the public sphere, immediacy of topic virality, algorithmic dissemination across platforms, interactive audience participation, influencer or KOL effect, and overall acceptance.

As illustrated in Figure 1, government agendas register the strongest perception on the social impact indicator ($x_{\diamond} = 4.17$), whereas viral spread and interactive participation are deemed non-applicable at the lowest levels ($x_{\diamond} = 1.52$ and 1.23). For media agendas, the professional verification index emerges at the highest tier ($x_{\diamond} = 4.20$), while interactive participation remains marginal ($x_{\diamond} = 2.39$). In case of UGC agendas, algorithmically driven systems and interactive participation are treated as the pivotal indicators that transform the UGC on social platforms into public agendas; here, the mean values reach the highest level ($x_{\diamond} = 4.25, 4.23$), respectively, whereas the criteria of influencer, trendy topics, and viral spread are recognized at comparatively high means ($x_{\diamond} = 4.11, 4.07, 4.04$). By contrast, the professional verification indicator for UGC agendas is prioritized at the lowest level ($x_{\diamond} = 2.33$). When comparing overall acceptance across the three domains, media agendas attain the highest valuation ($x_{\diamond} = 3.97$) while UGC on social media is moderately ($x_{\diamond} = 3.39$) acknowledged as a potential source of public agendas followed by government agendas ($x_{\diamond} = 3.03$).

These associate with Shehata and Strömbäck (2023) and Man et al. (2026) indicating that even in the context of social media popularization, traditional mass media still maintain irreplaceable power advantages in the framing of authoritative issues and the legitimation of public agendas, and that digital media platforms often prioritize clicks and traffic over the accuracy and public interest of information, exacerbating the social trust in the media. Similarly, Zhang and Cao (2023) stresses that the engagement within social platforms has broadened to illuminate the construction of the public agenda, shaped through interactivity, self-expression, social visibility, and content creation whereas governance tools such as platform algorithmic management, content moderation mechanisms, and hot list regulation have to be implemented, forming an ecosystem with both development vitality and normative constraints. Together, personalized algorithmic content is often confined to specific interest circles and difficult to break through circle boundaries to form a unified public agenda across the whole society (Yu & Yang, 2022).

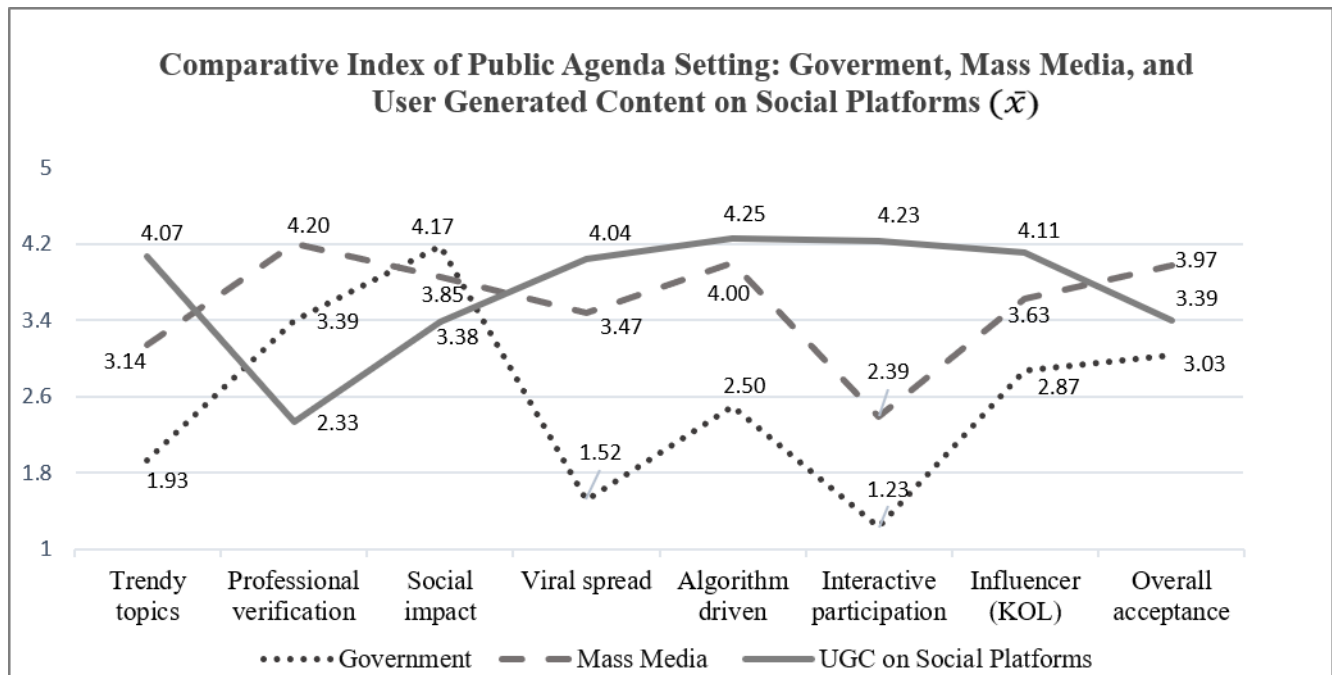


Figure 1: Young generation's perception to public agendas across the domains of government, mass media, and social platforms

2) Threats and Opportunities of Social Media behind Public Agendas

Table 1: Threats and opportunities of social media affordance behind public agenda construction

Threats	Opportunities
Viral spread generates a widespread perception of fragmented, circle-based agenda diffusion bringing personalized hot topics, even community-based issues to nationwide public agendas.	Cross-platform sharing enrich the discussion materials for agenda germination, and breaking the limitation of single-channel information supply on the diversity of agendas.
Multi-layered participatory functions of social media facilitate transmedia communication that amplifies fleeting trends into the public agenda, thereby distorting substantive discourse.	Multi-layered participation jointly promotes the multi-dimensional development of topic content. The hierarchical participation structure forms a complete transmission chain from agenda exposure to in-depth discussion.
Platform Algorithms subtly distort the trajectory of public agendas by steering discussions toward selective topics.	Algorithmic distribution connects audience participation and agenda evolution by matching personalized content with users' preferences, which aggregates scattered individual views into collective public voices.
User perception to the engagement in the influencers' contents play a critical role in initiating and driving public agendas.	User perception supports the stable operation of the agenda diffusion mechanism, leaving a buffer period for agenda evolution.

Table 1 presents the critical roles of social media behind the threats and the opportunities to public agenda construction. For the threats, most youngers believe that active participation in browsing, sharing, and reposting influencer-generated content, together with the platform-specific dynamics of agenda diffusion, plays a decisive role in the viral circulation of topics on social media. In their view, such topics tend to be community-oriented rather than nationwide public agendas. These multidimensional engagement practices, on the one hand, foster information cocoons among audiences; on the other, individual acts of sharing can outweigh algorithmic amplification in shaping agenda influence. Algorithms on social platforms can manipulate personal interests into public agendas, producing a distorted form of agenda communication that reflects viral sharing rather than genuine public concern. Moreover, many young people perceive online agendas as diverging from real-life social problems. In identifying the opportunities of social media in shaping public agendas, it is evident that the cross-platform, multi-layered participation, algorithmic distribution and user perception collectively drive public focus.

The results are concurrent to Liu & Zhang (2024) revealing that, in the digital era, platform algorithms function not only as gatekeepers of information distribution, but also marking a paradigmatic shift in agenda-setting mechanisms—from platform-

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centered to user-centered agendas, and from safeguarding authenticity to privileging salience (Liu & Zhao, 2025). With multi-account browsing and multimedia sharing rapidly transforming personal interests into public concerns, agenda-setting theory must integrate algorithmic influence, user perceptions, and participatory practices to remain relevant within the digital ecosystem (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2022). This new environment creates a new set of social interaction where individuals are held socially accountable not just for what they say, but for where and how they say it (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020).

4.2 Pattern of Social Media Engagement among Chinese Young Generation

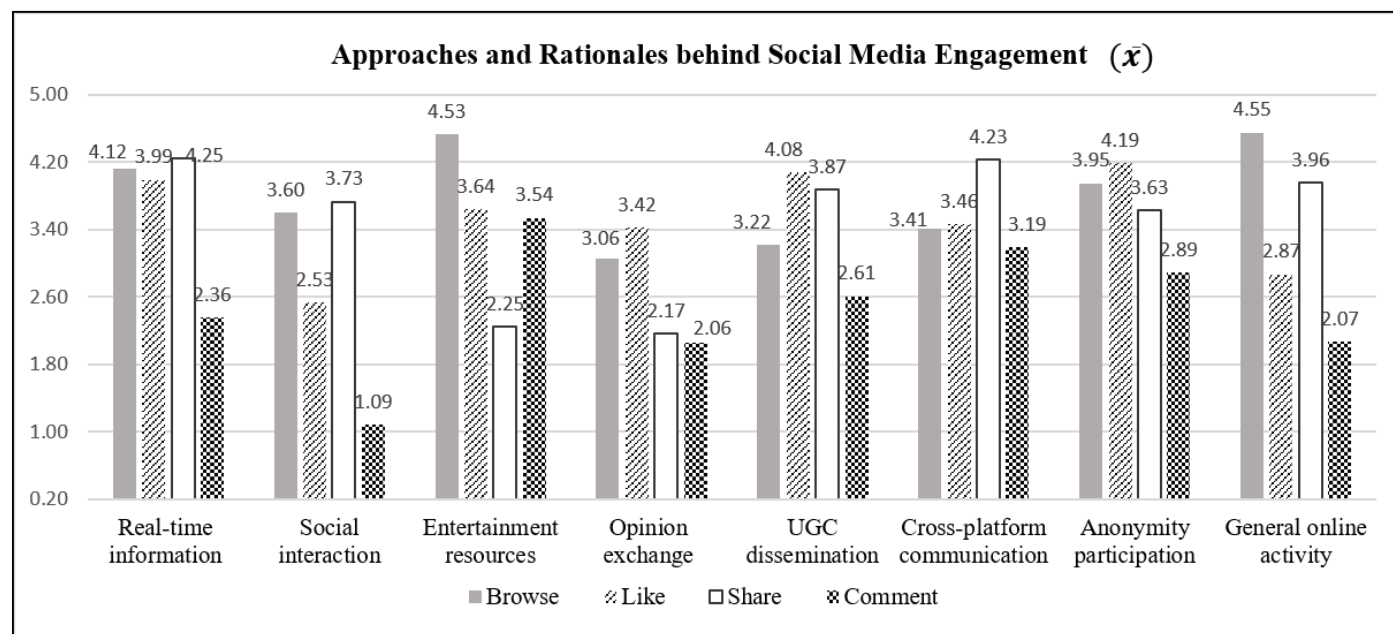


Figure 2. The illustration indicating how and why Chinese young generation engage in social media

As shown in Figure 2, it is evident that social media engagement affords a multiplicity of benefits in the everyday lives of younger generations. The figure illustrates the daily practices of Chinese younger generation predominantly involving browsing social platforms for entertainment resources ($x_{\diamond} = 4.53$) and general online activity ($x_{\diamond} = 4.55$), followed by engagement with real-time information ($x_{\diamond} = 4.12$). “Like” and “share” functions constituted the primary modes of social media engagement: the “like” mechanism was most evident in contexts of opinion exchange ($x_{\diamond} = 3.42$), viewing user-generated content ($x_{\diamond} = 4.08$), and anonymous participation in platform connections ($x_{\diamond} = 4.19$); whereas the “share” function was preferentially employed for disseminating real-time information ($x_{\diamond} = 4.25$), facilitating social interaction ($x_{\diamond} = 3.73$), and enabling cross-platform communication ($x_{\diamond} = 4.23$). By contrast, the comment mechanism accounted for comparatively lower levels of engagement across all rationales. It is obvious that the anonymous mechanism mainly serves users’ interpretive expression behavior of posting, and reduces the threshold of viewpoint output related to entertainment content ($x_{\diamond} = 3.54$).

The findings can be supported by the threshold effect of behavioral engagement proposed by Lee and Park (2023) concluding that lightweight behaviors such as browsing and sharing have low participation costs and are widely adopted by users, while comment interaction and original content creation require higher time and cognitive costs, resulting in a significantly smaller user scale. The research result is also concurrent to the study of Liu & Zhao (2025) revealing that within the digital landscape where users not only consume media but also actively produce, curate, and disseminate UGC contents, the engagement manifests through habitual practices such as browsing, liking, sharing, and commenting at the different attentions. These activities are closely tied to real-time information acquisition, social interaction, entertainment, and the supplementation of opinion exchange, whether conducted anonymously or across platforms.

4.3 Influences of Social Media Engagement to Public Agenda Setting

Table 2: Chi-square tests of independence between levels of social media engagement and public agenda setting effect

Variables	χ^2	df	N	P	Cramer's V
Social media engagement level X Public agenda setting effect	28.42	6	400	< .001	.188

Table 2 presents the results of Chi-square tests of independence. The association between level of social media engagement and public agenda was statistically significant, $\chi^2(6, N = 400) = 28.42, p < .001$. The effect size, measured by Cramer's V, was .188, suggesting a small-to-moderate association (0.10 - 0.30). Though effect sizes are not large, the consistent pattern underscores the relevance of social media engagement in shaping public agenda setting. The significant linear-by-linear trend implies that higher social media engagement tends to correspond with higher public agenda setting, albeit with variability.

These results support the interpretation that Chinese young generation's social media engagement exerts a modest but discernible influence on their perception to public agenda setting. The expanding influence of social media also extends the classical framework of agenda-setting theory, integrating the active agency of user engagement into public agenda construction (Lee & Park, 2023; Johnson et al., 2022a; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2023).

5. CONCLUSION

Social media has transformed from a peripheral channel into the central arena of public agenda formation, marking a decisive shift from the one-way flow of traditional media toward dynamic, multi-agent, and interactive communication embedded within complex networks of information exchange. The browsing and dissemination of trending topics function as primary drivers, profoundly shaping the everyday usage patterns of China's younger generation. A nuanced interplay of active participation and passive consumption defines the depth of user engagement with contemporary social affairs. Within the framework of agenda-setting theory, this evolution underscores how platform algorithms—applied to both user-generated and professionally produced content—operate as new forms of gatekeeping, translating personalized topics into collective public agendas. Cross-platform circulation and audience perception thereby constitute both threats and opportunities for transforming fragmented individual viewpoints into aggregated public voices, extending the classical agenda-setting paradigm into digital contexts. In particular, practices of social media engagement among younger cohorts demonstrably influence public agenda setting across four core dimensions: multi-platform affordances, multi-layered participation, algorithmic distribution, and user perception. Ultimately, the interplay between social platforms and agenda-setting processes within the digital media ecology illustrates how digital infrastructures have become the epicenter of public discourse, especially along China's localized developmental trajectory in contrast to global evolutionary patterns.

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