Flagships and Community Builders: A Configurational Analysis of High-Impact University Ideological and Political Education WeChat Accounts

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Abstract

Organizational success on digital platforms rarely emerges from single "best practice" factors but from the complex interplay among strategic elements. Yet, research has predominantly relied on linear models ill-equipped to capture this causal complexity. Addressing this gap, this study draws on configuration theory and employs fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) to uncover the pathways to high impact for 30 top-performing university Ideological and Political Education (IPE) WeChat accounts. Our analysis reveals two crucial findings. First, high-quality content and extensive communication influence are identified as dual necessary conditions, resolving the theoretical tension between value-centric and reach-centric logics. Second, we uncover two equifinal sufficient configurations built upon this shared foundation: a "Community Builder" strategy that combines the core conditions with high affinity, and a "Flagship" strategy that combines them with demonstrative leadership. This study develops and validates a configurational model of digital success, offering a nuanced theoretical alternative to correlational approaches and providing a strategic map for practitioners navigating the complexities of digital communication.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital landscape, social media is no longer a peripheral marketing tool for universities but has become a central arena for institutional branding, stakeholder engagement, and the fulfillment of core educational missions (Capriotti et al., 2024; Rutter et al., 2016). Within China, this digital transformation is especially critical for the practice of Ideological and Political

Education (IPE), a foundational component of the national higher education system (Yu & Yao, 2024) University IPE WeChat accounts have thus emerged at a critical intersection, tasked with the complex challenge of translating institutional values into engaging content for a digitally native generation that exhibits distinct patterns of media consumption and identity expression, particularly on mobile and video-centric platforms (Lian, 2023; Zhou et al., 2024). However, many of these accounts struggle to translate effort into effect. Existing studies and practical observations point to widespread challenges such as content homogenization, superficial engagement, and a polarization of communication effects, where official announcements fail to resonate with the target audience (Arora et al., 2022; Ngai et al., 2020). The success in this digital realm directly impacts an institution's legitimacy and its ability to fulfill its fundamental purpose.

Faced with this challenge, university administrators and scholars alike have sought to identify the key drivers of success (Shu, 2023; Yang et al., 2023). Existing research has made valuable contributions by consistently pointing to a series of critical factors, such as high-quality content, extensive communication reach, and high levels of user affinity (Lian, 2023; Yang et al., 2023; Zhang, 2023). However, the vast majority of this research relies on variable-centered, linear-additive models such as regression analysis (Chen, 2024; Shen et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2023), which assess the isolated "net effect" of each factor. This dominant approach is often criticized for being fundamentally ill-equipped to capture the complex realities of strategy, as it assumes factors work in isolation and are simply additive (Fiss, 2011). By searching for a "one-size-fits-all" solution, it generates a fragmented and often confusing "checklist" of best practices, leaving a critical research gap that how can we understand these crucial factors combine synergistically to produce high impact.

Without a coherent map of successful strategic combinations, university managers are left to navigate the complex digital environment with inadequate tools, often leading to wasted resources on fragmented initiatives that fail to deliver a synergistic impact (Luan et al., 2020). To address this critical gap, this study investigates the causal complexity behind high-performing IPE WeChat accounts on consideration of Chinese background. We move beyond simplistic linear assumptions to ask a more nuanced, holistic question: What configurations of platform characteristics lead to high impact for university IPE WeChat accounts? To answer this central question, we employ fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA), a set-theoretic method specifically designed to identify complex causal recipes and uncover conditions of equifinality, the existence of multiple pathways to the same outcome(Fiss, 2011; Ragin, 2008; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). This configurational approach is ideal for understanding how conditions combine synergistically, and it allows us to investigate three specific sub-questions: (1) Are there multiple, equally effective pathways to achieving high impact? (2) Are any individual characteristics necessary for success? and (3) Is the explanation for success the symmetrical inverse of the explanation for failure?

This study offers significant value to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it challenges the prevailing linear models in digital communication research by introducing and empirically testing a configurational approach. Practically, the findings will provide university administrators and communication managers not with another simplistic checklist, but with a "strategic map" of

distinct, actionable, and context-dependent pathways for enhancing the impact of their digital IPE efforts.

2. Literature Review

This chapter provides the theoretical foundation for the study. It first reviews existing research on IPE WeChat accounts to identify a critical gap, then synthesizes broader theories of communication and institutional legitimacy to develop the configurational model.

2.1. Studies on IPE WeChat Accounts and Their Limitations

The strategic importance of IPE WeChat accounts has spurred a growing body of research (Lian, 2023; Shu, 2023). Scholars have made valuable contributions by identifying a series of factors critical to their success. These include, for example, the necessity of high-quality, mission-aligned content (Zhang, 2023) , the importance of extensive communication reach (Yang et al., 2023) , and the role of high-level user affinity and engagement (Lian, 2023). However, the vast majority of this research relies on variable-centered, linear-additive models, such as regression analysis, to assess the isolated "net effect" of each factor (Chen, 2024; Sun et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2023). This dominant approach, while useful, often generates a fragmented and sometimes confusing "checklist" of best practices. It is fundamentally ill-equipped to capture the complex realities of strategy, where factors work in synergistic combination rather than in isolation (Fiss, 2011). A critical research gap thus remains: we know what factors matter, but we do not know how these crucial factors combine synergistically to produce high impact. Existing research, with its linear assumptions, cannot adequately explain why some accounts with seemingly "good" content fail, while others succeed through different strategic profiles. This study addresses this gap by moving beyond a "net effects" logic to ask a holistic, configurational question: What combinations of platform characteristics lead to high impact for university IPE WeChat accounts?

2.2. The Digital Transformation of University Communication and IPE

The ubiquity of social media has reshaped higher education by enhancing communication, collaboration, and access to resources (Aleksandrova & Parusheva, 2019). Platforms like WeChat in China have evolved from peripheral channels into central arenas for institutional communication, profoundly altering how universities manage their reputation, engage with stakeholders, and fulfill their educational missions (Pang, 2020; Zhang, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). This digital transformation is especially critical for IPE, a core function of Chinese universities. The traditional top-down, classroom-based model of Ideological and Political Education faces challenges in engaging a digitally native student body accustomed to interactive and user-centric media (Chu, 2023). Consequently, university IPE WeChat accounts have become strategic assets, tasked not only with disseminating information but with actively shaping values and fostering community in a complex and noisy digital ecosystem (Lian, 2023; Zhou et al., 2024). Therefore, understanding what constitutes "effectiveness" in this new context is a pressing theoretical and practical concern.

2.3. The Duality of Digital Influence: Mass Communication vs. Community Engagement

To understand effectiveness on social media platforms, we must first consider the competing logics of digital influence rooted in communication theory. The first logic, stemming from classic mass communication theories, equates influence with reach and exposure (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). From this perspective, an effective platform is one that maximizes its audience size, viewership, and information dissemination capacity (Kandhway & Kuri, 2016; Purtle et al., 2020). This "broadcast" model prioritizes quantitative metrics and is built on the premise that a larger audience translates to greater potential impact (Zhang et al., 2020). The second, contrasting logic emphasizes community engagement and resonance (Brunton et al., 2017; Weitz, 2023). Drawing from Uses and Gratifications Theory (Rubin, 2009), this view posits that users are not passive recipients but active agents who use media to fulfill social and emotional needs. Therefore, influence is not just about reaching people but about resonating with them (Liu et al., 2023). It is achieved by building relationships, fostering dialogue, and creating a sense of belonging within an online community (Overstreet, 2020). This "community" model prioritizes qualitative engagement, loyalty, and the strength of the user-platform bond (Kumar et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2015). A critical tension exists that should a platform prioritize broadcasting to the many or building deep relationships with a dedicated community? Successfully navigating this duality is a central challenge for digital strategists.

2.4. The Institutional Imperative: Legitimacy as the Ultimate Goal

While communication theories explain the mechanisms of influence, Institutional Theory explains the motivation behind a university's digital strategy (Hinings et al., 2018; Valdés-León et al., 2021). As organizations, universities operate within a complex institutional field and are driven by a powerful need for legitimacy, the perception that their actions are appropriate and desirable within their social and political context (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2013). An IPE WeChat account is a primary tool for signaling and securing this legitimacy. This institutional imperative manifests in several ways. Firstly, it demands a high degree of responsiveness to key directives, a form of normative and coercive isomorphism where the university aligns its messaging with the expectations of key stakeholders like the government and the Ministry of Education to maintain its standing as a legitimate public institution (Dias et al., 2021; Salmi, 2007; Varughese, 2017). Secondly, universities engage in competitive strategies to enhance their status, such as striving for demonstrative leadership in digital innovation to be seen as a sector leader (Isaeva et al., 2024; Kiriliuk & Zakharova, 2024). Crucially, the ultimate foundation of an educational institution's legitimacy is the substance of its mission. Therefore, the ideological and educational content it produces is not merely informational but is the very embodiment of its claim to authority and purpose (Verhoeven & Verbruggen, 2024). High-quality, mission-aligned content is the core resource that underpins all other legitimacy seeking activities on the platform. Thus, the institutional context compels universities to manage a portfolio of actions, which includes responsiveness, leadership, and substantive content, to secure and enhance their legitimacy.

2.5. A Configurational Synthesis: Multiple Pathways to Legitimacy and Impact

From the above, the core logic of institutional social accounts includes the communication duality of reach versus resonance, and the institutional imperative for legitimacy through content, leadership, and responsiveness. A simple linear model (Chen, 2024; Shen et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2020; Yang, 2023) is inadequate to capture how these forces combine. Therefore, this study adopts Configuration Theory as its synthesizing framework (Fiss, 2011; Meyer et al., 1993). Configuration theory posits that effectiveness arises not from individual factors but from the holistic and synergistic interplay among them, and that multiple, different combinations of factors or configurations, can lead to the same successful outcome (Andrews et al., 2016; Puppatz et al., 2023). This theoretical lens allows us to integrate the previously discussed dimensions into a cohesive model. So we propose that high-impact IPE WeChat accounts achieve success through different, and equifinal configurations of communication logics and institutional strategies.
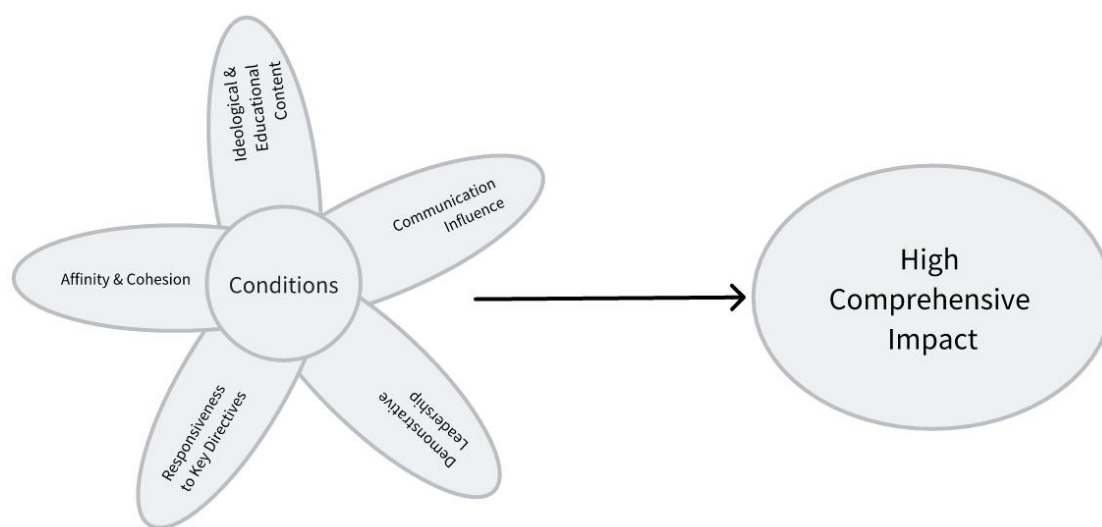

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Figure 1 visually presents our conceptual model, which integrates the theoretical streams discussed above. The model identifies five key conditions posited to combine to produce the outcome. Based on the communication duality, we derive two conditions: Communication Influence (CI) , representing the "mass communication" logic of reach, and Affinity & Cohesion (AC), representing the "community engagement" logic of resonance. From the institutional imperatives (Section 2.4), we derive three conditions: the foundational Ideological & Educational Content (IEC), which embodies the IPE mission; Demonstrative Leadership (DL) , reflecting institutional status-seeking; and Responsiveness to Key Directives (RKD), reflecting organizational alignment. The configurational argument is that High Comprehensive Impact is not achieved by maximizing any single condition, but rather through distinct, synergistic combinations of these five conditions.

In conclusion, based on this configurational synthesis, this study operationalizes the key elements of effectiveness by drawing from these theoretical streams. From the communication logics, we derive the conditions of Communication Influence and Affinity and Cohesion. Concurrently, from the institutional imperatives of legitimacy, we derive the conditions of Responsiveness to Key Directives, Demonstrative Leadership, and the foundational element of

Ideological and Educational Content. These five conditions constitute the building blocks of the configurations we seek to uncover through fsQCA (as shown in the Conceptual Model of Figure 1), allowing us to explore the multiple, complex pathways to achieving high impact in the digital landscape of Ideological and Political Education.

3. Methodology

This section outlines the fsQCA methodology. It covers the case selection and data source, the operationalization of the study's conditions, and the multi-step procedures used for data analysis.

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts the method of fsQCA to answer the research questions that how could these crucial factors combined synergistically to produce high impact. Unlike conventional quantitative methods such as regression analysis, which focus on the net effect of independent variables, fsQCA is a set-theoretic approach rooted in configurational theory (Fiss, 2011; Ragin, 2008). It is exceptionally well-suited for this study for three reasons. First, fsQCA is designed to unravel causal complexity, identifying conjunctural causation, where conditions are only effective in combination (Ding, 2022; Liu et al., 2023); equifinality, where multiple distinct causal pathways can lead to the same outcome (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996; Wolfschwenger & Young, 2021); and causal asymmetry, where the explanations for the presence of an outcome can be different from the explanations for its absence (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). This aligns with our theoretical assumption that there is no single best way to achieve high impact. Second, fsQCA is ideal for small- to medium-N research designs (N=30 in our case), where traditional statistical methods lack sufficient power and case-oriented qualitative methods lack generalizability (Trueb, 2013). It bridges the gap between these two approaches by enabling a systematic, cross-case analysis while preserving the holistic integrity of each case (Douglas et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2022). Third, by using fuzzy sets, fsQCA moves beyond simple binary (present/absent) classifications and allows for the calibration of partial membership of cases in sets (Ragin, 2006). This accommodates the nuanced reality that universities possess characteristics (e.g., "communication influence" or "affinity") to varying degrees, providing a more fine-grained analysis.

3.2. Case Selection and Data Source

The cases for this study are the 30 top-performing Chinese universities as listed in the April 2025 "Ranking of Human Power in Ideological and Political Education". This ranking constitutes an information-rich sample of elite institutions that have demonstrated success in digital IPE, making them ideal for an inquiry into the configurations driving high performance. The data was sourced from the China National Ideological and Political Work Net (www.sizhengwang.cn), an official and authoritative platform supervised by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. This monthly report assesses IPE accounts using a comprehensive index that includes multiple indicators tracking, for example, content quality, communication reach, engagement, and innovation. These indicators align closely with our chosen conditions (e.g., IEC, CI, AC, DL), thus ensuring the data's high relevance and construct validity for this study. The specific dataset is from the monthly report covering the period from April 1st, 2025, to April 30th,

2025. This official source ensures the credibility and relevance of the data for assessing IPE effectiveness in China's higher education context.

Table 1. The Original Data Collected

Case Number	IEC	CI	DL	RKD	AC	HCI
1	2.58	2.88	0.98	0.89	0.9	823.46
2	2.56	2.88	0.98	0.9	0.92	822.79
3	2.49	2.88	0.9	0.89	0.93	809.38
4	2.54	2.84	0.77	0.9	0.93	798.96
5	2.43	2.82	0.95	0.87	0.9	796.76
6	2.44	2.85	0.9	0.87	0.88	793.71
7	2.51	2.8	0.82	0.89	0.91	793.22
8	2.43	2.81	0.89	0.87	0.91	790.3
9	2.44	2.78	0.92	0.87	0.88	789.59
10	2.42	2.81	0.88	0.88	0.91	789.51
11	2.4	2.8	0.93	0.85	0.9	788.77
12	2.51	2.8	0.76	0.88	0.92	786.26
13	2.51	2.78	0.74	0.89	0.92	784.11
14	2.41	2.78	0.88	0.87	0.9	783.96
15	2.43	2.75	0.87	0.87	0.91	783.52
16	2.39	2.74	0.96	0.86	0.88	783.07
17	2.4	2.77	0.86	0.85	0.87	775.8
18	2.36	2.75	0.87	0.85	0.89	773.51
19	2.37	2.74	0.88	0.86	0.86	770.82
20	2.34	2.73	0.89	0.85	0.88	769.01
21	2.34	2.69	0.85	0.86	0.93	767.03
22	2.31	2.73	0.89	0.85	0.89	765.9
23	2.32	2.72	0.89	0.84	0.85	762.01
24	2.33	2.69	0.87	0.85	0.89	761.65
25	2.29	2.75	0.86	0.84	0.87	760.96
26	2.3	2.7	0.89	0.84	0.87	760.26
27	2.26	2.7	0.91	0.84	0.89	759.93
28	2.34	2.72	0.76	0.86	0.89	757.09
29	2.24	2.72	0.85	0.84	0.9	755.17
30	2.26	2.68	0.87	0.84	0.89	754.88

3.3. Description of Conditions and Outcome

Our configurational model incorporates one outcome, High Comprehensive Impact (HCI), and five causal conditions. These conditions are derived from our conceptual model (Fugure 1) and are chosen to holistically capture the key strategic dimensions of content quality, communication strategy, and institutional positioning. The detailed definition for each variable is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Definition of Outcome and Causal Conditions

Abbreviation	Variable Name	Description
HCI	High Comprehensive Impact	(Outcome) The overall performance and effectiveness of the university's IPE WeChat account, measured by the comprehensive score in the ranking.
IEC	Ideological & Educational Content	(Condition) The quality and depth of content in promoting core values and mainstream ideology.
CI	Communication Influence	(Condition) The account's reach and engagement, reflected in metrics like readership and user base size.
DL	Demonstrative Leadership	(Condition) The account's role as an industry benchmark in innovation and agenda-setting.
RKD	Responsiveness to Key Directives	(Condition) The effectiveness in communicating and interpreting major policies and university-level initiatives.
AC	Affinity & Cohesion	(Condition) The ability to build an emotional connection and a sense of community with the audience.

3.4. Analysis Approach

The data analysis followed a structured, multi-step procedure using the fsQCA 4.0 software package.

Calibration. Calibration is the process of transforming the raw scores for each variable into fuzzy-set membership scores, which range from 0 (full non-membership) to 1 (full membership). We employed the direct calibration method (Ragin, 2008), a standard procedure that uses theoretical knowledge and empirical data to define three qualitative anchors: the threshold for full membership (fuzzy score of 0.95), the threshold for full non-membership (fuzzy score of 0.05), and the crossover point (fuzzy score of 0.5), indicating maximum ambiguity. Given the absence of established external standards, we determined these anchor points based on the percentile distribution of our sample (N=30). Specifically, we set the thresholds for full membership (fuzzy score of 0.95), the crossover point (fuzzy score of 0.5), and full non-membership (fuzzy score of 0.05) to correspond with the 75th percentile, 50th percentile (median), and 25th percentile of the

raw scores, respectively. The specific values for these anchors for all conditions are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Dependent and Independent Variables

		IEC	CI	DL	RKD	AC	HCI
Mean		2.398	2.770	0.876	.864	0.896	780.380
Variance		0.009	0.003	0.004	0.000	0.000	353.804
Minimum		2.240	2.680	0.740	0.840	0.850	754.880
Maximum		2.580	2.880	0.980	0.900	0.930	823.460
Percentile	25	2.328	2.720	0.858	0.850	0.880	761.920
	50	2.400	2.760	0.880	0.860	0.895	783.295
	75	2.453	2.810	0.903	0.880	0.910	791.030

Analysis of necessary conditions. The study conducted an analysis of necessary conditions to test whether any single condition (or its negation) was a prerequisite for the outcome by examining if its consistency score exceeded the 0.90 threshold (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012).

Construction of truth table. Following calibration, we constructed a truth table listing all $2^5=32$ logically possible combinations of the five conditions, and cases were assigned to analyse all possible combinations of causal conditions. The truth table was structured in binary form to represent the presence or absence of each condition (Ragin, 2008). To ensure analytical rigour and empirical relevance, we refined the truth table using established criteria: a minimum frequency threshold of one case and a consistency threshold of 0.80 (Li, 2018). This refinement step ensured that only empirically meaningful configurations were retained for subsequent analysis, while maintaining the methodological standards of fsQCA.

Configuration analysis. With the refined truth table, we conducted a configuration analysis using the Quine-McCluskey algorithm and counterfactual analysis (Fiss, 2011). This analytical process systematically identified consistent causal combinations while distinguishing between core and peripheral conditions (S. Chen et al., 2021). Through Boolean minimization, the analysis revealed how different conditions interrelate within successful configurations to produce high dissemination effectiveness. FsQCA software was used to perform the analysis while ensuring both analytical rigor and theoretical relevance, thus allowing for a thorough exploration of the necessary and sufficient conditions for achieving high comprehensive impact.

Predictive validity analysis. To validate the robustness of the configurational solutions, we conducted a predictive validity analysis (Woodside, 2014). The dataset was randomly split into two equal subsamples using SPSS. FsQCA was applied to both subsamples using the same analytical parameters as in the main study (Pappas et al., 2016). The resulting configurational

model was then tested against the holdout subsample to assess its predictive capability. This cross-validation approach enabled us to evaluate the consistency and coverage levels across the different datasets, thereby confirming the generalisability of our findings (Olya & Altinay, 2016).

Sensitivity analysis. To ensure the robustness of our findings, we performed a sensitivity analysis by examining alternative calibration specifications (Fiss, 2011). Specifically, we systematically adjusted the initial calibration anchors (upper quartile, median, and lower quartile values) by ±10%. This analysis assessed the stability of our configurational solutions and verified that the results remained consistent across different calibration specifications, ensuring that the findings were not dependent on specific calibration thresholds.

Post hoc analysis. As a supplementary post hoc analysis, we integrated the fsQCA solutions into a Tobit regression framework (Fiss, 2011) to explore the marginal effects of the identified configurations on comprehensive impact. In this analysis, comprehensive impact was the dependent variable, and the configurational solutions from fsQCA were treated as independent variables. While the regression analysis was not intended to replace or confirm the fsQCA solutions, it provided additional insights into the relative importance of each path. This complementary analysis enhanced our understanding of the causal relationships identified through fsQCA, offering supplementary perspectives on the marginal effects of the configurations.

4. Results

This section presents the findings from the fsQCA analysis. It reports on the necessary conditions, details the two sufficient configurations for high impact, and summarizes the results of the robustness checks.

4.1. Results of Necessary Conditions

A necessary condition is one that must be present for an outcome to occur. In set-theoretic terms, the outcome set is a subset of the condition set. We followed the standard convention of setting a consistency score threshold of 0.90 to identify a necessary condition (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012).

As shown in Table 4, two conditions surpass the 0.90 consistency threshold for the presence of high comprehensive impact. High-quality Ideological & Educational Content (IEC) has a consistency score of 0.923, and high Communication Influence (CI) has a consistency score of 0.934. This indicates that both strong content and wide reach function as foundational, necessary conditions for achieving high comprehensive impact among China's top universities. No other single condition qualifies as necessary for the outcome's presence.

Symmetrically, the analysis for the absence of high impact (~HCI) reveals that the absence of content (~IEC, consistency = 0.902) and the absence of influence (~CI, consistency = 0.905) are necessary conditions for non-high impact. This further strengthens the finding that IEC and CI are the fundamental prerequisites for entering the ranks of high-performing accounts.

Table 4. Analysis of Necessary Conditions

Condition	HCI		~HCI	
	Consistency	Coverage	Consistency	Coverage
IEC	0.923	0.902	0.218	0.219
~IEC	0.2	0.199	0.902	0.924
CI	0.934	0.905	0.232	0.232
~CI	0.207	0.207	0.905	0.934
DL	0.678	0.653	0.445	0.442
~DL	0.421	0.424	0.651	0.676
RKD	0.867	0.837	0.263	0.262
~RKD	0.236	0.237	0.836	0.866
AC	0.757	0.732	0.34	0.339
~AC	0.317	0.318	0.731	0.756
Note: A consistency score > 0.90 is required to classify a condition as necessary.				

4.2. Results of Configurations Analysis

Following the necessity analysis, we performed a sufficiency analysis to identify the configurations leading to high comprehensive impact. Using a frequency threshold of 1 and a consistency cutoff of 0.873, the analysis yielded a final solution with a high overall consistency of 0.928 and a strong overall coverage of 0.846 (as shown in Table 5). This indicates that the model reliably explains the vast majority of high-impact cases. The analysis revealed two distinct, equifinal pathways to success.

The initial software-generated intermediate solution yielded two pathways. However, a core principle of set-theoretic research is that identified necessary conditions should be present in all sufficient configurations. Our necessity analysis established that both Ideological & Educational Content (IEC) and Communication Influence (CI) are necessary conditions for high impact. While the initial solution's paths both contained IEC, the first path did not include CI.

Therefore, to enhance the theoretical coherence and rigor of our findings, we constrained the final solution based on these results. We manually incorporated Communication Influence (CI) as a required condition into the first pathway, ensuring that both final configurations presented are

built upon the foundation of all identified necessary conditions. This theoretically informed adjustment yielded a final solution with an overall consistency of 0.921 and coverage of 0.835.

Table 5. Configurations for Achieving High Comprehensive Impact (HCI)

Conditions	Content-Affinity Driven Pathway	Leadership-Integration Driven Pathway
Ideological & Educational Content	●	●
Communication Influence	●	●
Demonstrative Leadership	⊗	⊗
Responsiveness to Key Directives	⊗	⊗
Affinity & Cohesion	⊗	
Consistency	0.854	0.997
Raw Coverage	0.372	0.590
Unique Coverage	0.257	0.475
Solution Coverage	0.846	
Solution Consistency	0.928	

Note: Note: ● (large solid circle): Core condition present. ⊗ (large crossed-out circle): Peripheral condition present. ⊗ (small crossed-out circle): Peripheral condition absent. Blank spaces indicate a "don't care" condition.

The first pathway is the "Content-Affinity Driven" configuration. In its refined form, this path is defined by the core presence of both necessary conditions—Ideological & Educational Content and Communication Influence. This dual core is then combined with two peripheral conditions: the presence of high Affinity & Cohesion and the absence of Demonstrative Leadership. This pathway, representing a strategy of deep engagement built upon a strong content and communication foundation, shows a consistency of 0.841 and uniquely explains 0.243 of the high-impact cases.

The second pathway is the "Leadership-Integration Driven" configuration. This path also features the core presence of Ideological & Educational Content and Communication Influence. It combines this core foundation with the peripheral presence of Demonstrative Leadership. This configuration, which represents a strategy of leveraging broad influence and industry status, is highly consistent at 0.997 and is the empirically more dominant path, uniquely explaining 0.475 of successful outcomes.

This more rigorous analysis presents a clear and powerful finding. It confirms the existence of two distinct pathways to success, but more importantly, it demonstrates that both pathways are built upon the same dual-core foundation: high-quality content combined with strong communication reach. The strategic differentiation between high-performing institutions,

therefore, occurs in the choice of peripheral elements, either a focus on community-building or on institutional leadership, that are arranged around this shared, non-negotiable core.

4.3. Validation and Post-hoc Analysis Results

The sensitivity analysis, which utilized a more stringent 95/50/5 percentile calibration, yielded results substantially consistent with the main analysis. While minor variations in consistency and coverage scores were observed, the core solution identifying the "Content-Affinity Driven" path and the "Leadership-Integration Driven" path remained stable. This confirms that our findings are robust and not dependent on a specific calibration scheme.

The configurations derived from Sample 1 were tested using the data from Sample 2, yielding comparable levels of consistency and coverage (see Figures 2 and 3). These results support the assumption that the proposed configuration model demonstrates high predictive validity.
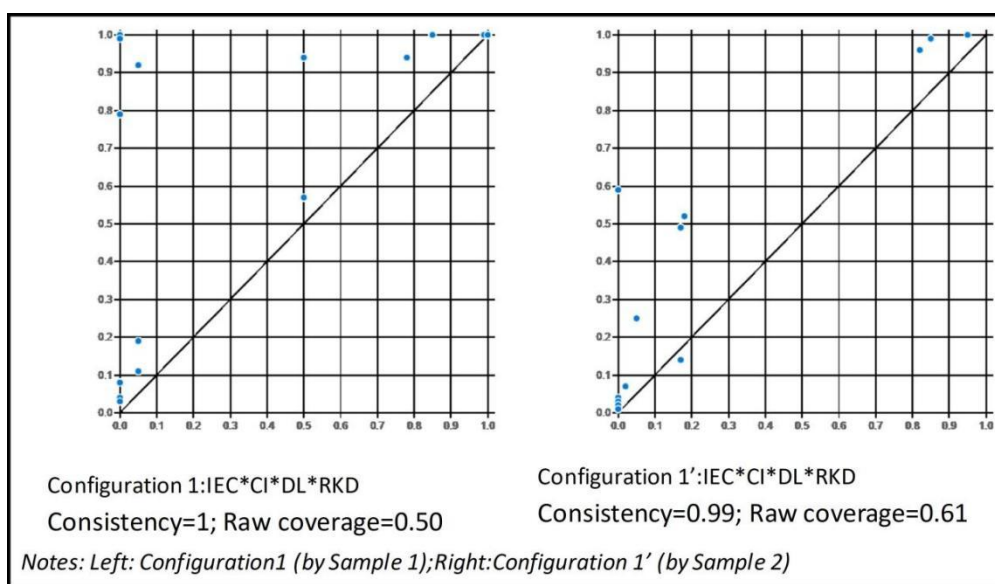

Configuration 1:IEC*CI*DL*RKD
Consistency=1; Raw coverage=0.50

Configuration 1':IEC*CI*DL*RKD
Consistency=0.99; Raw coverage=0.61

Notes: Left: Configuration1 (by Sample 1);Right:Configuration 1' (by Sample 2)

Figure 2. XY scatterplots of High Comprehensive Impact in Configurations 1 and 1'

Configuration 2:IEC*CI*RKD*AC
Consistency=0.96; Raw coverage=0.70

Configuration 2':IEC*CI*RKD*AC
Consistency=0.93; Raw coverage=0.55

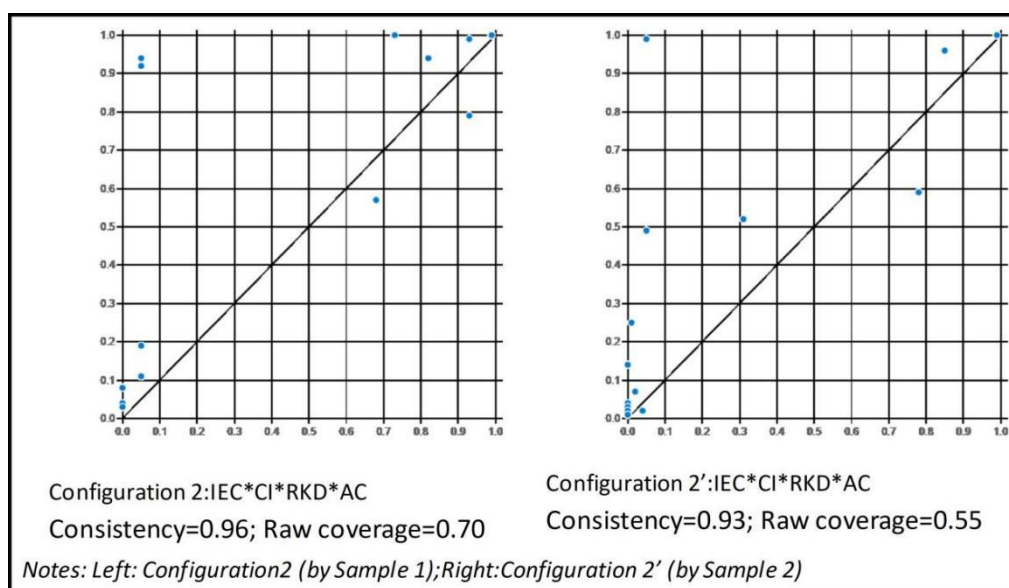*Notes: Left: Configuration2 (by Sample 1);Right:Configuration 2' (by Sample 2)*

Figure 3. XY scatterplots of High Comprehensive Impact in Configurations 2 and 2'

The results of the Tobit regression provide strong, unambiguous support for our configurational findings (as shown in Table 6). As the analysis shows, the membership score in both the Content-Affinity Path (Coefficient = 0.758, p < 0.001) and the Leadership-Integration Path (Coefficient = 1.166, p < 0.001) has a positive and highly statistically significant effect on the comprehensive impact score.

This quantitative analysis confirms that both of the configurations identified through fsQCA are substantively and significantly linked to achieving higher performance. The positive coefficients indicate that a university's closer conformity to either of the two successful strategic recipes is associated with a greater marginal increase in its final impact score. Furthermore, the analysis indicates that the coefficient for second path is larger than that for first one, suggesting that membership in the "Leadership-Integration Driven" path is associated with a greater marginal effect, a finding that is consistent with its higher raw coverage in the primary fsQCA analysis. This post-hoc test therefore provides robust correlational evidence that validates and complements our main set-theoretic conclusions.

Table 6. Post-hoc Tobit Regression on Comprehensive Impact Score

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z-Statistic	Prob.
Content-Affinity Path	0.758361	0.098635	7.688587	0.0000
Leadership-Integration Path	1.165619	0.082905	14.05974	0.0000

5. Discussion

This section interprets the study's findings. It discusses their theoretical implications in relation to existing literature and outlines the practical applications for university managers.

5.1. Key Findings

Our analysis yields three principal findings that together form a configurational map of digital IPE success. First, the necessity analysis established that both high-quality Ideological & Educational Content and high Communication Influence are foundational prerequisites for achieving a high level of impact. This indicates that to even be in the running for excellence, an account must both produce valuable content and ensure it reaches a substantial audience. Second, and central to this study, is the discovery of the two successful strategic recipes. The "Content-Affinity Driven" path demonstrates a strategy of deep community engagement, while the "Leadership-Integration Driven" path showcases a strategy of leveraging institutional prestige and mass communication. The existence of these two viable pathways provides clear empirical evidence for equifinality. Third, our analysis revealed a clear dual-core structure within both configurations, with Ideological & Educational Content and Communication Influence serving as the non-negotiable foundation, while other elements such as Affinity & Cohesion and Demonstrative Leadership function as peripheral, yet defining, components of each distinct strategy.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

These empirical findings have significant theoretical implications. First and foremost, this study provides a direct empirical answer to the research gap identified in Section 2.1. Instead of a fragmented "checklist" of success factors, our results support the core tenets of Configuration Theory (Meyer et al., 1993), demonstrating that impact arises from the holistic interplay of strategic elements (Fiss, 2011; Puppatz et al., 2023). By identifying two equifinal pathways, our findings empirically challenge the "one-size-fits-al" logic inherent in the variable-centered, linear-additive models that are prevalent in IPE communication research (Chen, 2024; Sun et al., 2020). This marks a theoretical shift from asking "what factors matter" to "how factors combine to matter" in achieving digital success.

The two pathways themselves can be interpreted as distinct resolutions to the theoretical "duality of digital influence" discussed earlier. The "Content-Affinity Driven" path empirically validates the community engagement logic (Brunton et al., 2017; Weitz, 2023). It shows how platforms can succeed not simply by maximizing reach, but by resonating deeply with users, satisfying their social and emotional needs as described by Uses and Gratifications Theory (Rubin, 2009), and thereby fostering a strong user-platform bond. In contrast, the "Leadership-Integration Driven" path exemplifies the powerful synergy between the classic mass communication logic of maximizing audience size and exposure (Kandhway & Kuri, 2016; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and the institutional imperative for status-seeking. This aligns perfectly with Institutional Theory's view of organizations proactively shaping their environment to enhance their prestige and legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Isaeva et al., 2024).
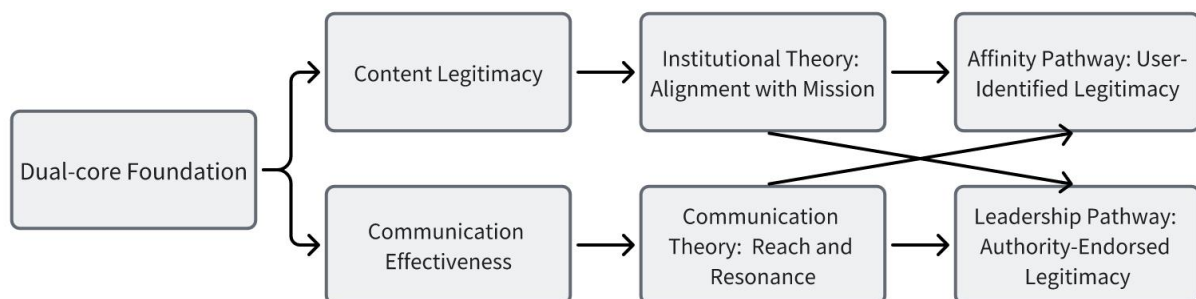

Figure 4. Dual-Core Theoretical Integration Framework for Digital IPE Success

Furthermore, our findings connect to and extend other key communication theories. The "Content-Affinity Driven" path provides strong empirical support for User-Generated Content (UGC) Theory. This configuration's reliance on high "Affinity & Cohesion" demonstrates that success is not merely broadcast-driven, but is co-created by fostering a community where users feel a sense of belonging and are motivated to engage, comment, and share, aligning with the "Uses and Gratifications" perspective (Rubin, 2009). In parallel, the model aligns with Media Convergence Theory. WeChat itself is a converged platform, blending mass communication (CI), social networking (AC), and institutional branding (DL) .The findings empirically show that high impact does not arise from mastering one of these functions in isolation, but from a strategic

configuration of these converged elements, offering two distinct, successful models for navigating this complexity.

Perhaps the most crucial theoretical contribution is the synthesis offered by our finding of a dual-core structure (as shown in Figure 4). It suggests that while universities can choose between different peripheral strategies (community vs. leadership), they cannot escape the foundational requirements of both producing substantive content and achieving significant communication influence. The centrality of Ideological & Educational Content confirms that the institutional need to provide mission-aligned substance as the basis of legitimacy is paramount (Scott, 2013; Verhoeven & Verbruggen, 2024). This grounds the entire digital strategy in the university's fundamental purpose, a point underscored by recent work on the importance of digital IPE in engaging contemporary students (Chu, 2023; Lian, 2023).

5.3. Practical and Managerial Implications

Our findings offer a clear and actionable "strategic map" for university administrators, moving beyond the often confusing and fragmented advice that can lead to wasted resources (Luan et al., 2020). The most fundamental implication is the need for a managerial mindset shift: from searching for isolated "best practices" to adopting a holistic, configurational perspective. Rather than asking "Should we focus on content or on promotion?", leaders should ask "Which complete recipe of synergistic actions is most coherent with our institution's unique identity and resources?". This approach replaces a simple checklist with a more sophisticated model of strategic alignment.

The analysis then provides a clear, two-step sequence for strategic planning. The first step is to secure the non-negotiable foundation. Our results are unequivocal that all successful strategies begin with the same dual-core foundation: high-quality Ideological and Educational Content combined with significant Communication Influence. This provides a clear directive for resource allocation. It means universities must simultaneously invest in both the "substance" of their message (content research, creation, and quality control) and the "delivery" of that message (platform promotion, audience growth, technical optimization). Excelling in only one of these two core areas is an insufficient condition for achieving high impact.

Once this dual-core foundation is in place, managers face a clear and evidence-based strategic choice between two proven pathways. The "Community Builder" path is a strategy of depth over breadth, focusing on authenticity and fostering deep, affective engagement to build a loyal and interactive community (Zhang, 2023). This approach is potent for any institution aiming to strengthen its unique cultural identity and build strong stakeholder relationships. Alternatively, the "Flagship" path is a strategy of leadership and scale, which involves leveraging institutional status to lead national discourse and set industry benchmarks (Kiriliuk & Zakharova, 2024). This path is best suited for well-resourced, top-tier universities aiming to project their influence and solidify their elite position. The power of these findings lies in validating both approaches, allowing for more deliberate and synergistic strategic planning that aligns with an institution's specific capabilities and goals.

6. Conclusion, Limitation and Future Research

This final section summarizes the study's main contributions, acknowledges its limitations, and proposes directions for future research.

6.1. Conclusion

This study sought to move beyond simplistic, single-factor explanations of success in the digital realm of Ideological and Political Education. By employing a configurational approach, we have provided a more holistic and causally complex understanding of how China's universities achieve high impact with their IPE WeChat accounts. Our central contribution is the empirical identification of two distinct and equifinal pathways to success. The "Content-Affinity Driven" path leverages deep community engagement, and the "Leadership-Integration Driven" path relies on the synergy of massive reach and institutional prestige. Crucially, we found that both of these successful strategies are built upon the same non-negotiable dual-core foundation of high-quality Ideological & Educational Content and strong Communication Influence. In doing so, this research offers a nuanced configurational theory of digital success that synthesizes communication and institutional logics, and provides a context-dependent strategic map for university administrators navigating the complexities of digital communication.

6.2. Limitation and Future Research

Like all research, this study defines clear boundaries that, in turn, illuminate a clear and productive agenda for future inquiry. Our deliberate focus on elite, top-performing universities was crucial for understanding the configurations that produce excellence, yet it naturally raises questions about generalizability. Future research should therefore apply this configurational model to a more diverse sample of mid-tier, regional, and specialized institutions to discover whether the pathways identified here are universal, or if distinct configurations for success emerge under different resource constraints.Furthermore, the study's cross-sectional design provides a powerful snapshot of successful strategies but does not capture their evolution. A compelling avenue for future work lies in longitudinal research, employing time-series Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) to map how universities develop, maintain, and perhaps transition between these strategic configurations over time. Third, our study carries the inherent methodological limitations of fsQCA. The operationalization of conditions and, most notably, the calibration of anchor points, involves a degree of researcher judgment. While we defended our choices based on the data's percentile distribution (Table 3) and confirmed their robustness through sensitivity analysis , this potential for subjective bias remains. Future research could explore alternative calibration strategies or different operationalizations of the conditions to further test the stability of these configurations. Finally, while our analysis identifies what successful recipes contain, it invites deeper inquiry into how they are executed. We strongly advocate for future research using in-depth qualitative case studies of universities that are archetypal examples of each path. Such work could illuminate the micro level managerial decision-making, team dynamics, and specific content practices that bring these configurations to life, and then building a richer and more dynamic theory of digital IPE success.

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