
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Analysis of Crisis Communication and Public Participation in Online Colleges and Universities from the Perspective of Emotional Contagion Theory: Taking the Case of Sichuan University Subway Photographing

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| ABSTRACT

The objective of the study is to examine the handling of public opinion crises in higher education institutions within the complex and rapidly evolving multimedia landscape. In this context, universities must enhance their crisis communication awareness and improve both the speed and approach to addressing public opinion crises. This research focuses on the case of Sichuan University's response to the subway voyeurism incident, revealing that universities often lack effective crisis management strategies, which inadvertently exacerbate the spread of public opinion on online platforms instead of calming public sentiment. Drawing from the social sharing theory, this study delves into the discussion of crisis communication in higher education institutions, particularly in response to events like the Sichuan University subway voyeurism incident. The results of the study indicate that universities should closely monitor and proactively address events and situations within public opinion discourse that carry potential harm. This proactive approach is essential to prevent adverse effects from arising and spreading. Additionally, universities should closely follow the development of previously sensitive warning events and promptly formulate effective response measures.

| KEYWORDS

Crisis communication; Emotional contagion theory; Sichuan University subway camera incident

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

As an important place of education, the behavior and reputation of colleges and universities often become the focus of social attention. On June 7, 2023, a male passenger was suspected by a female passenger of taking a candid photo and was asked to "prove his innocence", but was still exposed by a female on a micro-blog when no evidence of candid photos was found. After a huge public opinion discussion, the woman was later revealed as a graduate student of Journalism at Sichuan University, and the man was the "uncle of migrant workers.". The incident triggered a heated discussion about gender, identity, and Intergeneration. At the same time, because of the student identity of the woman, Sichuan University triggered a negative discussion about Sichuan University.

The development and popularization of the Internet not only facilitate modern social life and promote economic development but also becomes an important space for social public opinion activities and a barometer of public social psychology." it can be seen that in the development process of the new media era, the spread and fermentation of negative network public opinion in the media not only affects the reputation of colleges and universities but also is very easy to cause network emergencies when sensitive topics are involved, It affects the healthy network public opinion ecology, thus hindering the normal development of social order. (Lang, 2022)

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One social media has not only become a channel for information dissemination but also a platform for the public to participate in discussions and form consensus. At the same time, it has also become a platform for the dissemination, production, and dissemination of university crisis events.

1.2 Research Significance

In fact, "the rationality and irrationality of network public opinion and the rationality and irrationality of emotions are not the same level of problems." (Zhang & Yan, 2017). We can't just regard emotion as a destructive force in the network of public opinion. It also has many constructive functions.

In the field of network public opinion research, how the public influences public opinion has always been a hot and challenging issue. Public opinion is not only a means of information dissemination but also carries emotions and emotions, which reflect the deep psychological characteristics of the public. Therefore, the in-depth study of the impact of emotion on public opinion has become an important way to provide a new perspective for us to analyze the impact of the public on online public opinion. The exploration of this research direction is expected to reduce the research difficulty and open up new possibilities for further research in the future.

1.3 Research Methods

The main theoretical supports this paper intends to adopt are the Framework Theory, the theory of agenda-setting, and the emotional contagion theory. In terms of research methods, qualitative research methods such as literature analysis and case citation analysis are mainly used, as well as web crawler technology for data collection and analysis, to explore the problem of university crisis communication countermeasures.

2. Literature review

To grasp the current situation of the field of public opinion research at home and abroad as a whole, this paper first conducts a quantitative analysis of the relevant literature and selects the CNKI database and Web of Science database with a relatively complete collection and a large amount of data. To ensure the recall rate, in terms of the selection of search words, Chinese uses "public opinion" and "crisis communication" as keywords and titles, respectively. The corresponding foreign search topic is "public opinion" and "crisis communication". The search time is September 21, 2023. A total of 8,173 Chinese documents and 15,427 foreign documents were retrieved.

As far as the development of public opinion research is concerned, it started early in foreign countries, from the primary development in the middle of the nineteenth Century to the middle of the twentieth Century. Domestic research on social public opinion began in the 1990s. In 1989, the article "Public Opinion Survey in China", published by Chen Chongshan, a domestic scholar, was the earliest article on public opinion research found on CNKI. (Xing & Wang, 2015)

3. Analysis and Discovery

3.1 Case Analysis

3.1.1 What Happened

In June 2023, Zhang suspected that a male passenger was secretly photographing her while squatting on the subway and playing with a mobile phone. To clarify her doubts, the man agreed to let Zhang check the album on his mobile phone. However, even if it was confirmed to be a misunderstanding, Zhang still chose to expose this matter on the Internet, using derogatory words such as "creepy old man", "not the first time to commit a crime", and "skilled action" to blame the male, and raised the question "do I not need to defend my rights if my rights and interests are not infringed?".

With the gradual fermentation of public opinion, the identity of Zhang was picked out by netizens. She is a postgraduate student of journalism at Sichuan University, and the male who is required to prove his innocence is a "migrant worker uncle.". The male's family, out of their understanding of her difficult entrance to the University, hoped that she could publicly apologize rather than be affected by her studies. On the same day, Zhang came from Dongguan to officially apologize to the uncle's family. That night, Zhang issued an apology statement on her Weibo, and the two sides settled.

After an investigation, Sichuan University made a detention for the student by the provisions of Sichuan University on disciplinary measures for students. At the same time, according to the regulations of the Communist Party of China on discipline, the student was also observed.

3.1.2 Public Interaction and Feedback on Social Media

In the beginning, some netizens were affected by Zhang's statement and expressed their support for her, while others defended the male. Later, Zhang posted a blog on Weibo, asking, "Why didn't he speak for himself since he didn't take a candid photo?" which triggered thousands of angry comments and further heated public opinion.

However, in this crisis, the punishment result of Sichuan University did not calm the public opinion on the Internet. Just quelling online violence, another is in the making: Zhang's personal information and photos were exposed, not only on the matter and rational criticism but also a large number of malicious speeches and personal attacks. Even the various groups Zhang was regarded as a representative were implicated. After that, it was revealed that Tencent had terminated the internship contract.

3.2 Communication Analysis on Social Media

3.2.1 Speed and Range of Transmission

Sina-Weibo has become an important crisis outbreak platform. The platform, media, and media bloggers interact with each other, which makes it easy to enlarge the problem and upgrade the crisis. These characteristics make the "Sichuan University subway camera incident" spread quickly on the network. Relevant photos, videos, and public comments may spread rapidly in a few hours, forming a huge network of public opinion.

During the period of data analysis, reptile data collection was carried out with the keywords "Guangzhou Metro camera incident". The heat of micro-blog public opinion information fluctuated the most, reaching 0 troughs on 07 / 06, reaching 55,596 peaks on 12 / 06, and reaching 47,804 sub-peaks on 13 / 06. The popularity of web pages, WeChat, and other types of public opinion information is less than that of Sina-Weibo platforms.

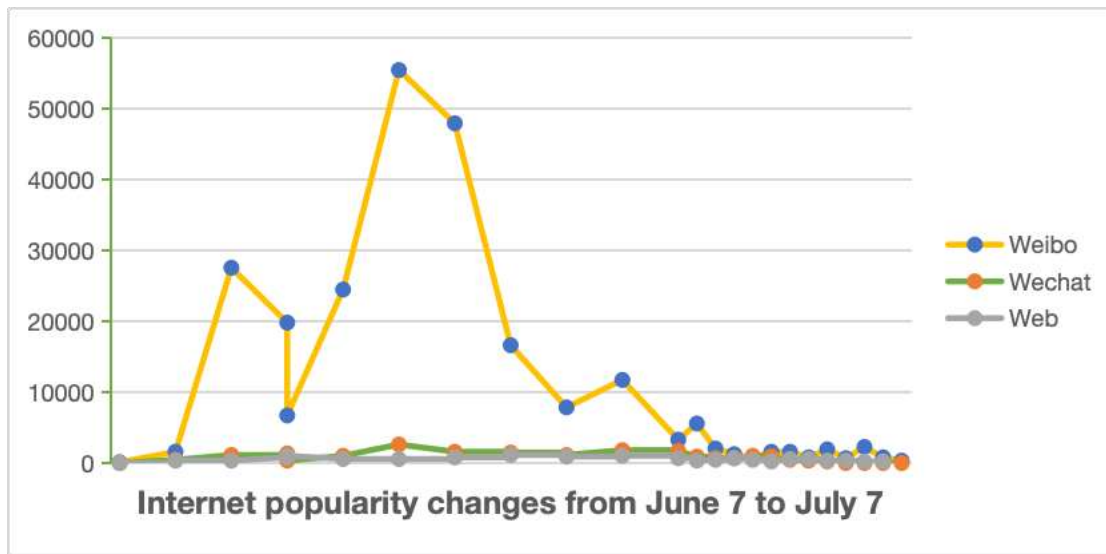


Figure 1. Popularity line chart of social media

3.2.2 Public Participation and Emotional Response

Social media platforms allow the public to participate widely. When people express their opinions, they often express anger, sympathy, or other emotions, and these personal feelings become important drivers of communication. During the analysis period from 00:00:00-2,023, 07, 06, 2,023 to 18:00:00, 7, 07, 00:00:00-2,023, a total of 334,007 public opinion information were matched, including 2,506 positive (accounting for 0.75%), 60,683 neutral (accounting for 18.17%), and 270,818 negative (accounting for 81.08%), with the largest proportion of negative information.

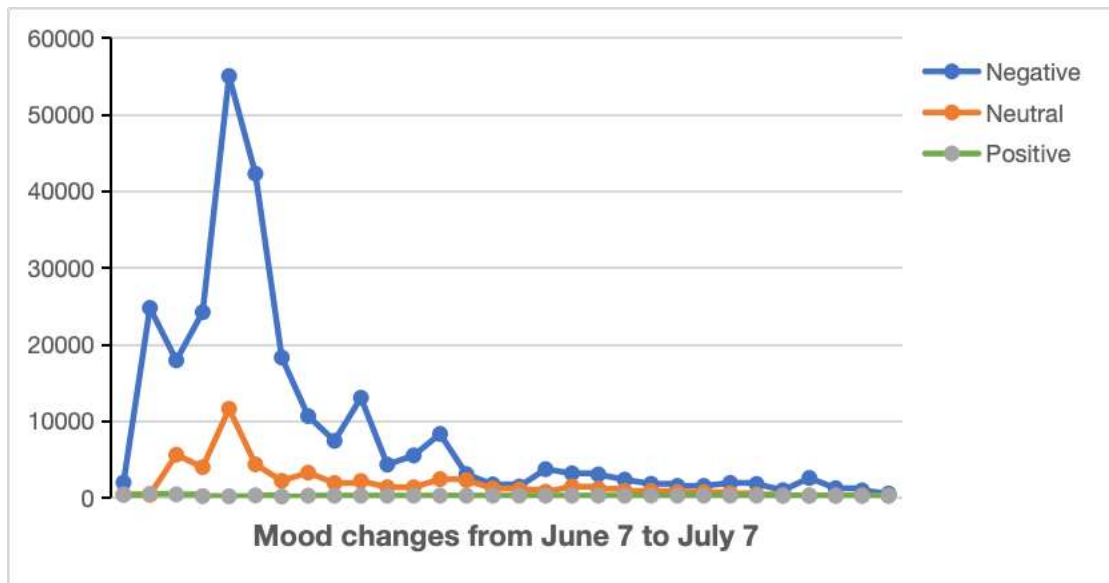


Figure 2. Sentiment change line chart

3.2.3 The Influence of Weibo Influencers and KOL

After the incident broke out, KOL and some influencers participated in the discussion, and their views significantly affected the direction of public opinion. In the event, under the narrative framework of some opinion leaders, public opinion rose from criticism of the personal character of the parties to criticism of the whole of Sichuan University.

3.2.4. False Information and Verification Difficulties

In the dissemination process of this event, there was some false information, which affected the correct direction of public opinion. Illegal truancy, bullying of students, and other unverifiable information became a weapon for netizens to attack Zhang and Sichuan University. Because of the anonymity of the network, it is unable to verify this information effectively and quickly, which also improves the difficulty of colleges and universities in dealing with the crisis, and it is unable to respond in time, which easily causes two crises.

4. Theoretical Analysis

Based on the theory of emotional social sharing, this paper makes an in-depth analysis of public emotional communication in the subway candid shooting event at Sichuan University. The theory points out that people tend to voluntarily share their emotional experiences with others, which has the characteristics of universality, timeliness, and communication. Here is the specific analysis:

4.1 The Universality of Emotions

The incident of secretly taking photos of the Sichuan University subway has caused a wide range of public emotional reactions. Anger, concern, sympathy, and other emotions are widely spread on different social media platforms, showing people's general emotional responses.

4.2 The Timeliness of Emotion

Emotional sharing usually occurs rapidly in a specific period after an event. In the first few days after the incident was exposed, emotions quickly rose and spread on social media, and later may gradually slow down.

4.3 The Spread of Emotions

Emotions spread through social interaction in social networks. In the case of the Sichuan University subway candid shooting, people's anger and concerns spread rapidly on the Internet, becoming a collective emotional phenomenon. Through forwarding, commenting, and discussing, emotions flow and spread among different social circles.

In summary, the emotional, social sharing of Sichuan University's subway candid shooting reveals the complex emotional dynamics in the modern social media environment. It shows people's collective emotional response to privacy and security issues, as well as the flow and role of emotions in social networks. It provides useful observation and analysis for us to understand emotional communication and social media interaction in modern society.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Research Results and Discussion

Based on the in-depth analysis of the Sichuan University subway camera incident, here are our findings and related discussions:

First of all, the incident shows that under the complex and changeable media environment, colleges and universities should strengthen the awareness of crisis communication, especially in the face of a public opinion crisis, and should take the appropriate way as soon as possible. Sichuan University's handling methods in dealing with this incident were relatively unskilled and failed to effectively calm the public's emotions, which led to the further upgrading of the spread of public opinion on the network platform. This highlights that colleges and universities need more training and preparation in dealing with crisis communication to better cope with similar situations.

Secondly, based on the theory of social sharing, this study explores the handling strategies of public opinion communication and crisis communication in Colleges and universities. The results show that in the face of potentially harmful public opinion events, colleges and universities should pay close attention to and take positive measures to prevent the spread of adverse effects. This emphasizes the importance of the initiative and timeliness of colleges and universities in crisis communication management. In addition, colleges and universities should also pay close attention to the development of sensitive early warning events to formulate effective response measures promptly. Such a forward-looking approach helps colleges and universities better cope with the possible crises in the future.

5.2 Research Contribution

This study provides valuable insights on crisis communication management in Colleges and universities. First of all, we discussed the impact of emotional factors in the spread of public opinion, providing a new perspective for understanding the impact of the public on online public opinion. Secondly, we carried out a detailed case analysis of the subway candid shooting incident at Sichuan University, providing specific empirical support for the decision-making of the University in crisis communication management. Finally, we put forward a series of suggestions to help colleges and universities better cope with the possible crises in the future and guide for improving the effect of crisis communication management in Colleges and universities.

5.3 Research Limitations

Although this study has its value, there are also some limitations. First of all, this study depends on the analysis of specific cases, so it may not be universal. Secondly, due to data restrictions, we are unable to cover all factors that may affect public opinion. Finally, this study only provides preliminary views on crisis communication management in Colleges and universities, and further research is needed to verify and expand our findings.

5.4 Suggestions for Future Research

In future research, we suggest more extensive cross-university research to verify our findings and improve the universality of research. In addition, we can further explore the role of emotional factors in the spread of public opinion to deepen the understanding of the impact mechanism of the public on online public opinion. Finally, we suggest that researchers pay attention to the actual implementation of crisis communication management in Colleges and universities so as to evaluate and improve the current management strategy so as to better adapt to the complex and changing Omnimedia environment.

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