

Semiotic Misinterpretation and Public Sentiment Backlash: A Case Study of the 2026 CCTV Spring Festival Gala Copyright Statement

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Abstract. In the context of digital media, the difference between official language and public interpretations often causes unexpected emotional reactions. This study takes the copyright statement incident of CCTV's Spring Festival Gala in 2026 as an example to explore the mechanism of symbolic misunderstanding and public emotional rebound in official speeches. In contrast, the classical copyright notice has been misunderstood by the general public opinion as a completely prohibitive sign of any possible secondary usage. According to the literature sources, people's emotions impact the ability to understand the meanings of certain symbols: the stronger the negative emotions, the higher the probability of misinterpreting those symbols, which were supposed to carry a positive message; in the case when people feel positive emotions or at least neutral, the chance of misinterpreting symbols which carried negative meanings is drastically enhanced. Undoubtedly, it can be seen that both negative emotions and symbol misunderstandings cause the backlash among people, and this proves a clear relationship between the two phenomena. Symbol misunderstanding is based on the lack of communication between people, on the action of algorithms, as well as on deeply rooted stereotypes of the general population. This study helps to get a better insight into the issues of misunderstanding associated with emotions and cognitions in public opinion.

Keywords: Semiotic Misinterpretation, Emotional Reactions, Public Emotion, Official Discourse, Cognitive Bias

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

The digital age has accelerated the formation of public opinion, making the gap between official narrative and public interpretation a key issue in communication. After the publication of the copyright notice of the CCTV Spring Festival Gala 2026, numerous discussions concerning this document started between people and in the media, primarily on social media such as Weibo. Although the goal of publishing the copyright notice is to make people aware of the copyright law,

the internet community perceives the publication of the copyright notice as a restriction of secondary creation because it forbids remixing and even satire.

Since the question under consideration touches upon the issue of short video platforms and their remix culture, it is reasonable to speak of the controversy surrounding this topic. In order to investigate this topic properly, the following research questions should be considered. Namely, they are concerned with the mechanism of misunderstanding the official copyright disclaimer symbolically and the importance of the emotional misunderstanding for shaping the public opinion concerning this particular copyright disclaimer, and how it could be learned from the discussed case. Analyzing the copyright disclaimer of the CCTV Spring Festival Gala 2026, it is possible to find the causes of symbolic misunderstandings and negative emotional reactions.

1.2. Literature review

This review delves into existing literature on symbolic misreading and public sentiment, with a particular focus on how symbolic communication interacts with public response. Semiotics, which is the study of signs and symbols, offers an essential theoretical framework for understanding the meanings conveyed by texts. In media environments like the Spring Festival Gala, a copyright statement is not just a legal notice, but also a cultural symbol with significant meaning. Cognitive biases in public opinion play a crucial role in how this information is interpreted, influencing how individuals perceive media content [1]. When it comes to online public opinion, these cognitive biases can heavily distort the interpretation of symbolic elements, such as copyright statements, often leading to misunderstandings and sparking backlash [2].

Semiotic inference involves interpreting symbols by combining logical reasoning with cultural context, but without empirical evidence, it can often lead to misinterpretation [3]. A misunderstanding of the semiotic inference in Gala's copyright statement could create confusion among the public and intensify negative reactions due to the misreading of the information. If transparency is lacking, this misunderstanding is likely to grow, as research has shown that the transparency of media information has a direct effect on public sentiment. When public expectations are unmet, it typically leads to negative responses [4].

The public opinion shaped by such misunderstandings is not a passive force; instead, it actively influences responses to public policies. Even in an authoritarian regime where formal feedback channels are limited, public opinion can still be shaped through informal channels like social media [5]. In the case of the Spring Festival Gala, any misunderstandings about the copyright statement could quickly spread across social media, causing a significant public backlash and forcing the event organizers to make adjustments.

Public opinion is often shaped by emotional frameworks, meaning how issues are presented by opinion leaders or the media can significantly alter public perception. Opinion leaders have the power to frame an issue by either emphasizing or downplaying negative reactions, thus influencing public opinion [6]. For example, if the emotional tone of a key figure or the media's presentation of a copyright statement is perceived as too commercial or unfair, it can deepen public dissatisfaction.

The concept of symbolic violence also plays a role in shaping public sentiment, especially when certain symbols are seen as marginalized or commercialized cultural products. In such cases, the copyright statement might be viewed as a form of symbolic violence, sparking public resistance since it's interpreted as a commercialized part of cultural heritage [7]. This perception of symbolic violence can lead to negative emotional responses, which in turn fuel a public backlash against copyright statements.

Cognitive bias is crucial in understanding how individuals form their views on media content. For instance, negative cognitive biases may lead to a stronger attachment to certain types of media, like short videos, which can skew how people accept other forms of media content, such as copyright statements during large-scale cultural events like the Spring Festival Gala [8,9]. These biases can magnify negative interpretations of copyright statements, intensifying public sentiment and triggering a more significant backlash.

Cognitive biases in the broader social context can distort public perception of social governance, showing how explanatory bias can shape opinions about policies and actions [10]. In the case of the Gala, such biases might exaggerate the public's negative perception of the copyright statement, leading to widespread dissatisfaction, which may not reflect the actual intent behind the content.

As symbolic misreading and cognitive bias interact to shape public sentiment, understanding these dynamics is key to grasping why the public may develop negative views towards cultural messages, such as the copyright statement of the Spring Festival Gala. Literature shows that the public's response is not just about the content itself, but also how it's interpreted through various cultural and cognitive lenses. These interpretations are influenced by symbolic processes and emotional frameworks, which can lead to significant public backlash when information is misinterpreted or lacks transparency [11,12]. The existing research highlights the complex relationship between symbolic processes, public emotions, and cognitive biases, providing valuable insights into how the public reacts to media information.

1.3. Research questions and framework

Based on the theoretical perspective of the above discussion and the specificity of the selected cases, this study is guided by three research questions:

What is the substantive boundary of copyright supervision explained in the statement, and what is its original policy intention?

What specific forms of symbolic misunderstandings have emerged in public discourse, and how have these misunderstandings led to public opposition?

In the context of mainstream ritual communication, what potential factors explain this communication difference, and how can the dissemination of official statements be optimized to reduce public misunderstandings?

2. Research design and methods

2.1. Research design and hypotheses

To investigate the proposed research questions, a quantitative content analysis approach was employed. This method is appropriate for systematically examining the manifest content of online discourse and testing relationships between key variables.

H1: Emotional tendency significantly affects semiotic misinterpretation.

H1a: Negative emotion positively predicts semiotic misinterpretation.

H1b: Positive and neutral emotions negatively predict semiotic misinterpretation.

H2: Emotional tendency positively predicts public semiotic misinterpretation.

H3: Semiotic misinterpretation positively predicts public sentiment backlash.

2.2. Data collection and sample

The data comprises: (1) the full text of the official 2026 CCTV Spring Festival Gala copyright statement; and (2) a purposive sample of 200 original Weibo comments posted between February 12 and 18, 2026, relevant to the statement. Duplicate, irrelevant, or non-substantive comments were excluded during collection. The quantitative analysis was performed using SPSS 26.0. Analytical techniques included descriptive statistics (frequencies), Chi-square tests (for categorical associations), Pearson correlation analysis (for relationships between scaled variables), and effect size calculations (Cramer's V).

2.3. Analytical procedures

Firstly, organize the official copyright statement text to clarify the policy intention of the 2026 statement and the real boundaries of copyright control. Secondly, manually code 200 netizens' comments, conduct quantitative analysis with SPSS, and analyze the distribution and correlation of emotions, symbol misinterpretations, and public opinion reversals. Thirdly, through content analysis, extract the specific manifestations of symbol misinterpretations and explore the transmission path through which they trigger public opinion reversals. Fourthly, summarize the deep-seated causes of the information communication deviation between the official and the public, and propose optimization strategies for the dissemination of official announcements.

3. Research results

3.1. Official statement: intent and scope

The 2026 Spring Festival Gala copyright statement is a routine annual announcement, with no new regulatory clauses or policy changes. Its core aim is to prohibit commercial copyright infringement (e.g., unauthorized reproduction, distribution for profit) to protect the rights holders' interests. It explicitly permits non-commercial sharing, secondary creation, and constructive criticism by ordinary users.

3.2. Hypothesis testing results

3.2.1. Descriptive findings: prevalence and manifestations of misinterpretation

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of semiotic misinterpretation

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percent	Cumulative
0=NO	26	12.9	12.9	12.9
1=YES	175	87.1	87.1	100.0
Total	201	100.0	100.0	

As shown in Table 1, 87.1% of the comments exhibited semiotic misinterpretation. The specific misreadings are concentrated in three areas: First of all, the routine copyright announcement was misinterpreted as a new and stricter regulation. The public mistakenly believed that the 2026 Spring Festival Gala was introducing a new policy to restrict content, completely ignoring the long-term nature of the statement. Secondly, commercial copyright protection is misunderstood as a total ban

on secondary creation and commentary, extending the original restrictions on commercial activities to all forms of creation and expression by Internet users, thus distorting the scope of control over the statement. Third, the official compliance copyright statement was misread as an attempt to suppress public expression, attribute negative regulatory intentions to the statement, and ignore its original intention to protect intellectual property rights.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of emotional tendency

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percent	Cumulative
0=Positive	27	13.4	13.4	13.4
1=Neutral	59	29.4	29.4	42.8
3=Negative	115	57.2	57.2	100.0
Total	201	100.0	100.0	

According to Table 2, the emotional distribution of 200 sample comments shows that negative emotions account for 57.2%, neutral emotions for 29.4%, and positive emotions for 13.4%. This distribution shows that the majority of the public interprets the statement negatively, further exacerbating the degree of symbolic misunderstanding.

3.2.2. Inferential findings: testing the hypothesized relationships

Table 3. Chi-square test results

	Value	Degree of Freedom	Asymptotic sig.(2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	60.980	2	<0.001
Likelihood Ratio	44.808	2	<0.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	46.687	1	<0.001
Valid N	201		

The expected count for one cell (16.7%) is less than 5, with the minimum expected count being 3.49.

According to Table 3, the impact of emotional tendencies on symbolic misinterpretation was examined using a chi-square test, which revealed a significant association between internet users' emotional tendencies and symbolic misinterpretation ($\chi^2 = 60.980$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$), confirming Hypothesis 1. Further analysis shows that the symbol misunderstanding rate of the negative emotion group is 96.5%, suggesting that it has a significant positive predictive effect on symbolic misunderstanding, and verifying hypothesis 1a. In contrast, the misunderstanding rate of positive and neutral emotional groups is significantly lower, indicating that symbolic misunderstanding has a negative predictive effect, and Hypothesis 1b is verified. The effect size of Cramer's $V = 0.552$ indicates that there is a strong practical relationship between emotional tendencies and symbolic misunderstandings.

Table 4. Correlation analysis results

		Emotional Tendency	Public Sentiment Backlash	Semiotic Misinterpretation
Emotional Tendency	Pearson Correlation	1	.676***	.483***
	Sig.(2-tailed)		<.001	<.001
	N	201	201	201
Public Sentiment Backlash	Pearson Correlation	.676***	1	.418***
	Sig.(2-tailed)	<.001		<.001
	N	201	201	201
Semiotic Misinterpretation	Pearson Correlation	.483***	.418***	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	
	N	201	201	201

***.correlation at 0.001(2-tailed)

N=Valid number of cases

According to Table 4, the impact of emotional tendencies on public opinion reversal was tested using a correlation analysis, which showed a significant positive correlation between negative emotions and public opinion reversal ($r = 0.676$, $p < 0.001$). The more negative the emotions, the stronger the reversal in public opinion, thus confirming Hypothesis 2.

Table 5. Cross-tabulation

			Symbolic Misinterpretation		Total
			0=no	1=yes	
Emotional Tendency	1	Count	16	11	27
		Percentage within Emotional Tendency	59.3%	40.7%	100%
	2	Count	6	53	59
		Percentage within Emotional Tendency	10.2%	89.8%	100%
	3	Count	4	111	115
		Percentage within Emotional Tendency	3.5%	96.5%	100%
Total	Count		26	175	201
	Percentage within Emotional Tendency		12.9%	87.1%	100%

According to Table 5, the impact of symbol misreading on the reversal of public opinion is also analyzed. The results show that the higher the degree of misreading of the symbol, the more significant the reversal of public opinion ($r=0.418$, $p<0.001$), indicating that the misreading of the symbol has a significant positive predictive effect on the reversal of public opinion, confirming hypothesis 3.

The path of symbol misreading leading to the reversal of public opinion can be summarized as follows: First, due to the fragmentation of information reception and the influence of previous

stereotypes, the public has cognitive deviations in official statements, which leads to the symbol misreading mentioned above. Secondly, this misreading makes the public feel controlled or limited in expression, thus causing resistance. Finally, these negative emotions are amplified through online group interaction and turned into acts of reversal of public opinion, such as questioning and criticizing statements, expressing hostility to the authorities, and even irrational public calls, which eventually lead to small-scale public opinion turmoil. Among them, the symbolic misunderstanding rate of groups with negative emotions is 96.5%, making it the main driver of the reversal of public opinion. Therefore, symbolic misunderstanding is the core intermediary factor that links negative emotions with the reversal of public opinion.

3.3. Underlying causes of the communication bias

According to the case study and content analysis, under the background of mainstream ritual communication, the root cause of the deviation of information communication between the official and the public in this incident can be attributed to two main factors: first, the fragmentation of information dissemination and the effect of algorithm amplification. Internet users often only receive fragmented information about statements, causing them to skip reading the full text. In addition, algorithm recommendations have strengthened the dissemination of negative public opinion content, further exacerbating cognitive bias and symbol misreading. Second, the interference of the public's previous stereotypes. In the past, the controversy over some official announcements has led to the public's preconceived negative view of official regulatory documents. When faced with this conventional statement, they instinctively interpret it as control or restriction, making it difficult to consider its true intention rationally.

4. Discussion and implications

4.1. Optimize the way of official discourse expression and communication

In daily public communication scenarios, the officially released text content will directly affect the public's reception and subsequent understanding of information. In the current cyberspace, fragmented reading has become a common habit. The content of the official announcement can not only pursue the standardization of format and the rigor of expression, but also take into account the readability of the content and provide guidance to the public. Through a more reasonable text structure, the public needs to pay less when understanding information. The cognitive cost. A clear explanation of the basic attributes of the announcement, the scope of the applicable population, and the core boundaries of the content can effectively avoid the situation of multiple interpretations due to too vague expression, so that the public can more accurately understand the original intention of the policy release, and reduce the possibility of misreading symbols from the source of information dissemination. Maintaining a gentle and neutral attitude in the expression of speech can also alleviate the psychological resistance of the public when receiving information, so that everyone is more willing to accept the content conveyed by the official, and lay a good foundation for subsequent rational communication.

At the same time, relying only on a single release channel and a single text form, it is difficult to adapt to the communication needs of the all-media era. With the help of multiple platforms to release information synchronously and different forms of auxiliary interpretation content, the core key information can be seen by more people and ensure the integrity of content transmission. According to the communication characteristics of different platforms, reasonable splitting and

supplementary explanations of the information content can fill the information gap caused by fragmented dissemination, make the content received by the public more coherent and comprehensive, reduce the judgment bias caused by incomplete information acquisition, and effectively improve the overall communication effect.

4.2. Improve the public opinion monitoring and guidance mechanism

To stop the continuous spread of misunderstandings and prevent the emergence of public opinion rebellion, a timely and effective public opinion response is indispensable. Official institutions can establish a normalized public opinion monitoring mechanism. In the early stage of public opinion, it can quickly detect potential risks and make corresponding responses, communicate and clarify with the public in a transparent and gentle manner, avoid small-scale misunderstandings from slowly expanding into concentrated public opinion disputes, and shape the public's cognition. Return to the rational track and do not let the misreading of symbols further develop into an antagonistic public opinion tendency.

The expression of public opinion on the Internet itself is complex and diverse. Official institutions can adopt differentiated communication methods to improve the actual effect of public opinion guidance. On the one hand, for those questions arising from an incorrect understanding of the facts, they should explain and clarify with objective and clear content. On the other hand, for obvious emotional reasons, when communicating with the public, they should not only convey their own position clearly, but also take into account everyone's psychological feelings. For a small number of extreme and irrational remarks, public should deal with them in an orderly manner in accordance with relevant regulations to avoid further intensification of contradictions. Through hierarchical and classified guidance, it can gain greater understanding and recognition from the public, so that the whole public opinion field can maintain a relatively rational order.

4.3. Consolidate the foundation of long-term communication ecological construction

The level of trust will directly affect the communication effect of official discourse, which is also the core basis for improving communication efficiency. In the daily dissemination of information, while maintaining the openness and transparency of information, official institutions also maintain the stability of the position, provide full explanations of the content related to the public interest, and make the expression of the policy consistent with the actual actions. If they persist for a long time, they can slowly weaken the stereotypes of the public and optimize the acceptance environment of official information, fundamentally reducing the probability of regular announcements being misread.

It is also an important aspect to optimize the overall official communication ecology and improve the public's ability to process information and the cognitive level of relevant knowledge. Relying on various channels of social education and mass communication, the popularization of media literacy can slowly guide the public to develop more rational information interpretation habits and enhance everyone's ability to distinguish fragmented information. At the same time, doing a good job in popularizing basic copyright knowledge can also make the public understand the relationship between copyright protection and creative freedom more comprehensively, reduce panic misreading caused by insufficient cognition, and provide more stable social support for the formation of an atmosphere of rational public opinion.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the CCTV Spring Festival Gala copyright statement incident in 2026 to reveal the mechanism of symbol misreading and public emotional rebound. Three core findings were derived from the analysis. The official statement is a routine, business-oriented document, but it is widely interpreted as a restrictive new policy, highlighting the fundamental gap between intention and perception. There have been a wide range of symbolic misreadings in public discourse (87.1%), and the notice is mainly understood as a new type of prohibition on expression. What is most significant about the findings is that there is evidence for a triple process: first, the inclination towards negative emotionality has a strong association with the misinterpretation of symbolic communication; secondly, both have an independent and significant association with the generation of a public emotional reaction.

These findings bear dual meanings. First of all, in theory, they illustrate the connection between the symbolic process and emotional process, and hence make it clear why such a phenomenon exists in an online situation, offering a deeper lens for understanding the communication gap between the official and the people. In addition, in practice, it is important to note that official communication should not merely focus on delivering the message, but also on controlling the people's emotions and avoiding cognitive biases. The weakness in this research is its case-based design and the use of limited samples. To further prove the validity of the research findings, it is highly recommended that future studies conduct vertical and comparative studies.

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