

Public Influence and Reactions in the Maelstrom of Public Opinion in Social Media Event Coverage

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Abstract: This study investigates the positive and negative impacts of social media, as well as the public's behavior and psychological responses within the dynamics of public opinion. In contemporary society, the information dissemination has shifted from a simple traditional mode to an instantaneous, interactive, and multi-directional framework, eliminating barriers to information flow, garnering nationwide attention on major events, and subtly reshaping the public opinion landscape. However, the subsequent deterioration of the public opinion environment and its unpredictable direction have made it difficult to control, thus exerting a significant impact on individuals and social order. This paper examines the dissemination mechanisms of public opinion on social media and the concept of hotspot events. Utilizing content analysis, it investigates the dissemination process of specific event reports on social media platforms and explores the dynamics of public opinion. Thus, it seeks to analyze the evolution of emotional transmission in hotspot events, understand public behavioral patterns and emotional responses within the public opinion vortex, and clarify strategies for guiding public opinion and managing crises in social media events. Consequently, targeted solutions are proposed for improving public opinion guidance.

Keywords: Social Media, Opinion Leadership, Opinion Sentiment Communication, Public Behavior and Psychology, Crisis Management

1. Introduction

In the digital age, social media reshapes public opinion by enabling rapid, interactive engagement in social discussions. However, it also contributes to opinion polarization, misinformation spread, and online violence, complicating the public opinion landscape. Existing research mainly examines how public opinion spreads on social media, along with user behavior patterns and emotional dynamics. For example, studies analyzing large-scale user comment data from multiple social media platforms have found that prolonged discussions are more likely to trigger polarization and hostile emotions [1]. Despite research advances, emotional dynamics in public opinion remain unclear, and effective guidance strategies are lacking. The paper explores the dynamics of public opinion dissemination on social media, analyzing key patterns, influencing factors, and emotional shifts in hotspot events while proposing strategies to mitigate polarization and guide discourse effectively. Moreover, this study explores optimizing the social media opinion environment, proposing guidance strategies, and refining content recommendation algorithms to curb harmful information spread. As such, through a analysis of existing literature, it aims to enhance the understanding of public opinion dissemination on social media and provide some reference for media organizations and social platforms in opinion

management. Potential measures like content regulation, policy refinement, and brand management helps curb extremist information, enhance the public opinion environment, and mitigate the impact of negative discourse.

2. The dual impact of social media

As a global digital force, social networking accelerates information flow, boosts connectivity, and fosters cross-cultural exchange within modern information ecosystems. However, like any tool, it has its downsides, contributing to social polarization, mental health risks, and real-life disruptions. Therefore, more cautious management strategies should be adopted to optimize the social media environment and balance its positive and negative impacts.

2.1. The positive function of social media

By enhancing information dissemination, enabling public expression, promoting cultural exchange, and empowering communities, social media plays a pivotal role in contemporary communication. In particular, it transcends the spatial and temporal constraints of traditional media, enhancing the timeliness and reach of news reporting and enabling the public to access domestic and international events and political developments more efficiently. Furthermore, it serves as a vital channel for governments, businesses, and organizations to communicate with the public [2]. Social media also lowers the barriers to public participation in social affairs, enabling individuals to freely express opinions, share experiences, and engage in discussions on societal issues, increasing transparency and fostering civic engagement. Besides, it fosters cultural diversity by offering artists, writers, and musicians a platform to reach wider audiences beyond traditional media constraints, amplifying niche cultures, local art, and non-mainstream voices while also facilitating global cultural exchange. More importantly, social media empowers marginalized groups by providing a platform to amplify their voices and advocate for their concerns. Those with limited resources can use images, videos, and personal narratives to highlight their circumstances, drawing public attention and driving social change. For instance, social movements such as #Fridays for Future and #Black Lives Matter have leveraged social media to gain global support, demonstrating its critical role in social activism.

2.2. The negative impact of social media

Despite its ability to rapidly disseminate information, social media can spread conspiracy theories and misinformation, exacerbating social divisions and amplifying extreme viewpoints. In particular, social media can deepen divisions and fuel extremism. Algorithm-driven recommendation systems expose users to information that aligns with their existing beliefs, reinforcing the “echo chamber” effect, where individuals are repeatedly exposed to similar viewpoints, thus further solidifying their political stances or ideologies [3]. Additionally, social media platforms provide a breeding ground for conspiracy theories and misinformation. Studies have shown that false information often spreads faster than fact-checking efforts, and emotionally charged, provocative content is more likely to go viral, intensifying societal polarization and eroding public trust in authoritative sources [4]. Besides, social media’s growing impact on mental health is evident in Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), which compels users to constantly check updates, thereby leading to anxiety and negative self-perception [5]. Prior research links FOMO to social media addiction, anxiety, and depression, with excessive use disrupting sleep and real-world social skills [6]. Also, social media may divert users’ attention from real life, influencing overall well-being. Prolonged virtual engagement can impair real-world social skills and hinder productivity. In addition, social media’s idealized representations can drive social comparison, leading to dissatisfaction, anxiety, and depressions [7].

3. The mechanism and characteristics of social media public opinion dissemination

3.1. Information dissemination and public opinion formation

In the social media environment, the public is more inclined to believe information that aligns with their emotions and preexisting beliefs, a phenomenon known as the post-truth era. The post-truth era refers to a time when emotions and personal beliefs exert a greater influence on public opinion and decision-making than objective facts [5]. In this context, users prioritize emotional expression over factual accuracy, relying more on sentiment than rational judgment. The formation of public opinion on social media is both interactive and dynamic. The spread of information depends not only on the content itself but on users' backgrounds, values, and cognitive abilities. In the event that individuals perceive their views as dominant, they are more likely to voice their opinions actively; however, under social pressure, they may align with the mainstream perspective. The aggregation and diffusion of public opinion are driven by this group interaction. Besides, the multi-directional communication mechanisms of social media transform audiences from passive recipients into active participants who engage in discussions through comments, pop-ups, and other interactive features. For instance, in major public events, discussions on social media platforms can quickly escalate into trending topics, influencing both government decision-making and media agendas.

3.2. Interactivity and real-time nature of social media

The bidirectional interactivity and immediacy of social media are among its defining characteristics. Users engage in posting, commenting, and sharing information, strengthening connections, forming interest-based communities, and facilitating the exchange of perspectives and the dissemination of information. At the same time, decentralized communication has emerged as a defining trend in the digital era. Unlike the one-way transmission of traditional media, social media enables every user to create, distribute, and consume content, dismantling the monopoly on information dissemination. This transformation has fostered a more diverse public opinion landscape, rendering the trajectory of public discourse increasingly unpredictable [6]. Additionally, the dissemination of public opinion is influenced by the Two-Step Flow Theory and the Uses and Gratifications Theory. The Two-Step Flow Theory posits that information is first transmitted to opinion leaders, who then spread it to a broader audience [7]. In the social media era, influencers and key opinion leaders (KOLs) serve as central nodes in information transmission, significantly shaping the trajectory of public discourse. However, this dynamic may also foster blind trust in opinion leaders, weakening users' independent judgment. In contrast, the uses and gratifications theory emphasizes users' motivations for engaging with social media, such as information-seeking, social interaction, or self-expression [8]. Although algorithm-driven personalized recommendations enhance user satisfaction, they simultaneously reinforce the filter bubble effect, narrowing exposure to diverse viewpoints.

3.3. Emotional transmission and public opinion evolution

Emotions play a vital role in the dissemination of public opinion on social media, as people tend to mimic the emotional expressions of others, fostering resonance and amplifying sentiment [9]. Social media often leverages emotionally charged content to draw attention, reinforcing users' preexisting beliefs. For instance, anger spreads more rapidly than rational analysis, intensifying public opinion polarization. Proposed by Mehrabian and Russell, the PAD emotional model explains the emotional mechanisms behind public opinion dissemination, focusing on three dimensions: Pleasure, Arousal, and Dominance [10]. In the realm of social media public opinion, content with high pleasure, such as heartwarming stories, fosters a positive public opinion atmosphere, while negative emotions, such as anger and fear, are more likely to spark widespread social discussions. Meanwhile, content with high

arousal, such as controversial events, is more prone to becoming a focal point of public discourse, whereas low-arousal information tends to disseminate more gradually. Dominance represents the distribution of discourse power in public opinion, with governments and mainstream media often playing a leading role in major public opinion events, thereby steering the direction of public discourse. For example, in the case of a sudden event, anger on social media may quickly spread, driving the public to criticize related policies or actions. Without proper guidance, this emotion can escalate into online harassment or the spread of misinformation. Nevertheless, when authoritative institutions intervene, official statements or fact-checking usually help temper the emotional intensity, steering public opinion back toward rationality.

4. The crisis management and public opinion guidance in social media

4.1. Features and challenges of crisis communication

In the social media era, crisis-related information spreads at an unprecedented pace, triggering swift and intense public reactions. The core challenges of crisis management lie in the unpredictability of events, the authenticity of information, and the effectiveness of response measures. In particular, crises are often highly uncertain. While social media facilitates rapid information dissemination, it also amplifies the risk of misinformation and rumors. If governments or relevant institutions fail to provide timely and transparent information, the public may rely on unverified social media content, exacerbating panic and misunderstandings. Moreover, the openness of social media transforms the public from passive recipients into active participants in information dissemination. As official statements alone cannot shape public opinion, consistent communication and active engagement are crucial. Additionally, personalized algorithms on social media may create an echo chamber effect, reinforcing certain viewpoints and potentially escalating extreme public sentiment. Besides, crisis management requires both transparent information disclosure and effective public emotion guidance. And a lack of transparency, passive attitudes, or delayed responses can heighten dissatisfaction and escalate public opinion crises. Therefore, effective crisis communication hinges on providing timely, accurate information and taking measures to soothe public sentiment [11].

4.2. The crisis management and public opinion guidance

In the information age, a swift media response within the critical four-hour window is essential. The social platform serves as key channels for the dissemination of trending events, thus enabling rapid information control and preventing public opinion from escalating. The collaboration between the government and new media platforms is vital for promptly addressing public concerns, as prolonged silence can spark a secondary wave of public outcry. Furthermore, crisis management should not only provide direct responses but convey accurate information in a timely manner and take concrete actions to address public concerns. For example, in 2018, Starbucks faced worldwide criticism over allegations of racial discrimination when a Black customer was refused access to the restroom. The incident rapidly gained global attention, which prompted Starbucks' CEO to issue a public apology, temporarily shut down 8,000 stores across the United States and introduce racial bias training for employees. Through proactive measures, the company minimized brand damage, showcased its commitment to change, and effectively rebuilt its corporate image. In crisis management, social media serves not only as an information dissemination tool but also as a moderator of emotions and public discourse. The complexity of the information environment makes public opinion guidance more challenging, as personalized algorithms on social media often reinforce biases, leading to fragmented information and selective exposure to viewpoints. In the post-truth era, public opinion tends to focus more on emotional expression rather than the factual background of events. As such,

delivering timely and accurate information, along with effective public opinion guidance, plays a critical role in stabilizing public sentiment and steering discussions in a constructive direction.

4.3. Public sentiment and behavioral trends

Widely discussed events that frequently ignite controversy are known as social hotspots, and these events trigger public debate and emotional reactions via conflicts, shaping the evolution of public opinion. One notable example is the controversy surrounding “mandatory seat yielding” in China. A viral video showed an elderly man forcefully demanding a pregnant woman to give up her seat on the metro, verbally abusing her in the process. And this incident rapidly spread across social media, drawing intense public reactions. Initially, the majority of public opinion strongly condemned the actions of the elderly person [12]. However, as the discussion progressed, the debate broadened to encompass wider issues such as seating rights and public transportation regulations. Although the incident quickly garnered widespread attention, official responses from transportation authorities ultimately helped calm public discourse. The discussion surrounding this case reflected the tension between public sentiment and social norms, hence influencing perceptions of public transportation management. And this phenomenon highlights the double-edged nature of social media in modern society. On one hand, it fosters diverse public discourse and encourages the exchange of viewpoints; on the other, it amplifies emotional rhetoric and exacerbates societal divisions. The rapid spread of information through social media intensifies public pressure, prompting swift responses from the government and media [13]. However, it also increases the risk of uncontrolled emotional reactions, deepening social conflicts. In this incident, social media surpassed traditional media constraints, amplifying public awareness and engagement while deepening opinion polarization. Case analysis highlights its deep influence on public sentiment, behavior, and societal reactions..

5. Public opinion and emotion management

5.1. Strategies for public opinion guidance in the social media era

In the social media-driven information landscape, public opinion events are often characterized by sudden emergence, rapid dissemination, and high emotional intensity, making opinion guidance more challenging. Therefore, effectively leveraging social media for public opinion intervention is crucial. Governments and relevant institutions should actively utilize social platforms to respond to public concerns promptly and transparently, thus preventing the spread of misinformation and loss of control over public discourse. At the same time, mainstream media must adhere to principles of authenticity and objectivity in information dissemination, ensuring accurate and fair reporting to minimize misleading interpretations driven by emotional responses. Also, establishing professional public relations teams to enhance the efficiency and precision of information release is essential for improving public opinion guidance. Following the principles of the Two-Step Flow Theory and the Uses and Gratifications Theory, media should strengthen opinion guidance by aligning information dissemination with the public’s needs.

5.2. The social responsibility of emotion management

Emotion management is an integral part of public opinion guidance and should be framed within the context of social responsibility to ensure rational emotional expression. Emotional reactions in public opinion events often stem from the public’s sense of powerlessness regarding certain issues and the misinterpretation caused by fragmented information [14]. With the increase in negative social events, public emotions are more susceptible to influence, leading to large-scale opinion fluctuations. As a result, the government, media, and the public should share the responsibility of emotion management,

promoting rational discussions and preventing intensified social divisions. The government must establish a transparent information release mechanism to address public concerns and alleviate social anxiety promptly. The media should uphold its social responsibility by avoiding overly emotional or sensationalized reporting while ensuring the truthfulness and fairness of information dissemination. Meanwhile, the public should cultivate media literacy, analyze public opinion events rationally, and avoid making judgments solely based on subjective emotions. The Social Responsibility Theory, introduced by the Commission on Freedom of the Press in the 1940s, underscores the media's duty to adhere to truthfulness, objectivity, and fairness in information dissemination to promote social stability. A more rational public discourse can be fostered by tempering emotional reactions via the collective efforts of the government, media, and the public.

6. Conclusion

This study explores the mechanisms and impact of public opinion dissemination in the era of social media. Through an analysis of relevant literature and specific cases, this study explores the role of crisis management and emotional guidance in shaping public opinion. The results demonstrate that while social media facilitates information dissemination and public discussion, it also exacerbates emotional polarization and misinformation. Future research should prioritize enhancing opinion monitoring and risk prediction technologies, refining algorithmic recommendations to mitigate filter bubbles, and utilizing AI to detect and counter misinformation. Additionally, stronger collaboration among governments, media, and platforms is crucial for effective public opinion management, greater transparency, and a more orderly media environment.

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