

Research on Brand Trust Crisis and Public Opinion in the Digital Public Sphere

Haoyu Wang

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Beijing Normal-Hong Kong Baptist University, Zhuhai, China

t330031255@mail.bnbu.edu.cn

Abstract. With the rapid development of the Internet and social media, the digital public sphere is becoming an important space that influences public opinion and consumer behavior. This article takes the "Sam's Club product selection controversy event" that sparked widespread discussion in China in 2025 as a case study to explore how social media shapes consumers' perception and trust in brands as a public sphere. Based on the theories of public sphere and brand trust, this study uses questionnaire surveys and text analysis methods to analyze how social media promotes extensive discussions among consumers about this event. The research finds that social media uses hot lists and tag functions to strengthen agenda-setting attributes, expand the spread of the event, and influence the image of the brand constructed in the public's mind. This article points out that the digital public sphere is not limited to political issues, and its influence is increasingly extending to the consumption field. The significance of this study lies in revealing the mechanism of social media's role in consumption disputes and providing references for brands on how to respond to crises, rebuild trust, and shape identity in the digital public sphere.

Keywords: Public sphere, Brand Trust Crisis, Sam 's Club, Identity construction

1. Introduction

With the widespread adoption of the Internet and the development of social media, online platforms have become a main arena for public discussion [1]. These discussions increasingly extend beyond social and political topics to consumption, brands, and daily life, offering a valuable lens for studying public opinion and communication. In recent months, Sam's Club, long regarded as a model of membership supermarkets, faced criticism on Chinese social media due to issues such as product selection and quality decline. The 2025 "Sam's Club product selection controversy event" provides a typical case for observing how brand opinions emerge and evolve in the digital public sphere.

Based on the "public sphere theory," this article uses questionnaire surveys and text analysis to study how social media, as a public sphere, influences people's views on controversial events and further explores how such discussions challenge the long-term brand identity construction of Sam's Club. While prior research has extensively explored digital public sphere dynamics in political communication, there is still a lack of in-depth research on how the digital public sphere acts on

brand consumption issues. Therefore, the significance of this study lies in filling this gap, not only providing new perspectives and case support for digital public sphere research but also offering new insights and directions for brand trust construction and identity shaping in the social media environment.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Digital public sphere and social media

In 1964, Habermas proposed the theory of the "public sphere," emphasizing that the public sphere, as a sphere within social life, has become an important space for rational discussion and the formation of public opinions, and within this sphere, things like public opinions can be formed [2]. With the advent of the digital age, this concept has been extended to the "digital public sphere" [3]. Johannessen et al. pointed out that communication conducted on social media can promote the development of media consumers' discussions and make it possible for the public to have immediate debates online [4]. Entering the digital age, the popularity of social media has enabled individuals to discuss relevant public interest practices on the Internet and express their own opinions [5]. Compared with traditional media, the digital public sphere not only expands the range of issue participants, but also the wide dissemination of user-centered content, statements, and viewpoints is gradually becoming popular in social networks [6].

2.2. Agenda-setting theory in the context of social media environment

The Agenda-Setting Theory emphasizes that media shape the public's perception of the significance of events by highlighting certain issues [7]. In the social media environment, the agenda-setting process not only depends on the push mechanism of the platform but is also influenced by algorithm recommendations. For example, the hot search list on Weibo amplifies the attention to specific topics through the ranking mechanism, while the recommendation algorithm on Douyin enables related videos to spread rapidly within a short period of time, thereby promoting the dissemination of the event [8].

In this study, agenda setting plays a powerful role in determining what issues people pay attention to. On the one hand, traditional media's news reports still play a guiding role in the authority and "framework" of the event, and through the wide dissemination of this event, traditional media attracts the attention of its audience [9]; on the other hand, the forwarding of social media users and topic tags (such as #Sam's Card Withdrawal#) continuously drive the popularity of the topic, by constantly pushing a large amount of negative content about Sam to users who are concerned about this event, the algorithm mechanism of the social media platform creates "filter bubbles" and guides viewers to form a specific perception on this issue [10].

2.3. Brand trust theory and the change of identity recognition

Brand trust is a stable expectation formed by consumers based on the brand's reputation, product quality, and past experiences, and it is regarded as an important prerequisite for consumers' trust in a brand and their repeated purchasing behavior [11]. However, in crisis situations, brand trust often shows vulnerability: consumers may experience a loss of trust due to product disputes, lack of transparency, or unsatisfactory corporate responses.

This study aims to investigate whether the establishment of the membership system at Sam's Club has been affected by the events by comparing the trust levels of Sam's users before and after the

occurrence of the incident regarding Sam's Club. The phenomenon reflects that in a public opinion crisis, the previously established identity sense of the brand is more susceptible to being reconstructed by public opinion, especially when media magnify consumers' perception of the event [12].

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a mixed research method combining text analysis and questionnaire survey. The text analysis method is used to reveal the emotional tendencies of users' comments on the platform and the role of multimodal dissemination forms such as images. The questionnaire survey method aims to obtain quantitative data on consumers' trust in the Sam brand, emotional responses, and identification with membership status.

The reason for choosing to combine these two methods is that text analysis can reveal the characteristics of consumers' verbal expressions, while the questionnaire survey can provide empirical evidence of consumers' cognition and emotions. The two methods complement each other, not only helping to describe the event dissemination process but also explaining the deep impact of the event on brand trust and consumer behavior.

3.2. Data collection method

The questionnaire was divided into 5 parts, covering (1) Basic information, (2) Awareness of the event and information sources, (3) Participation in public discussions, (4) Brand trust and identification with membership status, and (5) Emotions and possible behaviors. A total of 51 valid questionnaires were collected in this study. Among them, 40 respondents indicated that they "heard this event" and provided complete answers to the subsequent questions.

3.3. Analytic strategy

During the data analysis process, this study specifically employed the following strategies:

(1) Descriptive statistical analysis: Frequency, proportion, and mean values were calculated for variables such as event awareness, information sources, brand trust, and renewal card intention in the questionnaire to grasp the overall characteristics and basic trends of the sample;

(2) Cross-analysis: Statistical inferences were made on the differences among different groups;

(3) Correlation and group comparison: Through group comparisons and correlation analysis, the relationships between different variables were examined.

4. Findings

4.1. Social media as a digital public sphere

According to the data, 78.0% of the respondents stated that they had heard of the "Sam's Club Product Selection Dispute" incident, while 22.0% said they had not. The awareness rate was significantly higher than the non-awareness rate. This result indicates that the event had a wide dissemination range among the target consumer group and might have been widely known through social media, news reports, etc.

According to the statistics, the channels through which respondents initially learned about the incident were highly concentrated on social media platforms. As shown in Figure 1, "push notifications on Rednote" accounted for the highest proportion (70.0%), followed by "WeChat Moments/Friend Groups/Chat with Friends" (55.0%) and "Hot Search Lists on Weibo (or other platforms)" (53.0%). The combined coverage rate of these three types of social media channels was significantly higher than that of traditional news media (15.0%) and offline communication (10.0%). The data indicates that the algorithmic push of social media (such as Rednote), instant messaging social networks (such as WeChat), and public topic lists (such as Weibo) together constitute the core path for the dissemination of event information.

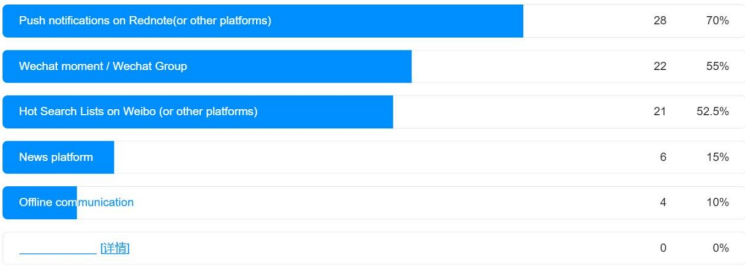


Figure 1. Where did you first know this incident

Social media channels significantly enhance consumers' proactive information search behavior. Based on the analysis of questionnaire data, the active search behaviors of consumers after being exposed to the event information were studied. The overall data shows that 78.0% of the respondents stated that they would search for relevant information by using keywords or clicking on tags, while 23.0% would not. This indicates that the majority of consumers exhibit a high degree of active tendency in information search. However, the differences in information acquisition channels significantly affect consumers' search behaviors: consumers who learned about the event through social media platforms have an active search rate of over 80% (Weibo 90.0%; Rednote 82.0%; WeChat 82.0%), while the search rate of consumers through news websites/APP channels is only 50.0%.

Table 1. Will you actively search for more information on social media after hearing about this incident

Channel	“Yes”
Push notifications on Rednote	82%
Wechat moment / Wechat Group	82%
Hot Search Lists on Weibo	90%
News platform	50%
Offline Communication	50%

Social media promotes the exchange and discussion of opinions among consumers. According to the questionnaire data, 93.0% of the respondents believe that social media can help them discuss and exchange opinions with other consumers, while only 8.0% hold a negative view. The data distribution shows a significant tendency. This result clearly indicates that the effectiveness of social media as a public discussion platform has been recognized by the vast majority of consumers.

4.2. The change in the perception of the "Sam's Club" brand in the minds of consumers

Before the controversy, consumers had a high level of trust in the product selection quality of Sam's Club. According to the statistics, before the incident occurred, the average trust score given by consumers for the product selection quality was 8.1 out of 10, indicating a relatively high overall trust level. The specific distribution showed that 73% of the respondents gave a score of 8 or above; only 16% gave a score lower than 7, and the proportion of negative evaluations of the Sam brand before the controversy was low. Although there were a few low scores (3-6 points), there were no extreme negative evaluations of 0-2 points, indicating that the brand trust foundation before the controversy was relatively stable.

The controversial incident significantly reduced consumers' willingness to renew their cards. Based on the analysis of data from 40 valid questionnaires, the average value of consumers' willingness to renew their cards, influenced by this controversy event, is 7.1/10, indicating that the controversy event has a substantial negative impact on member loyalty. The data shows that 35% of the respondents gave an impact score of 8 (high impact), and another 15% of the respondents chose the extreme value of 10 (complete impact), accounting for a combined total of 50%. The median score (8) is close to the average score (7.1), which indicates the statistical stability of the conclusion. It is notable that the proportion of scores of 5 and below is 33%, indicating that some consumers hold a reserved attitude, but the overall trend is still mainly a significant decrease in the willingness to renew their cards.

Members with a strong pre-event differentiated perception are more susceptible to being influenced by the event. Based on the cross-analysis data of consumers' differentiated perception and brand recognition, this study examined the correlation between pre-event cognition and post-event brand attitude changes. The data showed that among the 34 members who believed that Sam offered a different lifestyle, 28 people (82.0%) indicated that this event had affected their brand recognition. In contrast, among the 6 members who did not agree with this differentiation, only 3 people (50.0%) expressed a similar impact. The difference in this proportion (82.0% vs. 50.0%) indicates that members who had a stronger previous perception of the differentiated brand image offered by Sam were more sensitive to this controversial event.

4.3. The change of membership identity

Sam's Club has a high risk of losing members. The data from the Douyin platform's backend (Figure 2) shows that after the controversy occurred, the popularity index of the topic "Sam's Club card refund" increased significantly, indicating the increased attention to this event on social media platforms. Although this study cannot directly obtain the official membership loss data of Sam's Club, the significant increase in search volume may imply an increase in the possibility of consumers returning their cards.



Figure 2. Topic popularity index in TikTok

The decline in product quality is the main factor driving consumers to return their cards. Based on the feedback from 13 card-cancellation consumers in the questionnaire data, the key factors influencing the decision to cancel the card are mainly related to the issue of product supply. 62.0% of the respondents listed "degradation of product quality / removal from shelves" as the primary reason, and 54.0% emphasized "the membership fee is not worth it," indicating that the stability of product quality and the decline in membership value are the core problems causing customer churn at Sam's Club. This data analysis reveals that there are significant issues with the product selection strategy of Sam's Club, and the membership fee pricing problem also needs to be optimized to reduce the risk of member churn.

5. Discussion

In summary, with the widespread use of social media, the digital public sphere has become an important arena influencing consumers' consumption behaviors and brand perception. Social media played a significant role in the dissemination and discussion of this event.

This study found that the interactive design of social media platforms (such as Rednote, Douyin, and Weibo) was the reason for increasing users' active search behavior. With the help of the Tag function, users only need to click the tags added by the article writer in an article to obtain all articles with the same tags on this platform. This different design from traditional media not only more easily stimulates users' active search behavior but also promotes discussions among different users.

It is worth noticing that this function could also be used by brands to form "filter bubbles" for users. The platform algorithm can analyze users' interests/hobbies or their preferences for the topic based on the tags they click and then push content that the algorithm believes users are more likely to see [12]. Through this algorithm filtering, those consumers who may not have developed specific preferences might be exposed to a large number of negative comments about Sam's Club and form a more negative view of the brand and cancel their membership in Sam's Club.

In China, the public sphere is not only for discussions on politics or related topics but also more widely involves topics related to the consumption field. In order to build a brand that consumers can trust in the social media environment and promote the unique identity construction of the brand, enterprises should establish a transparent communication mechanism with consumers on social media and openly communicate information with consumers on public platforms, including the ingredients, sources, production processes, and public transparency of the brand's social responsibilities. Responding quickly and honestly to consumers' doubts in the face of public opinion

events can significantly enhance the brand's credibility. In addition, establishing and maintaining a brand community, allowing consumers to participate in the brand's development, and promptly listening to user feedback, etc., can effectively enhance users' loyalty and trust in the brand.

6. Conclusion

This study analyzed the selection controversy incident at Sam's Club, revealing the profound impact of social media in the digital public sphere on consumers' perceptions and brand trust. The research found that in the early stage of the incident, traditional media mainly played the role of agenda-setting by reporting consumers' dissatisfaction, pushing "selection standard" and "consumer rights" to the forefront of public opinion. As the discussion gradually shifted to social media platforms, the unique interactive design of these platforms accelerated the consumers' discussion about the incident. By clicking on tags or keywords to access different posts about the incident, the online public opinion was further intensified. At the same time, the multimodal dissemination mechanism of social media platforms led to a large number of texts, image and video related to the quality of Sam's products being presented in the public's view, ultimately challenging Sam's long-established membership identity. This process indicates that the digital public sphere is not only a discussion space for political and social issues but is also widely penetrating into the consumption and brand sphere.

The contribution of this study lies in combining the public sphere theory with the brand trust theory, supplementing the academic research gap on the operational mechanism of the digital public sphere in consumer issues. At the same time, this study also provides practical insights for enterprises to deal with crises and rebuild trust in the social media environment: transparent communication, rapid and honest responses and the construction of consumer communities are all key paths for brands to maintain identity and trust in the digital public sphere.

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