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Use of Baidu Index to Explore the Public Attention Towards College Students' Mental Health in China

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Abstract

Baidu Index serves as a research tool that gathers and analyzes data on the behavior of Chinese Internet users. This study analyzed keyword searches on the Baidu Index to college students' mental health in China and investigated search volume using trend research, demand mapping and geographic and demographic distribution from January 2011 to November 2024, finding that the search trend for "college students' mental health" in China shows cyclical fluctuations, peak in May and December valley around the Spring Festival and summer vacation. The group concerned with "college students' mental health" is predominantly distributed in regions such as Henan, Guangdong, and Shandong. The majority are women under 29 years old. The factors influencing the changes in the search volume for "college students' mental health" include the Spring Festival, summer vacation, exam months, and College Students' Mental Health Day in China. Additionally, there are factors arising from regional disparities, such as the economic development level, cultural environment, education policies, and social support.

Keywords: Search engine, Public attention, Baidu Index, College students' mental health, Data mining

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1. Introduction

The "Report on National Mental Health Development in China (2021~2022)," also known as the Psychological Health Blue Book, released by the Chinese Academy of Sciences surveyed the mental health status of nearly 80,000 college students (Fu et al., 2023). It revealed that the detection rates for depression and anxiety risks were roughly 21.48% and 45.28% in turn (Ministry of Education, 2022). The mental health issues of college students to some extent restrict the improvement of talent cultivation quality in higher education institutions. Mental health has become a highly regarded social issue, and how to promote the comprehensive development of students' physical and mental health has become a significant topic of concern for various parties (Zhang, 2023). The "Special Action Plan for Comprehensive Strengthening and Improving Student Mental Health Work in the New Era (2023-2025)" launched by the Ministry of Education and 17 other departments (Ministry of Education, 2023) highlights the national emphasis on enhancing the quality of college students' mental health education. In recent years, the increasing public attention to college students' mental health

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education has facilitated the smooth development of mental health initiatives for students, contributing to the improvement of their mental health levels (Martin et al., 2021).

In the Internet environment, search tools function as a crucial channel for the public to acquire information. They also reflect the concerns and demands of netizens (Braun et al., 2006). Additionally, the online users' attention of online searches typically represents a voluntary and unrestrained expression of netizens. It holds high authenticity, objectivity, and credibility, thus becoming a vital reference for social demand monitoring and trend research (Hirsch, 2010). Using the extensive data offered by search engines to study Internet users' attention to specific topics, new ideas and perspectives have been unlocked for social science research (Tan et al., 2024a). Through online search engines, users can gain a relatively comprehensive understanding or acquisition of the relevant information they are interested in. In the process, a significant number of search traces are left behind (Tan et al., 2024b). Taking the search information of tens of millions of Internet users as the data basis and keywords, a scientific analysis and calculation of the weighted sum of the search volume of each keyword in the search engine can vividly present user attention through resulting trend lines (Wu et al., 2018). Recently, research on college students' mental health mainly focuses on evaluating the mental health condition, identifying factors that affect psychological crises, and assessing the effectiveness of crisis intervention measures. Case analysis and survey questionnaires are commonly used as research method. This study is the first attempt to utilize big data technology to carry out an in-depth analysis of college students' mental health from the view of public concern.

2. Method

The Baidu Index is a data-sharing platform created by Baidu that contains a vast quantity of user behavior data and can calculate the "search index" for a specific keyword over different periods. To quantify the level of concern for "college students' mental health," this paper employs the Baidu Index (<https://index.baidu.com/v2/index.html>) as an analytical tool. By comparing the search frequency, level of concern, temporal distribution, regional characteristics, and demographic attributes related to "college students' mental health" over different periods (from January 2011 to November 2024), this study analyzes the search trends related to college students' mental health.

Recently, Baidu Index data has attracted increasing attention from scholars and has been used as a primary data source in certain research areas (Bauckhage et al., 2014), such as disease assessment and prediction (Loukas et al., 2012), tourism destination evaluation (Önder and Gunter, 2016), stock price indices (Moussa et al., 2017) and knowledge management (Tan et al., 2024b). Nevertheless, using Baidu Index to explore "college students' mental health" needs to be further studied. This work is the first attempt to explore the temporal and spatial characteristics of the public's online search for "college students' mental health" and evident in the Baidu Index can efficiently measure public concern about college students' mental health in the temporal and spatial context.

3. Results

3.1. Search Trends

On the official website of Baidu Index, the search index enables users to comprehend the level of interest and ongoing changes in netizens' searches for specific keywords. The trend research of Baidu Index is divided into three parts: PC trends, mobile trends, and PC + mobile trends. The PC trend has been available since June 2006, while the mobile trend provides data from January 2011 to the present. From the Baidu Index curve, we obtained weekly search index data for "college students' mental health" on both PC and mobile platforms from January 2011 to November 2024, amounting to nearly 13 years of search index data. As depicted in Figure 1, whether on PC or mobile, public attention in college

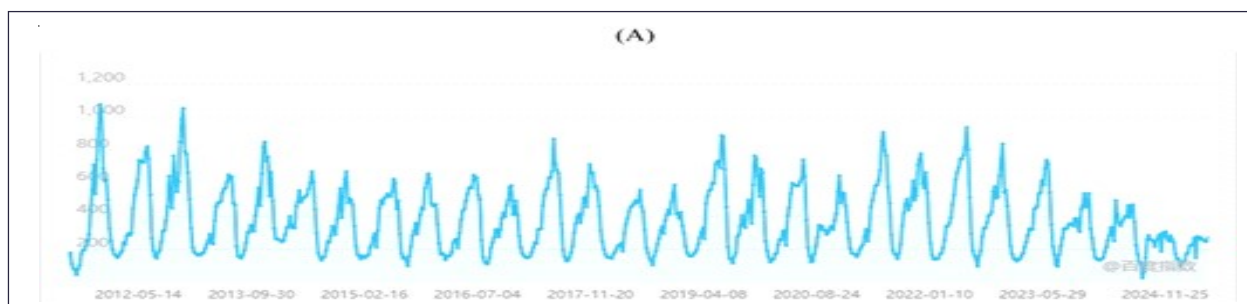


Figure 1: Baidu Search Volume Index in China for "College Students' Mental Health". The Average Value of Search Volume: (A) The Overall Search Trend Index. (B) Personal Computer Search Index. (C) Mobile Search Index

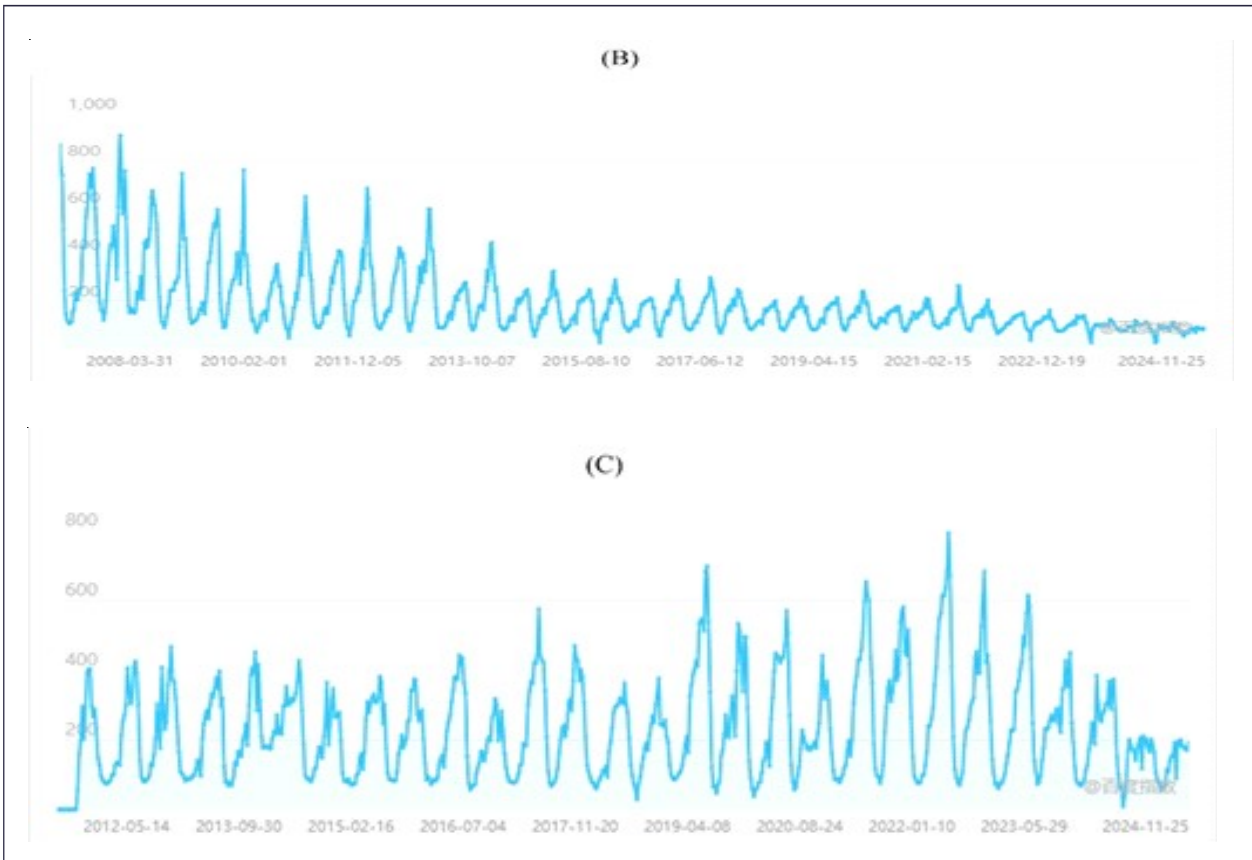


Figure 1 (Cont.)

students' mental health shows periodic fluctuations. The overall average daily search index is 374, and the mobile daily average is 229. After the introduction of the mobile terminal in January 2011, the PC search index exhibited a significant downward trend. A comparison between the PC and mobile terminals shows that their search trends are in line. However, the average daily search index on mobile is higher than that on PC.

3.1.1. Geographical Distribution

The Baidu Index possesses a “demographic profile” function. It utilizes data mining methods to perform cluster analysis on the demographic attributes of keywords and offers information about users’ provincial, city, and regional distributions.

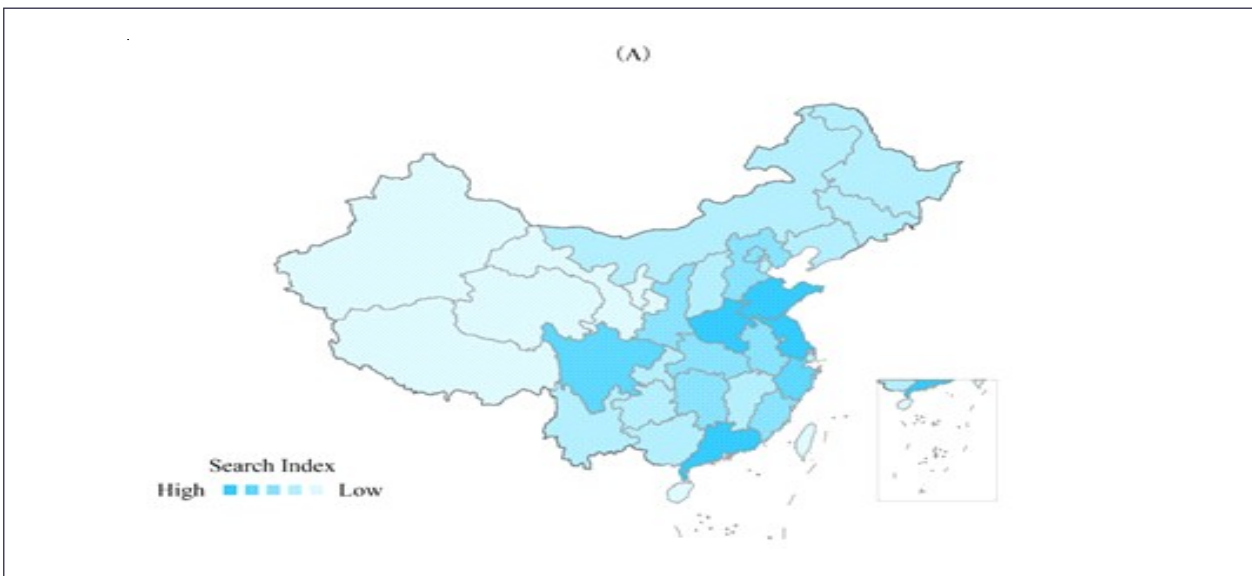


Figure 2: Baidu Index Maps For "College Students' Mental Health" By (A) Province (B) City (C) Region

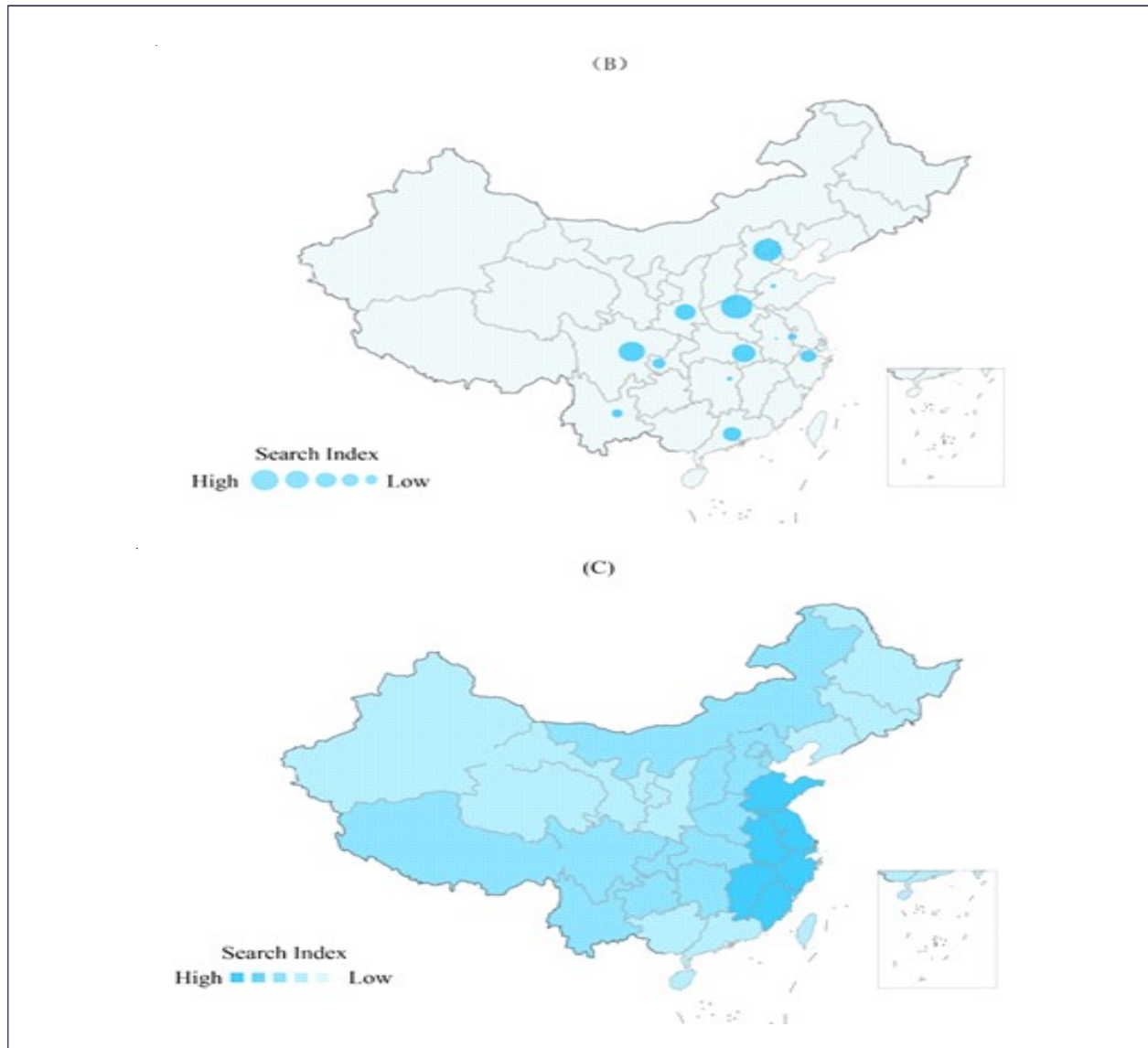


Figure 2 (Cont.)

3.1.2. Demographic Profiles

Demographic profiles are analyzed by utilizing Baidu user search data and data mining methods. The demographic profiles of search keywords are clustered to offer the distribution of users according to age and gender. According to the age distribution in Figure 3 of the Baidu Index “Demographic profiles,” users concerned about “college students’ mental health” are mainly under the age of 29, and women show more interest than men.

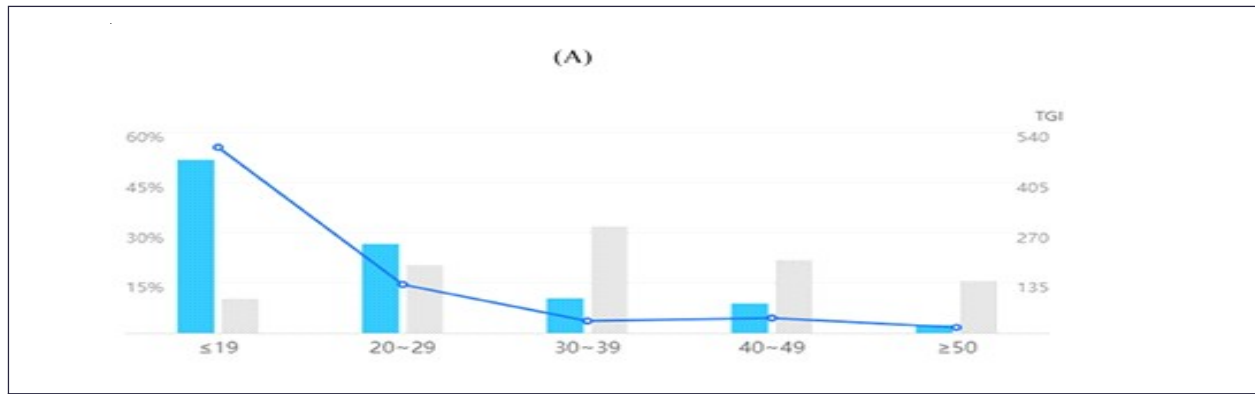


Figure 3: Demographic Profiles by (A) Age and (B) Gender

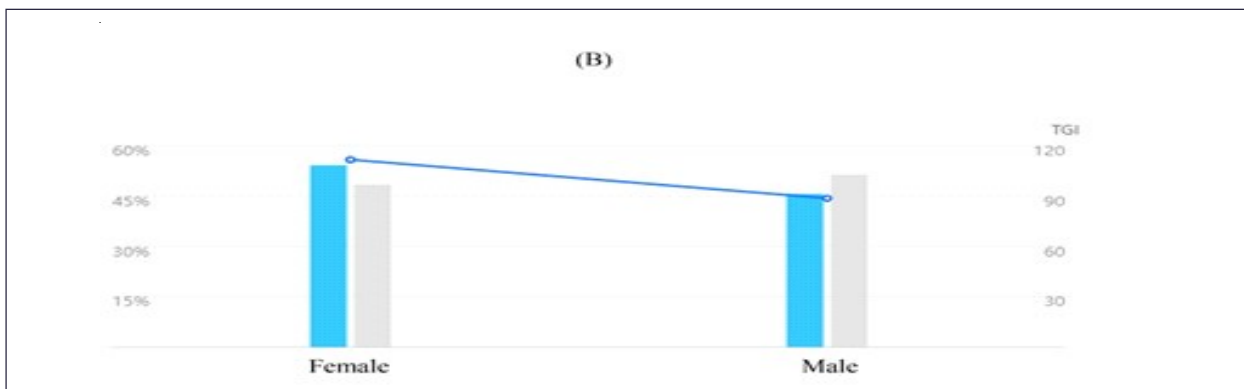


Figure 3 (Cont.)

4. Discussion

China is a vast country with a large population, characterized by distinct regional differences. Thus, it becomes challenging for the public to gain a precise understanding of the temporal and spatial characteristics of college students’ mental health. At the 2024 China International Big Data Industry Expo, specifically during the ‘Intelligent Economic Innovation and Development’ symposium, the China Internet Network Information Center unveiled its 54th edition of the ‘Internet Development in China’ statistical report. The report shows that by June 2024, the number of Internet users in China had nearly reached 1.1 billion, specifically standing at 1.09967 billion. This figure represents a growth of 7.42 million since December 2023, and the proportion of the population with internet access had climbed to 78.0% (China Internet Network Information Center, 2024). The proportion of mobile Internet users is 99.6%. Evidently, due to their ease of use and portability, mobile phones have become the preferred means of communicating with the world. Therefore, the average daily search index on mobile is higher than that on PC. Among the popular search engines, Baidu leads the way, succeeded by Google Search, 360 Search, Sogou Search and so on. The Baidu Index serves as a basis for understanding the temporal and spatial characteristics of public concern to college students’ mental health.

Figure 1 shows that the search trend for “college students’ mental health” reaches its peak in May and December each year and dips to a trough around the Spring Festival and summer vacation. The main reason for the peak in May is that it is China’s Mental Health Month. In 2000, on May 25, the “National College Students’ Mental Health Day” was launched at Beijing Normal University to educate college students about their mental health. The Mental Health Day, symbolized by “5.25” which sounds like “I love myself,” emphasizes caring for psychological growth and health and reminds college students to “cherish life and love yourself.” In 2004, the Ministry of Education, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, and the National Student Federation Office proposed designating May 25 as National College Students’ Mental Health Day (Party Group of the Ministry of Education of the Communist Party of China, 2022). Since then, a series of documents have been published in China focusing on the “May 25” College Students’ Mental Health Day (Ministry of Education, 2022), and mental health education engagements are conducted each May. It concentrates on strengthening humanistic care and mental health guidance, cultivating students’ self-esteem, self-confidence, rationality, positivity and a balanced psychological state (Kharroubi et al., 2024), Encouraging the balanced growth in college students’ mental health quality, ethical standards, and intellectual and cultural competencies (Liu et al., 2017). As these activities are implemented in May, there is extensive societal attention to mental health. This results in an increase in the search index for “college students’ mental health,” which reaches its peak in May.

Each December is a challenging and stressful time for college students in China. During this period (Luo, 2018), National Postgraduate Entrance Examination, final exams, and College English Test Band 4 and 6 exams occur successively, becoming topics of extensive societal concern. These exams not only directly impact students’ academic performance and future development but also prompt reflection among various sectors of society on the education system, employment situation, and students’ mental health (Zhang et al., 2024). The National Postgraduate Entrance Examination, as an important route to graduate education, attracts many college students. With the popularization of higher education, an increasing number of undergraduates opt to pursue further studies to enhance their competitiveness (Al Ani et al., 2024). This trend reflects not only students’ thirst for knowledge but also society’s urgent need for high-level talent. Final exams are a crucial assessment of college students’ learning outcomes. Final exams of each semester are crucial for both students’ academic performance and their degree conferral. The approach of final exams often brings anxiety and stress to students, leading to growing societal attention to this phenomenon (Wang, 2023). Educators and psychological experts have begun to call for more attention to students’ mental health and advocate for the establishment of a more

humane assessment system to reduce students' burdens. College English Test Band 4 and 6, as important indicators of students' English proficiency, receive widespread attention (Han, 2021). With the acceleration of globalization, improving English skills has become a fundamental requirement in the job market (Han, 2021). The results of these exams directly affect students' employment prospects and career development. Therefore, these exams in December not only represent crucial moments in college students' personal development but also become focal points of societal concern.

Generally, the valleys of "college students' mental health" occurs annually during the Spring Festival and summer vacation periods. The Spring Festival stands as the most significant traditional celebration in China, taking place from late January to early February each year. To celebrate the Spring Festival, Chinese people gather with family or friends or go on trips. According to statistics, the annual growth rate of tourists going abroad during the Spring Festival over the past few years is approximately 30% (Li *et al.*, 2016). Thus, during the Spring Festival, people tend to put aside working or studying to enjoy the holiday, resulting in a regular drop in the search index for "college students' mental health."

During the summer vacation period in July and August, public attention to college students' mental health generally declines for multiple reasons. Firstly, summer vacation is a crucial period for college students to rest and relax. During this time, many students get away from academic pressures and participate in activities like traveling, internships, and part-time jobs (Zhang, 2023), which temporarily leads to the neglect of mental health issues. Society typically views summer vacation as an opportunity for students to relax and shifts its focus to other areas (Adebayo *et al.*, 2024), such as the job market and employment competition, while overlooking the internal changes and needs of students. Secondly, during the summer vacation, many schools and psychological consulting institutions reduce their services, and the promotion and publicity of mental health initiatives also weaken (Önder and Gunter, 2016). This potentially leads to a decreased sensitivity to college students' mental health issues in society and results in insufficient dissemination of relevant information. In summary, the decline in public attention to college students' mental health during summer vacation is caused by multiple factors, including changes in student status, reduced service resources, and societal cognitive biases.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the top ten provinces are Henan, Guangdong, Shandong, Jiangsu, Sichuan, Zhejiang, Hubei, Hebei, Shaanxi, and Beijing. The top ten cities are ranked in the following order: Zhengzhou, Beijing, Chengdu, Wuhan, Xi'an, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Chongqing, Kunming, and Nanjing. In terms of regional distribution, the search index in East China notably exceeds that of other regions. The level of economic development is closely intertwined with the attention paid to mental health (Stoyanova and Pinilla, 2020). Provinces such as Henan, Guangdong, and Jiangsu have witnessed rapid economic growth and possess relatively abundant educational resources. East China's GDP accounts for approximately 40% of the national total, making it a crucial engine for China's economy. Consequently, the corresponding mental health services and attention naturally increase (Doran and Kinchin, 2020). Additionally, cultural background has an impact on the degree of emphasis placed on mental health. Southern provinces like Guangdong and Zhejiang, influenced by open and diverse cultural backgrounds, tend to have students who hold a relatively positive understanding of mental health and a higher acceptance of psychological consulting services. In contrast, in regions with strong traditional cultural influences, mental health issues are often overlooked, resulting in lower levels of attention (Beijing Academy of Social Sciences Regional Economic Research Team, 2024). Furthermore, policy direction is also a significant factor influencing the attention given to mental health. As the capital, Beijing has more comprehensive policy resources and mental health education facilities, leading to a higher overall level of attention to college students' mental health issues.

The public attention given to college students' mental health among areas reflect the interaction of multiple factors such as economic development levels, cultural environments, educational policies, and social support. This phenomenon indicates that while promoting mental health, it is essential to adopt region-specific strategies suitable for each area to effectively enhance the overall mental health level.

In Baidu Index, we can use the Target Group Index (TGI) as an indicator employed to reflect the strength or weakness of a target group within a specific research domain. It is computed by dividing the proportion of a group possessing a certain characteristic within the target group by the proportion of the same characteristic in the overall population, and then multiplying the result by the standard value of 100. Specifically, the formula for calculating TGI is as follows:

$$TGI = (\text{Proportion of the group with a certain characteristic in the target group} \div \text{Proportion of the same characteristic in the overall population}) \times 100$$

This index facilitates our understanding of the disparities in issue attention among users with diverse characteristics. When the TGI index is equal to 100, it signifies an average level. A value higher than 100 indicates that the attention level of this group of users to certain issues is greater than the overall level. In terms of gender distribution, women make up 48.51% of the total number of Internet users, whereas men account for 51.49% (China Internet Network Information Center, 2024). It can be seen in Figure 3, regarding attention paid to college students' mental health, women comprise 54.27%, and men constitute 45.73%. Female TGI is 111.88, while male TGI is 88.81, suggesting that female users are more interested in contents related to college students' mental health.

And the reason why women show greater concern for college students' mental health than men is due to the socialization of gender roles, differences in emotional expression, and the influence of social culture. Enhancing men's attention to mental health and promoting their ability to express emotions will contribute to achieving a comprehensive focus on and resolution of mental health issues.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

The Baidu Index functions as an effective tool for measuring the temporal and spatial characteristics of public attention on college students' mental health. The public's concern for college students fluctuates significantly over time and presents distinct periodicity (Ripberger, 2011). Annually, attention peaks around May 25, which is the "National College Students' Mental Health Day," and during the exam periods in December, such as for National Postgraduate Entrance Examination and final exams. Conversely, public attention dips to a low point during spring festivals and summer vacations. From a spatial distribution perspective, the disparities in attention to college students' mental health reflect the interaction of various factors, including economic development levels, cultural environments, educational policies, and social support. This phenomenon indicates that when promoting mental health, it is essential to formulate region-specific strategies to effectively enhance the overall mental health level. In terms of demographic attributes, users under 29 are the primary focus when it comes to college students' mental health. Meanwhile, women show higher levels of concern than men, which is influenced by gender role socialization, differences in emotional expression, and cultural elements.

Although the Baidu Index is a reliable and novel data source for analyzing the border security issue from the public perspective in China, it fails to reflect concerns related to the uneven distribution of Internet access across different geographic regions or those of people who use other search engines and information sources (Tan *et al.*, 2024c). Future research should consider integrating other Internet-based data sources, such as the Weibo Index (Jiang *et al.*, 2015) and WeChat Index (Fan *et al.*, 2021). A combination of Internet data and questionnaire data can provide more comprehensive information on public concerns about college students' mental health. Supplementing the research with demographic data, including ethnicity, educational background, and socioeconomic status, will be advantageous.

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