

The Influence of Social Media on the Professional Competence Improvement of Undergraduate Students in Xi'an

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Abstract

In the digital age, social media platforms serve not only as communication tools but also as key spaces for enhancing professional competence among undergraduate students. This study investigates how senior undergraduates in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China, utilize social media to develop professional knowledge, skills, and cognition. Using a qualitative approach grounded in social media participation theory, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students across diverse institutions and disciplines. Thematic analysis revealed that students strategically differentiate platform use: WeChat and WeChat official accounts support structured academic learning and knowledge acquisition; Xiaohongshu and Douyin facilitate practical skill development, industry information exploration, and career planning; and Weibo enables access to macro-level industry trends and public discourse. Interaction styles vary between active sharing, where students post projects, seek feedback, and engage with peers and professionals, and passive acquisition, focused on browsing and collecting information. Students' content attention spans three dimensions: academic knowledge, industry-relevant skills, and career development guidance. Social media contributes significantly to professional competence, enabling students to apply theoretical knowledge, improve practical skills, and gain immediate feedback from peers and practitioners. It also enhances professional cognition, broadening students' understanding of their fields, informing career choices, and reinforcing occupational identity through achievement presentation. Despite these benefits, challenges such as fragmented information, variable content quality, and the risk of superficial learning highlight the need for deliberate guidance.

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Overall, the study demonstrates that social media functions as an informal, practice-oriented learning ecosystem that complements formal education, fosters multidimensional skill development, and empowers undergraduates to actively shape their professional trajectories. These findings provide practical implications for universities, students, and policymakers in optimizing social media usage for professional development and employability enhancement.

Keywords: Social media; Professional competence; Undergraduate students.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary era when digital technology is deeply reshaping the professional ecosystem, social media has transformed from a basic communication tool into a key field for cultivating professional skills. As the world's largest digital society, China's unique platform ecosystem - especially WeChat, Douyin, Weibo and Xiaohongshu - is profoundly changing the employment preparation mode of college students. A 2022 survey by China Youth Daily revealed that 99.39% of surveyed university students use social media daily, with WeChat being the most frequently used platform (95.76%), followed by QQ (72.25%), Douyin (65.57%), Xiaohongshu (36.50%), Weibo (35.91%), Bilibili (34.54%), and Zhihu (14.42%) [1]. we urgently need a systematic analysis: How do these localized digital communication tools reconstruct the connotation and practice of employability?

This study takes the multi-dimensional construct of employability as the theoretical anchor point and deconstructs it into three interrelated dimensions: (1) knowledge, namely industry cognition and professional quality; (2) Skills, covering transferable abilities such as communication and collaboration, innovation and practice; (3) Professional cognition refers to the understanding of objective professional development and the positioning of one's own adaptability; This framework transcends the skills-based limitations of traditional employment research and emphasizes the capacity building of individuals in the digital environment.

There are significant gaps in existing research: Firstly, the Western academic community has long focused on platforms such as LinkedIn and Twitter, making it difficult to explain the ternary characteristics of Chinese social media, which are "strong social - pan-entertainment - content emphasis". Secondly, most studies have fragmented the linkage mechanisms among various dimensions of professional competence [2], ignoring the catalytic effect of self-awareness on the transformation of social capital. At the same time, digital communication also presents multiple risks, and related research warrants attention [3].

The selection of Xi'an as a case study holds significant exemplary value. As a hub for higher education in the western region, the city exhibits pronounced dual characteristics: on the one hand, Xi'an has achieved 100% digital infrastructure coverage, with the software and information technology services sector serving as the core pillar of strategic emerging industries within the Xi'an Hi-Tech Industrial Development Zone[4]. Translated with DeepL.com (free version) On the other hand, the "Survey Report on the Development Level of Digital Literacy and Skills of the Entire Population (2024)" shows that the digital literacy of adults in Shaanxi Province is lower than that in the eastern and central regions. However, due to the differentiation of disciplines, the literacy level of students majoring in technical fields in colleges and universities is close to the average level in the east, while

there is still a gap among students majoring in humanities and social sciences. This tension makes Shaanxi a natural laboratory for observing the digital divide and career empowerment.

This study focuses on senior undergraduate students at universities in Xi'an, examining the distinct characteristics of social media usage among students from different institutional types and disciplinary backgrounds. It systematically investigates the mechanisms through which social media influences their professional competencies and career development. Specifically, the research first analyzes the differences in participation behaviors exhibited by undergraduates from diverse institutions and disciplines when utilizing social media to enhance professional capabilities. Second, it compares the effectiveness of capability enhancement achieved through social media across different groups, evaluating outcomes from both professional knowledge and professional skills dimensions. Third, it delves into the distinct usage patterns, focus areas, and cognitive characteristics exhibited by students from different institutional and disciplinary backgrounds when using social media to access industry and major-related information. This study further evaluates the influence of social media on deepening undergraduate professional cognition and constructing career identity, providing empirical evidence for understanding the functional role and value of social media in cultivating employment competencies among university students.

Theoretically, this research can provide new empirical support and perspective supplementation for the cross-disciplinary research of educational technology and social psychology, the research on the dynamic development of professional abilities, and the theory of regional educational differences. In terms of practice, it can provide specific references and directions for undergraduate students to optimize their use of social media, for universities to improve their training programs, and for social media platforms to optimize their educational functions. At the policy level, it can provide empirical evidence and ideas for local education departments to formulate digital literacy policies, improve the evaluation system of educational informatization in colleges and universities, and standardize the educational content on social media. When social media becomes the "second classroom" for career development, analyzing its enabling logic and risk boundaries not only concerns individual destinies but also carries the deep-seated demands of China's modernization talent strategy.

2. Literature Review

Under the digital wave, social media has become an important part of college students' study and life, providing a brand-new platform for the improvement of their professional abilities. For undergraduate students in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China, being in this city with a large number of universities and diverse majors, students from different institutions (such as 985/211 universities, provincial key universities, regular undergraduate colleges, private universities, etc.) and majors (such as science and engineering, humanities and social sciences, art, economics and management, etc.) It demonstrates uniqueness in enhancing professional knowledge, skills and cognition through social media. This review focuses on the impact of social media participation behavior on the professional competence improvement of undergraduate students in Xi'an. By combining the interview research method with six senior undergraduate students in Xi'an, it sorts out relevant studies, laying the foundation for in-depth exploration of the differences in social media usage preferences and effects among students from different backgrounds.

2.1. The Relationship between Social Media Participation Theory and Undergraduate Professional Competence

With the in-depth application of digital technology in higher education, social media platforms have gradually become an important space for college students to enhance their professional abilities. The social media participation theory proposed by Dolan et al, provides a key theoretical support for understanding how college students can enhance their professional capabilities in the digital environment [5]. This theory encompasses three core dimensions: social capital construction, professional identity performance, and exploratory learning, which are closely related to professional knowledge accumulation, skill improvement, and cognitive deepening.

The dimension of social capital construction emphasizes bridging the information and resource gap by expanding the "weak connections" of social platforms. The research by Manca and Ranieri confirmed that social media is an effective tool for college students to expand their professional networks and obtain professional resources [6]. Diverse social relationships can bring more opportunities for students of different majors to enhance their professional knowledge and skills. For students from different colleges and universities in Xi'an, the differences in resource acquisition may be more obvious.

The dimension of professional identity performance draws on Goffman's "drama theory", which refers to the process where individuals shape their professional image through carefully planned content [7]. This process can prompt students to continuously consolidate their professional skills and deepen their professional understanding. For undergraduate students of all majors in Xi'an, such as science and engineering students presenting experimental results and humanities and social science students sharing research viewpoints, they can all enhance their professional abilities through exhibitions and performances.

The exploratory learning dimension refers to the acquisition of tacit knowledge and construction ability by users through trial and error and reflection in the use of social media, which is consistent with the "adaptive learning" view of Andrews and Higson [8]. This process is of great significance for the expansion of professional knowledge, the proficient application of skills and the improvement of professional cognition of undergraduate students in Xi'an.

Combining this theory with Yorke's employability theory enables a clearer view of the impact of social media on professional competence [9]. The four elements of professional knowledge mastery, skill development, efficacy belief and cognitive ability in the Yorke framework are in line with the core elements of professional ability. Social media promotes students' development in these aspects by facilitating social interaction, enhancing self-expression, and providing feedback.

2.2. The Relationship between Social Media and Higher Education

In recent years, the application of social media in higher education has received extensive attention. Gao, Luo and Zhang conducted a critical analysis of the research on weibo and education from 2008 to 2011, pointing out that the interactivity and immediacy of social media in the learning process provide students with more flexible academic communication channels [10]. It helps to establish interdisciplinary and cross-regional

learning networks. Similarly, Tang and Hew conducted research on the application of Twitter in education and found that it helps students participate in academic discussions and obtain cutting-edge information in the field, but its effectiveness depends on students' information screening ability and platform usage habits [11].

In the Chinese context, Social media has broken the time and space limitations of traditional classrooms and become a bridge for resource sharing and interactive communication between teachers and students. Teachers release teaching materials, organize pre-class preview and post-class Q&A through platforms such as wechat and QQ, build learning-oriented online communities, and promote collaborative and active learning. Meanwhile, the entertainment-oriented tendency of social media also poses challenges to students' self-control and teachers' willingness to participate, which need to be guided through platform selection, teacher training and process-based assessment [12]. Furthermore, New media promotes the digitalization and internetization of teaching resources. Online teaching platforms, open educational resources and multimedia technologies enrich the content and forms of teaching. Innovative practices such as blended teaching, personalized learning and virtual experiments have made learning more flexible and interactive. Meanwhile, teachers use social media such as Weibo and wechat to conduct classroom discussions and after-class tutoring, achieving a role transformation from knowledge transmitters to learning guides [13].

Weibo or Twitter promotes immediate discussions, autonomous learning and peer collaboration outside the classroom with their immediacy and interactivity. However, research also suggests that their teaching effectiveness depends on well-designed learning activities and students' information processing ability [10]. In addition, research on the role of social media in teaching acceptance and adoption indicates that the perceived usefulness, ease of use, and psychological factors (such as conformity and self-esteem) of the platform can significantly influence the intention of teachers and students to incorporate it into their learning/teaching practices [14]. Overall, existing research supports the notion that social media has the potential of "enhancing learning engagement - expanding knowledge reach - promoting community practice", but its positive transformation into measurable professional competence improvement needs to be combined with instructional design, information literacy training and platform characteristics [15].

2.3. The Differentiated Professional Capability Empowerment Mechanisms of Different Social Media Platforms

The architectures, algorithms and community norms of different platforms determine their different paths in empowering professional capabilities (knowledge, skills, professional visibility).

a. WeChat: Mobile Teaching and In-depth Support in the "Strong Relationship" Ecosystem

Multiple studies have shown that the WeChat ecosystem (including official accounts, WeChat groups, teaching mini-programs, etc.) is widely adopted in the teaching practice of colleges and universities to support blended teaching, mobile-assisted learning and academic information push. Research based on questionnaires/cases and content analysis indicates that teachers and departments can enhance learning participation, support flipped classrooms and extracurricular extended learning by pushing course resources, providing learning reminders and

interacting with teachers and students through WeChat official accounts and WeChat groups [16]. Meanwhile, an empirical WCI analysis of WeChat official accounts in colleges and universities shows that official WeChat accounts/school WeChat accounts have a high reach and influence in the dissemination of campus information, employment and academic resources [17]. Furthermore, from the perspective of the technology acceptance model, the motivation and adoption of WeChat usage are influenced by platform ease of use, perceived value and psychological factors [14]. Implications for undergraduate students in Xi'an: By consciously integrating WeChat official accounts/WeChat groups (such as pre-class material push, project display, on-campus internship and lecture notifications) into departmental courses and combining them with information literacy training, the "strong relationship - high trust" advantage of WeChat can be transformed into a channel for understanding professional knowledge and obtaining career opportunities [17].

b. Weibo: Open Information Flow and Information Literacy Training Ground

Reviews and empirical studies on Weibo or similar microblogging platforms show that their open and weak relationship networks facilitate tracking industry trends, participating in academic topics, and quickly obtaining cutting-edge information [10]. However, studies have repeatedly pointed out that the quality of information on open platforms varies greatly. If there is a lack of information discrimination and critical processing, the learning effect may remain at a superficial level [11]. Implications for undergraduate students in Xi'an: While encouraging students of science, engineering and interdisciplinary studies to use Weibo to track industry/academic trends, information literacy training (such as information source assessment, evidence integration exercises) should be embedded in the curriculum to transform "massive information" into "high-quality knowledge input"[10].

c. Xiaohongshu: An Experience-Sharing UGC Community and Reflective Practices

Although systematic empirical research in academic journals on the direct connection between Xiaohongshu and higher education is still limited, studies based on large-scale text topic modeling and motivation surveys show that Xiaohongshu mainly features "experience/strategy" type UGC, and community interaction tends to be in-depth sharing (such as internship experiences and project reviews). Its highly sticky community is conducive to the dissemination and reflection of practical experience (relevant platform text analysis research). Implications for undergraduate students in Xi'an: Students majoring in economics and management, art and design, etc. can produce their internship logs and project summaries in the form of "Xiaohongshu Notes", and complete practical reflection and skill accumulation through community feedback. The college can guide students to structure their classroom or project achievements into sharing posts and conduct peer review, thereby forming a closed loop of "practice - presentation - reflection".

d. Douyin:

Visual Presentation, Algorithm Exposure and Skill Demonstration

Research on short-video platforms (taking Douyin as an example) has accumulated empirical evidence in fields such as medical care, educational communication, and the effectiveness of short video dissemination in colleges

and universities. Content quality research shows that knowledge-based/skill-based short videos on Douyin have certain value in terms of usability and dissemination effect, but differences in content sources can affect reliability [18]. Case studies and questionnaire research in colleges and universities show that short videos are easy to present professional skills (especially visual/performance/design skills) in an intuitive form, thereby quickly obtaining feedback from peers and the public. However, the fragmented and entertaining nature of the platform may also threaten the depth of learning, and instructional design is needed to guide it [19]. Inspiration for undergraduate students in Xi'an: Art-related and practical majors can use Douyin for work display and employment image building. For the achievements of engineering or theoretical majors, the technical content needs to be visualized (demonstrated + explained) and accompanied by reflective reports in order to transform "short video exposure" into real evidence of professional capabilities [19,18].

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews based on the theory of social media engagement. A qualitative methodological approach was used in this study.

3.1. Research Object

This study selected six senior undergraduate students from Xi'an, Shaanxi Province as interviewees, aiming to cover different educational institutions and professional backgrounds to fully reflect the differences in preferences and effects of social media usage. The specific selection criteria are as follows:

Institutional level: The coverage includes 985/211 universities (such as Xi'an Jiaotong University), provincial key universities (such as Xi'an University of Technology and Xi'an International Studies University), regular undergraduate colleges (such as Xi'an University and Shaanxi Xueqian Normal University), and private colleges (such as Xi'an Siyuan University). Each institution selects one student to reflect the influence of resource supply from different institutions on social media usage behavior.

Professional categories: including science and engineering (such as Computer Science and Technology), humanities and social sciences (such as Chinese Language and Literature, information management and system), art (such as Digital Media Art), and economics and management (such as International Economics and Trade, Marketing), ensuring coverage of the main professional fields of research concern, and analyzing the connection between professional attributes and social media usage strategies.

Characteristics: All interviewees are senior students with at least three years of experience in using social media. They have also obtained professional-related information and enhanced their professional capabilities through social media in the past year to ensure they have sufficient experience and understanding of the research questions.

Table 1: Information of informant

Informant	university	major	Social media usage experience
1	Xi'an University	Jiaotong Computer Science and Technology	More than 3 years
2	Xi'an University of Technology	information management and system	More than 3 years
3	Xi'an International Studies University	International Economics and Trade	More than 3 years
4	Xi'an University	Digital Media Art	More than 3 years
5	Shaanxi Xueqian Normal University	Chinese Language and Literature	More than 3 years
6	Xi'an Siyuan University	marketing	More than 3 years

3.2. Research Tools

The research adopted a semi-structured interview outline as the main tool. The outline design was centered around three sub-research objectives, including open-ended questions and guiding questions. The specific content is as follows:

Social media engagement behavior: "Which social media platforms do you commonly use?" How often is it used?" In your professional studies, do you prefer to passively browse through social media (such as reading professional articles and videos) or actively interact (such as asking questions, sharing opinions, and participating in discussions)? What types of professional content do you pay attention to (such as course materials, industry cases, academic frontiers, skill tutorials, etc.)?"

Professional ability improvement effect: "What specific benefits do you think the use of social media has brought to your professional knowledge (such as theoretical understanding and knowledge expansion)?" Could you give an example to illustrate?" What role does social media play in enhancing professional skills such as programming, design, data analysis, copywriting, etc.? "Are there any differences in the effects of different platforms on enhancing professional capabilities?" "

Professional cognition and career identity: "After learning about industry trends and career development paths through social media, has your understanding of your major changed?" "How do industry information or experiences shared by seniors on social media influence your career choice preferences?" "Do you showcase

your professional achievements (such as works and project reports) on social media? What effect does this have on your professional identity?

Before the interview outline is officially put into use, pre-interviews will be conducted with two senior students who are not the research subjects. Based on the feedback, the question expressions will be adjusted to ensure that the language is easy to understand and the logic is clear, avoiding overly guiding expressions to enhance the authenticity and effectiveness of the interview content.

3.3. Data Collection

The research collected data through face to face interviews. The specific process is as follows:

Interview Appointment: Contact potential interviewees through college student communities, recommendations from acquaintances, etc. Explain the research purpose, content and confidentiality principles. After obtaining consent, set an interview time (40-60 minutes per person), and send the interview outline to the other party in advance to allow them sufficient time to sort out their thoughts.

Interview implementation: The interviews were conducted in the interviewee's school. During the interviews, a combination of audio recording (with the consent of the interviewee) and written records was adopted to ensure the completeness of the information. The interviewer asked questions based on the outline and followed up on the interviewee's responses. For instance, when the interviewee mentioned "learning programming skills through Douyin", further inquired, "Which specific accounts did you follow?" "How can the learned content be applied to professional courses or practical projects?"

Data organization: Transcribe the audio recording into a transcript, remove personal privacy information (such as name, student number, etc.), proofread and code the transcript to form the original interview materials.

3.4. Data Analysis

The thematic analysis method in qualitative research was adopted to analyze the interview data. The specific steps are as follows:

Open coding: Read the interview text sentence by sentence, extract the core concepts and sentences related to the research question, such as "The professional course videos on WeChat Channels (video accounts) helped me make up for the knowledge points I didn't understand in class" and "After participating in industry topic discussions on Weibo, my understanding of professional application scenarios has become clearer", and then make a preliminary classification and marking of them.

Spindle coding Associate the concepts and categories obtained from open coding, and extract potential themes around the logical thread of "institutional background - professional attributes - social media usage behavior - effect of ability improvement".

Selective coding: Determine the core theme from the main axis coding topics, combine the research objective and sub-research questions, summarize the characteristics and patterns of students from different institutions and professional backgrounds in terms of social media usage preferences, ability improvement effects, and professional cognition construction, and form the final research conclusion.

4. Findings

The themes reported emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview data.

4.1. Social Media Participation Behavior

Frequently Used Platforms and Their Purposes

The findings indicate a clear functional differentiation in undergraduate students' use of social media platforms for professional learning and career development. Overall, WeChat, WeChat official accounts, and professional groups are primarily used for systematic learning, academic knowledge acquisition, and problem solving. Xiaohongshu and Douyin are more frequently used for skills acquisition, industry information exploration, and career planning. Weibo mainly functions as a channel for obtaining macro-level industry trends and public discussions. Students in science and engineering disciplines tend to watch technical tutorials, algorithm visualizations, and software operation demonstrations on Douyin, as one computer science student noted: "When I watch algorithm animation and programmer explanations on Douyin, it is easier to understand abstract concepts than in the classroom." (Informant 1)

Applied and creative major students use short-video platforms to obtain practical examples and inspiration. A digital media and arts student explained: "Every day I watch short videos on Douyin to see design and visual effects techniques, and sometimes I post my own practice works." (Informant 4)

Students in humanities and education majors rely more on WeChat and Xiaohongshu for teaching methods, examination preparation, and learning experiences. One education student commented: "I search for teaching qualification examination strategies and classroom management skills on Xiaohongshu, which is more effective than just reading textbooks." (Informant 5)

Interaction Preferences

Regarding interaction patterns, two main types were identified: active sharing and passive acquisition. Most students reported that they primarily browse and save information, but shift to active interaction when encountering concrete academic or practical problems. For instance, an information management student described: "When I encounter a bug in my course design, I search for solutions on WeChat or ask questions under relevant videos on Douyin." (Informant 2)

Active participants also share their work publicly to receive feedback and recognition. A digital media and arts student stated: "After finishing a course project, I post it on Xiaohongshu or Douyin to see others' feedback, and

sometimes professionals even provide suggestions.” (Informant 4)

These interaction behaviors not only meet immediate learning needs but also help students form preliminary professional networks and confidence in their fields.

Focus of Content Consumption

Students' content consumption mainly focuses on academic knowledge, industry skills, and career development information. Students in science and engineering prioritize technical visualization and practical skills. A computer science student explained: “When learning central processing unit pipelines, the textbook diagrams were too abstract, but the Lego simulation video on Douyin made it instantly understandable.” (Informant 1)

Creative major students focus on up-to-date project cases and design trends: “Many new technologies in artificial intelligence generated content and virtual production are not taught in class, but I can see the applications immediately on Douyin and Xiaohongshu.” (Informant 4)

Humanities and education students emphasize practical teaching experiences: “Watching lesson recordings and teaching plans shared by frontline teachers helps me understand how to apply theory.” (Informant 5)

These patterns indicate that students actively match content with their professional needs, forming an informal learning ecosystem that complements formal education.

4.2. Effects on Professional Competence Enhancement

Acquisition of Professional Knowledge

Social media plays a significant role in supplementing professional knowledge by visualizing abstract concepts and updating disciplinary information beyond textbooks. A computer science student reflected: “Through social media, I learned about new artificial intelligence code generation tools earlier than in class, which made my course projects more forward-looking.” (Informant 1)

An information management student highlighted real-world case learning: “Enterprise resource planning was abstract in class, but seeing actual company cases on Xiaohongshu made it clear what enterprise resource planning actually does.” (Informant 2)

Education students also benefited from practical examples: “Watching frontline teachers share microteaching and lesson plans made me understand how to apply teaching theory.” (Informant 5)

Improvement of Professional Skills

Skill improvement primarily arises from short-video platforms and experience-sharing communities that emphasize practical operation. A marketing student described: “I learned how to design storytelling presentations by watching other students' demonstrations on Douyin, which was very helpful during internship

presentations.” (Informant 6)

Computer science students also reported developing technical skills through social media practice: “Following a blogger on Douyin, I set up a Docker environment on my own computer, which later became an advantage during my internship interview.” (Informant 1)

Differences in Platform Functions

Students selectively combined platforms based on content depth, interaction mode, and practicality. An information management student summarized: “WeChat is for serious learning, Xiaohongshu provides practical experiences, and Douyin is for inspiration and quick tips. Each platform has its unique role.” (Informant 2)

This selective usage indicates students’ mature awareness of platform functionalities and highlights that social media serves as a supplementary tool rather than a replacement for formal education.

4.3. Professional Cognition and Occupational Identity

Changes in Professional Understanding

Social media broadened students’ understanding of their majors, shifting their perception from simple skill acquisition to integrated problem-solving and systems thinking. A computer science student said: “I used to think programming was just writing code, but now I understand that the core is systems thinking and solving complex engineering problems.” (Informant 1)

A marketing student similarly stated: “Real marketing involves the entire chain from market insight and product positioning to promotion and sales, not just selling products.” (Informant 6)

Impact on Career Choices

Exposure to peer narratives and real-life examples directly influenced students’ career decisions, including employment versus postgraduate study, industry selection, and role positioning. An information management student explained: “After reading alumni experiences on social media, I decided to work first instead of pursuing postgraduate study.” (Informant 2)

An international trade student reported: “Seeing alumni share their daily work in Japanese enterprises on Xiaohongshu helped me set a clear target for my own career.” (Informant 3)

Role of Achievement Presentation in Professional Identity

The public display of achievements enhanced professional identity and self-efficacy. A digital media and arts student stated: “When my work received likes and comments from peers and professionals, I felt more confident about pursuing this career.” (Informant 4)

A computer science student added: “Displaying course projects and competition results online led to inquiries from juniors and recognition from mentors, confirming that I am on the right professional path.” (Informant 1)

5. Conclusion

This study, through qualitative analysis of six undergraduate students from diverse disciplines in Xi’an universities, reveals the multifaceted role of social media as a significant informal learning ecosystem that substantially complements formal higher education. The findings demonstrate that social media usage is characterized by strategic platform differentiation, practice-oriented content curation, and active identity construction, collectively contributing to professional competence enhancement and career readiness.

Students exhibit sophisticated platform literacy, strategically leveraging different social media based on content depth and functionality. WeChat serves for systematic knowledge acquisition, Douyin for conceptual visualization and trendspotting, and Xiaohongshu for practical skill-sharing and peer-based career navigation. This selective usage indicates that students are not passive consumers but active architects of their personalized learning environments, effectively bridging gaps left by formal curricula, such as outdated case studies or limited practical exposure.

The core value of social media lies in its capacity for applied and contextualized learning. It transforms abstract theoretical knowledge into tangible examples—whether through algorithm animations, real-world marketing campaign breakdowns, or frontline teaching vignettes. This exposure fosters a deeper professional understanding, shifting students’ perception from mere skill acquisition to holistic problem-solving and systems thinking within their respective fields. Platforms facilitate just-in-time learning and problem-solving, offering immediate support for course projects, technical troubleshooting, and competition preparation, thereby enhancing operational competencies and adaptability.

Beyond knowledge and skills, social media profoundly influences professional socialization and identity formation. By consuming narratives and experiences of practitioners and peers, students gain realistic insights into industry landscapes, role expectations, and career pathways, which directly inform their academic choices, internship pursuits, and post-graduation plans. The act of publicly showcasing academic projects and receiving feedback cultivates a sense of professional efficacy, builds a nascent personal brand, and reinforces occupational commitment through external validation.

This influence is not without caveats. Challenges such as information fragmentation, quality inconsistency, potential distraction, and the risk of superficial learning underscore that social media is a supplement, not a substitute, for the depth and structure provided by formal education. Its effectiveness depends heavily on the user’s critical literacy, self-regulation, and ability to integrate online insights with offline practice and theoretical foundations.

For undergraduates in Xi’an, social media has evolved into an indispensable adjunct learning space. It empowers them to navigate the rapidly evolving knowledge landscape, connect theory with practice, and proactively shape their professional trajectories. For higher education institutions, these findings highlight the

need to acknowledge and pedagogically integrate these informal learning practices. Recommendations include fostering students' digital critical literacy, creating channels to bridge academic knowledge with online industry discourse, and encouraging the reflective use of social media for portfolio development and professional networking.

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