

Viable Pathways for Undergraduate Social Media Entrepreneurship in the Digital Economy Era

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Abstract. With the deep integration of the digital economy and the real economy, social media has become a primary platform for undergraduates to engage in innovation and entrepreneurial practice. As digital natives, undergraduates possess inherent advantages in social media entrepreneurship; however, they still face practical dilemmas such as limited entrepreneurial cognition, deficiencies in the education systems, and insufficient external policy support. Drawing on an analysis of how social media reshapes entrepreneurial logic, this study employs a mixed-methods approach encompassing literature review, case study, and data analysis. It synthesizes authoritative survey data with typical entrepreneurial cases to identify the core characteristics, cognitive biases, and practical dilemmas of undergraduates' social media entrepreneurship. It further constructs a three-dimensional optimization system for practical paths from the perspectives of universities, individuals, and government-society. The findings reveal a fundamental shift from product-first to market-first logic and from heavy-asset to light-asset operations. This study aims to break through the limitations of traditional entrepreneurial models, improve the success rate of undergraduates' social media entrepreneurship, and provide theoretical support and practical reference for the reform of college entrepreneurship education and the improvement of entrepreneurial support policies.

Keywords: Digital Economy, Social Media Entrepreneurship, Undergraduates, Entrepreneurial Thinking, Practical Path

1. Introduction

Driven by the national policy of "entrepreneurship and innovation initiative", undergraduate entrepreneurship in China has continued to grow and has emerged as a vital force driving industrial innovation and economic transformation. With the popularization of new media terminals and the maturity of digital technologies represented by big data, artificial intelligence and 5G, social media platforms including short video, live streaming and social e-commerce have built a low-threshold, wide-coverage entrepreneurial ecosystem, fundamentally transforming traditional entrepreneurial models and opening new opportunities for undergraduates with limited capital and resources.

As digital natives, contemporary undergraduates grow up with the internet and social media, and have a natural sensitivity to new media operations, content creation and user demand insights. They have become core participants in social media entrepreneurship. According to the 2023 China

College Students Employment Report by MyCOS Institute, among the 2022 college graduates who chose self-employment, 38.2% were engaged in internet and digital economy-related fields, and social media entrepreneurship has become the most concentrated form of entrepreneurship among college students [1].

Nevertheless, practical implementation reveals prominent challenges. The industry faces severe polarization, with a large number of entrepreneurial projects struggling with homogeneous content, difficulties in traffic monetization, and low market recognition. Most undergraduates hold cognitive biases and misunderstandings about social media entrepreneurship.

Current academic research on social media entrepreneurship mostly focuses on communication studies and business practices, with limited targeted research on the entrepreneurial thinking and practical paths of undergraduates as a specific group [1, 2]. Therefore, this paper takes undergraduates' social media entrepreneurship as its research object, analyzes its core logic and practical dilemmas, and constructs a scientific and feasible optimization path, which carries important theoretical significance and practical value for promoting high-quality development of undergraduate entrepreneurship and improving college entrepreneurship education systems. This paper specifically raises the following research questions: What are the core characteristics and cognitive biases of undergraduates' social media entrepreneurship? How can a multi-dimensional optimization path be constructed to improve the success rate of undergraduates' social media entrepreneurship?

2. Digital economy revolution and the rise of social media entrepreneurship

The fourth industrial revolution marked by digital technology has triggered a new wave of information transformation, and the digital economy has become the core engine of China's economic growth. Data from the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology shows that China's digital economy reached 50.2 trillion yuan in 2023, accounting for 41.5% of GDP, and has deeply penetrated all links of production, distribution and consumption [2].

The development of the digital economy has driven the continuous evolution of social media forms. From early text-based social platforms to today's integrated ecosystem of short videos, live streaming and private domain communities, social media has broken the temporal and spatial barriers of information transmission and realized two-way interactive connections between content producers and consumers. More importantly, social media has built a complete closed loop of "content creation—traffic aggregation—commercial monetization", giving rise to a new entrepreneurial form centered on content, supported by digital platforms, and guided by user demand: social media entrepreneurship.

Different from traditional entrepreneurship, social media entrepreneurship features low entry barriers, light-asset operations, fast information dissemination and wide user coverage. It breaks the traditional entrepreneurial model of "product first, market later", and shifts entrepreneurial logic from "supply-driven" to "demand-driven". For undergraduates with limited capital, strong creativity and solid digital literacy, social media entrepreneurship has gradually become the most suitable entrepreneurial form and the mainstream direction of undergraduate innovation and entrepreneurship practice.

3. The reconstruction of undergraduates' entrepreneurial logic in the social media era

3.1. Limitations of traditional undergraduate entrepreneurship models

Traditional entrepreneurship in China is dominated by traditional brick-and-mortar ventures with heavy asset investment, which has inherent limitations poorly suited for undergraduate entrepreneurial practice. The traditional entrepreneurial process starts with market research, is followed by raw material procurement and production organization, and finally sells products to customers through multi-level channels such as wholesalers and retailers to generate profits.

This model has three core flaws. First, it has high capital and resource thresholds, requiring substantial upfront investment in venues, equipment and inventory, which is difficult for undergraduates with limited capital and social resources to afford. Second, the long industrial chain leads to low operational efficiency, squeezing profit margins and slowing market feedback, which easily causes overcapacity and inventory backlogs. Third, the market scope is narrow and entrepreneurial risks are high, as traditional entrepreneurship is often limited to regional markets, making it difficult to scale up the user base in a short time. In addition, the traditional model places high demands on operators' industry experience and management capabilities, which are difficult for undergraduates lacking social experience to meet. This is also the core reason for the persistently high failure rate of undergraduates' traditional physical entrepreneurship [3].

3.2. Reconstruction of entrepreneurial thinking by social media

The arrival of the social media era has completely broken the limitations of the traditional entrepreneurial model, and has reshaped undergraduates' entrepreneurial thinking across multiple dimensions. Social media entrepreneurship refers to a unique form of digital entrepreneurship in which entrepreneurs utilise social media platforms (including short-video platforms, live-streaming ecosystems and private communities) to create value through content creation, traffic aggregation and the monetisation of relationships.

The most fundamental change is the shift from "product first" to "market first". With the help of social media big data, undergraduates can anticipate market demand and consumption trends, lock in target user groups in advance, and then carry out targeted content creation, product design or service provision based on user needs. This model completely reverses traditional entrepreneurial logic, avoids the risk of blind production, and greatly reduces entrepreneurial trial-and-error costs. The "Part-time Cat" project, founded by a graduate of Guangzhou University of Chinese Medicine, first identified the pain point of information asymmetry in the college student part-time job market through social media research before developing the matching platform. It has now served more than 50 million users and has become a benchmark project of college students' internet entrepreneurship.

Social media also enables the transition from "heavy-asset operation" to "light-asset entrepreneurship". Taking content and creativity as its core competitiveness, social media entrepreneurship does not require large upfront fixed asset investment, and can be started with just a mobile phone and a computer. Undergraduates can achieve commercial monetization through content creation, account operation and affiliate marketing, which perfectly aligns with the characteristics of undergraduates who lack capital but are rich in creativity.

Beyond operational models, social media transforms information dissemination from one-way communication to two-way interaction. Undergraduates can obtain real-time user feedback through comments, reposts, and private messages, continuously optimize content products and service

models, and foster emotional connections with users to build brand loyalty, which is the underlying mechanism behind the sustainable development of social media entrepreneurship. Meanwhile, social media transcends geographical boundaries and expands market reach from regional markets to national and even global markets. According to official statistics, as of June 2023, the number of short video users in China reached 1.026 billion, accounting for 95.2% of the total internet users [4]. Undergraduates can reach the national market through these platforms and even expand to overseas markets via cross-border social media.

3.3. Core advantages of undergraduates' social media entrepreneurship

Compared with other entrepreneurial groups, undergraduates have unique core advantages in social media entrepreneurship.

As digital natives, contemporary undergraduates grow up with the internet and social media, have a deep understanding of social media platform operation rules and user groups' preferences, and can quickly master content creation, traffic operation and user management skills — advantages that other age groups find hard to match.

Undergraduates also benefit from active innovative thinking and strong learning ability. They are in a stage of rapid knowledge acquisition, can quickly accept new things and technologies, and have strong capabilities to innovate content forms and entrepreneurial models. Meanwhile, professional knowledge learned in colleges can be effectively integrated into entrepreneurial practice: design majors engage in visual content creation, business majors focus on operation and model design, and foreign language majors pursue cross-border social media entrepreneurship, forming unique professional competitive advantages [5].

Flexible time arrangements and campus group resources further lower the threshold for early entrepreneurship. Undergraduates can carry out entrepreneurial practice while completing their studies, which is conducive to the trial-and-error and growth of entrepreneurial projects. The campus community also provides a natural target user group, making it convenient for them to conduct initial market verification and user accumulation. Finally, policy and resource support provides a favorable external environment. As an innovative entrepreneurial form aligned with the development direction of the digital economy, social media entrepreneurship qualifies for greater policy support and resource allocation from colleges and governments. Although social media start-ups offer widespread advantages, university students face unique challenges due to their specific circumstances.

4. Challenges and optimization paths

4.1. Entrepreneurship education system

At present, the social media entrepreneurship education system in Chinese colleges remains imperfect and disconnected from practical needs. Most colleges' entrepreneurship education still stays at the stage of theoretical indoctrination, focusing on traditional entrepreneurial theories, and fails to make full use of new media resources for practical teaching. According to the China College Students' Innovation and Entrepreneurship Education Development Report (2023), only 32.7% of surveyed undergraduates believe that college innovation and entrepreneurship courses are highly practical, while more than 60% say the courses are too theoretical and disconnected from industry practice [6, 7]. The faculty structure is also problematic, as most entrepreneurship teachers lack

practical experience in new media entrepreneurship, and few colleges invite front-line industry practitioners as part-time mentors.

To address these issues, colleges should optimize the curriculum system and integrate professional education with entrepreneurship education. Innovation and entrepreneurship courses should be classified as compulsory practical courses with increased class hours, and specialized courses such as content creation, short-video operation, and compliance operation should be added. Colleges should also build a professional faculty with both theoretical and practical capabilities, recruit teachers with industry experience, and establish a part-time mentor database inviting industry practitioners and successful entrepreneurs. Deepening school-enterprise cooperation and building special incubation bases for new media projects can further provide students with practical platforms and resource integration channels.

4.2. Individual entrepreneurial cognition

Undergraduates generally have cognitive biases and misconceptions about social media entrepreneurship, which is the core reason for the high failure rate of their entrepreneurial projects. Many undergraduates mistakenly believe that social media entrepreneurship has a low threshold and is easy to achieve success in. Relevant surveys show that more than 50% of surveyed undergraduates hold this view, which is completely inconsistent with the actual situation of the industry [7, 8]. Many also have a one-sided understanding of social media entrepreneurship, regarding it merely as opening online stores or becoming influencers, without realizing it is a complete system covering market positioning, user operation, commercial monetization and risk control. The impetuous mentality of seeking quick success further leads to serious content homogenization and lack of core competitiveness.

To correct these cognitive biases, undergraduates should establish a rational and pragmatic entrepreneurial attitude through systematic learning and in-depth industry research. They should abandon the misconception of quick success, treat entrepreneurship as a long-term career path, and focus on building core competitiveness in vertical niche areas while integrating their own professional advantages. Systematic skill acquisition should adhere to a T-shaped model: broad horizontal knowledge in platform operations, data analytics, and regulatory compliance, coupled with deep vertical expertise in a specialised subject linked with professional training, such as design majors in visual content systems. This framework converts general digital literacy into a robust competitive advantage.

Fundamental understanding of intellectual property law, advertising legislation, and the governance regulations of developing platforms (such as content moderation algorithms and data protection mandates) must be regarded as essential operational conditions rather than mere afterthoughts.

4.3. External support environment

China's support policies for college student entrepreneurship are still inadequate in the field of social media entrepreneurship, and there are many implementation challenges. Current policies are mostly general provisions, lacking targeted measures tailored to the characteristics of social media entrepreneurship such as light-asset operations and heavy platform dependence. According to survey data, 72.3% of college student entrepreneurs believe that insufficient start-up funds and limited financing channels are the primary difficulties faced in entrepreneurship [6]. In addition, most entrepreneurial incubation bases focus on offline physical projects, and professional incubation

platforms for online social media entrepreneurship are scarce. The industry norms and supervision system are not yet perfect, and social recognition of social media entrepreneurship is still insufficient.

To optimize the external environment, the government should introduce targeted support policies, set up special funds for undergraduates' social media entrepreneurship, and implement tax reductions, exemptions, and start-up subsidies. It should also cooperate with colleges, internet platforms and MCN institutions to build professional incubation bases and a unified national online service platform, providing one-stop services for entrepreneurial projects. Strengthening industry supervision and intellectual property protection can create a fair and orderly market environment. Finally, strengthening publicity of outstanding entrepreneurial cases can improve social recognition and create a tolerant and supportive entrepreneurial atmosphere.

5. Conclusion

This study illustrates that social media entrepreneurship signifies a fundamental transformation for Chinese undergraduates: transitioning from product-centric to demand-centric logic, from capital-intensive to asset-light operations, and from localised to platform-mediated marketplaces. This structural opportunity is compromised by a systemic misalignment between educational systems, individual cognition, and policy frameworks. Our three-dimensional optimisation model(encompassing university curriculum reform, individual capability enhancement, and collaborative governance between government and society) offers a cohesive solution to this imbalance. This study has important practical significance for the field of undergraduate innovation and entrepreneurship. For colleges, it provides specific ideas for reforming entrepreneurship education systems and optimizing curriculum settings. For undergraduates, it helps correct cognitive biases and establish scientific entrepreneurial thinking. For government departments, it offers a reference for formulating targeted support policies and improving the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

This study is limited by its research methods and scope, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. First, the research mainly adopts literature analysis and case study methods and lacks large-sample empirical investigation and quantitative testing of the relationship between various influencing factors and entrepreneurial performance. Second, the research data and cases are mainly from China, and cross-cultural comparative research with other countries and regions is insufficient. Future research could focus on conducting large-scale questionnaire surveys and empirical research to quantitatively analyze the key factors affecting the success of undergraduates' social media entrepreneurship. Cross-regional and cross-school comparative studies can also be conducted to explore the differences in entrepreneurial practice paths across different regional economic levels and school types.

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