# Research on phenomenon of public opinion polarization on Weibo from the perspective of situational collapse

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Abstract: Since the 21st century, the rapid development and popularization of the Internet have provided a broad platform for the general public to express themselves. Among many social products, Weibo has the characteristics of strong timeliness, rich themes, and both media and social attributes, and has become an important platform for users to discuss and communicate. As of November 2022, Weibo had 584 million monthly active users and 253 million average daily active users. Under the condition of Internet anonymity, free speaking has anonymity and uncontrollable difficulty to control. This paper explores the causes and influences of this phenomenon through questionnaire survey. Research has found that emotional expression is an important feature of the polarization of public opinion, and when users' own anxiety is greater, they are more likely to make extreme comments. When users browse Weibo platforms, users' attention is often attracted by extreme remarks, which will also infect users. This study proposes the degree of influence of inter-group emotions and users' own anxiety on the polarization of microblog speech, which reflects the further development and influence of public opinion polarization from the perspective of situational collapse.
Keywords:Weibo, situational collapse, public opinion polarization, anxious situations, intergroup emotions

## 1 Introduction

Weibo is an important platform for users to discuss and communicate. In this special social field, extreme words and conflicts occur frequently. In the anonymous state, users have a one-sided or multilateral attitude polarization trend, which can be seen in the comment section below many hot events. The author observed that under the communication platform of Weibo, when the audience communicate with other anonymous users, the original situation is broken and pushed into a new complex situation, while the performance mode and discourse system under the original situation are also difficult to deal with, resulting in confusion. When the audience is prone to conflict when discussing on the microblog platform, and then the phenomenon of conflict, collision and polarization appears in the whole public opinion field, which can be seen in the comment area below many hot events. In this regard, this paper tries to interpret the causes and mechanisms of public opinion polarization of microblog platform from the perspective of scenario collapse through questionnaire survey method and in-depth interview method, and discuss the

subsequent effects of public opinion polarization phenomenon.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Literature review of Situational collapse

The theory of situational collapse has attracted academic attention, but there are still few targeted studies. When discussing the situational changes in social media, foreign researchers all start from Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory and McLuhan's Media Ecology Theory. Scholar Boyd points out that as social media technology integrates social environments that are widely divided in the real world, it gathers diverse audiences in different contexts into a social media platform and a context and "context collapse" will occur. Weesch (2009) believes that context collapse is a new complex situation caused by the collapse of infinitely many contexts, in which the concept of context still remains relatively independent. Zhang Jie (2022) points out in Context collapse: Platform Supply or New Social Situation that context collapse is not only related to the availability of the platform, but also closely related to the overlap of context definition, conflict and reorganization. The premise and center of context collapse is the conflict and collapse of context definition. Ma Yikun (2022) points out in his study from situational collapse to situational separation: Based on WeChat Moments "only visible for three days" that the core of context collapse is the overlap of different separated situations, and the new situation affects how various audiences interact. Context collapse (context collapse) and context collapse (situation collapse) are synonymous and can be mixed. Jia Zhouzhou (2022) points out in "Emotional Compensation after" context collapse " that context collapse is the reason that makes digital communication into trouble. He mainly explored the value and possibility of offline physical space to make up for the future interpersonal communication under the collapse of context.

On the whole, these studies explain the theory of situational collapse from different perspectives, describing the preconditions, causes and cores of situational collapse respectively. More emphasis is placed on the conceptual description of the characteristics before and during the formation of situational collapse. From the perspective of situational collapse, the practical problems and formation consequences presented by individual network users are less discussed.

### 2.2. Literature review of the public opinion on Weibo

With the rise of "platform society" in the mobile digital era, social media represented by Weibo has gradually become the "infrastructure" commonly used for online users in online communication. At present, China has made many research achievements on public opinion in Weibo. With the theme of "microblog public opinion", 4,728 academic journals and 6,570 theses have been searched on CNKI, which involve various aspects such as the form, characteristics, formation mechanism and communication mode of public opinion in Weibo. Jiao Dewu (2013) points out in The Emotion and Impact in Weibo Public Opinion that microblog public opinion is defined as the common opinion of netizens on a recent topic with the help of microblog platform,

and believes that microblog public opinion has the dual characteristics of public and private. Yan Yuyan (2014) points out in the Study on the Guidance of Netizens' Behavior in the Microblog Public Opinion Field that the microblog public opinion field is an important part of the civil public opinion field, and the behavior of the microblog public opinion field in real life increasingly promotes the trend of the microblog public opinion field. In terms of the communication mechanism, Mu Wei (2013) points out the characteristics of the grassroots nature and the fission nature of the microblog public opinion, the manifestation of the public opinion of the content, and the speed and aggregation of the speed of the public opinion communication.

On the whole, the research focuses on the role of microblog in the formation of public opinion, especially the public opinion guidance function in some emergencies, as well as the social mobilization function of microblog public opinion and the supervision function of microblog public opinion. However, they are all summarized regularly from the theoretical level, starting from the formation mechanism of public opinion, and focusing on the public emotions including individual emotions and collective emotions in hot news.

### 2.3 Literature review of the polarization of public opinion

For the study of public opinion polarization, the focus at home and abroad is different. At present, there is no unified standard for the definition of public opinion polarization in China. Scholar Wu Yue (2022) points out in the Review of Public Opinion Polarization that the key to public opinion polarization is polarization, and the interpretation of public opinion polarization should return to the initial definition of polarization. That is, the polarization of public opinion is a kind of behavior that divides people into two groups with completely opposite views on a certain topic, and the polarization of public opinion is a phenomenon of polarization of group views. Domestic scholar Ge Yan (2020) points out in "Is Social Media bound to Polarize public opinion" that social media can promote polarization only when social instability and mainstream media lose credibility. Scholar Wang Qiwen (2017) directly discusses the group polarization instead of public opinion polarization in the Popular Public Opinion Polarization and Prevention under the Background of New Media. Scholar Li Fang (2022) believes in Information Cocoon room, masses and Biases of Public Opinion, that most domestic scholars use the two concepts of public opinion polarization and group polarization together, and mostly cite the concept of group polarization when explaining the polarization of public opinion.

On the whole, foreign research on public opinion polarization is mainly closely related to political polarization, while Chinese scholars' research on public opinion polarization involves more online hot topics and entertainment topics. It is mainly based on the new media environment, the digital age and other backgrounds as the research object, exploring and reflecting on the causes and prevention and control of public opinion polarization. However, none of these studies clearly define the scope of research, and mostly focus on conceptual elaboration based on the research results of foreign scholars, rather than analyzing the actual situation.

### 2.4 Proposal of research questions

This paper will start from the theory of situational collapse and try to answer the following questions: Why are the diverse audiences of microblog platforms prone to conflict? What are the factors affecting the audience's opinions? How do these conflicts evolve into public opinion? What is the impact of the public opinion polarization phenomenon?

## 3 Research methods

Based on the above mentioned, this paper uses the questionnaire survey method as the research method to answer the above questions, and tries to deeply explore the influence of public opinion polarization on microblog platform from the perspective of scenario collapse.

### 3.1 Questionnaire survey method

3.1.1 Hypothesis establishment

Based on the above problems, the corresponding assumptions are proposed again:

H1: The more frequently users use the microblog platform, the easier they are to make polarized comments.

H2: The more serious the user's anxiety, the more likely it is to make polarized comments.

H3: When users browse the Weibo platform, the more extreme the speech, the more attention users pay and the more likely to become infected. To prove the hypothesis, this study used a questionnaire survey to sample the population and produce questionnaires.

3.1.2 Sampling method

The corresponding research object of this hypothesis is the user group who often use the microblog platform. The sampling methods of simple random sampling, chance sampling and snowball were adopted, and the questionnaires were distributed mainly through online methods.

3.1.3 Sample selection

Through the analysis of the content, structure, utilization rate and audience characteristics of users of microblog platform, the research finally determines that the corresponding group is the audience who frequently uses microblog. First of all, we conduct non-representative sampling and judgment sampling for this group, and strive to ensure the realization of the sampling effect. With the help of the questionnaire star platform, this research can input questions, make and distribute questionnaires. The channels for the questionnaire link are WeChat, Weibo Super talk, Xiaohongshu, QQ Space, Zhihu, and questionnaire star filling community. The questionnaire was issued from March 24 to March 26,to people of different ages, education, regions and income to ensure the diversity and reliability of the respondents.

# 4 Research findings and discussion points

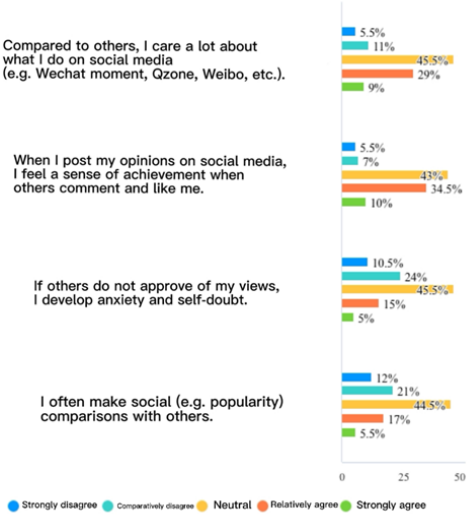
The questionnaire has been tested and passed the credit validity test, which can investigate and reflect the users' extreme remarks on the microblog platform and the potential reasons for the polarization of public opinion. The questionnaire was conducted by random sampling. During the distribution period, 200 questionnaires were collected, and 200 valid questionnaires were preliminarily checked, which means a total of 200 respondents accepted the survey.

## 4.1 Analysis of the use of respondents' social media platforms such as Weibo

4.1.1 Social media dependence

This study provides a more detailed measure of users' social media dependency. Among them, "After I post my views on social media, others 'comments and likes will give me a sense of accomplishment" has a maximum score of 3.37 (out of 5), and "If others don't recognize my views, I will have anxiety and self-doubt" is 2.8. It can be seen that the respondents' dependence on social media is mainly reflected in the sense of achievement that they can provide users with recognition, while their low anxiety about not being recognized. It can be concluded that users yearn for a sense of identity that can connect users with social media engagement.

**Table 1 Social media dependence**

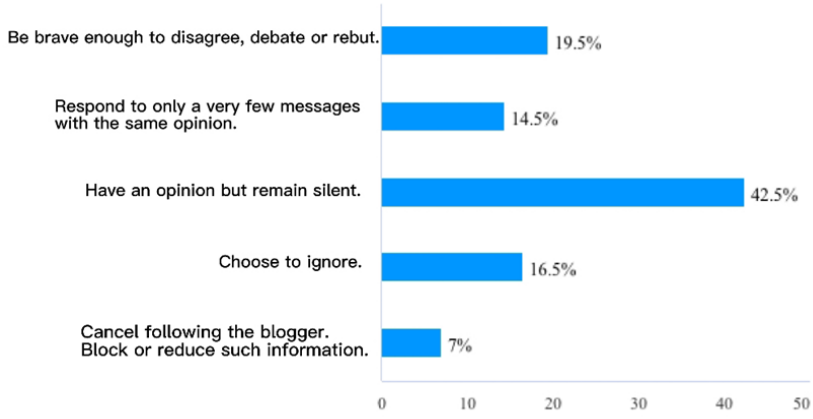



## 4.2 Analysis of microblog users' speeches and public opinion polarization

4.2.1 Practice when dealing with a disagreement

The phenomenon of public opinion polarization is a common public opinion phenomenon on a series of social media platforms such as Weibo, which is manifested in the obvious biased attitude of platform users towards a certain event or opinion. In response to this phenomenon, this study investigates the practice when users almost always do not agree with their views. Among them, 42.5% choose "opinion but silent", the highest proportion. Another 19.5% choose to "dare to make different remarks, debate or refute"; another 14.5% chose to "reply to only a few messages with the same opinion"; 16.5% "choose to ignore". Therefore, only a small number of users can make their different opinions when they almost all disagree with them, and most users will tend to remain silent or ignore them. Therefore, the author believes that the extreme tendency of users' comments may be affected by the social media platform environment, but the existing survey data is not enough to support the direct relationship between the two. Hypothesis 1 is not valid.

**Table 2 Practice when dealing with a disagreement**

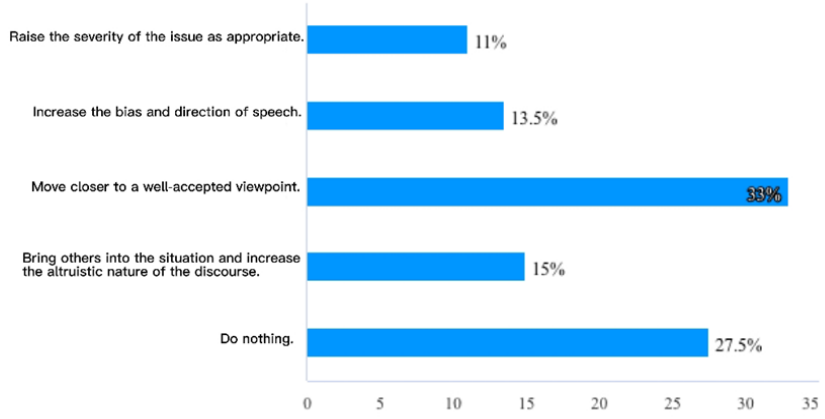



4.2.2 How to enhance the credibility of their own views

In the face of public opinion, explore how users express their views to seek higher recognition, from which we can also get the reasons for the polarization of public opinion on the platform. Among them, 33% of the respondents chose to "be close to the highly recognized view", another 15% chose to "bring others into the situation and increase the altruism of speech", 13.5% chose to "increase the bias and guidance of speech", and 11% chose to "appropriately increase the severity of the problem". Thus, on the Weibo platform, the user in order to better express their views, and hope to get the approval of other users, often use some means skills: such as to the popular view, or on the expression method exaggeration, bias, guide the audience, these are easy to form extreme speech, and attract users. It can be seen that most users choose to be close to the view of high recognition, which may lead to higher recognition of this view and more supporters, but its

correctness has yet to be verified, and fewer and fewer users hold different views, which is the polarization of public opinion intensifies.

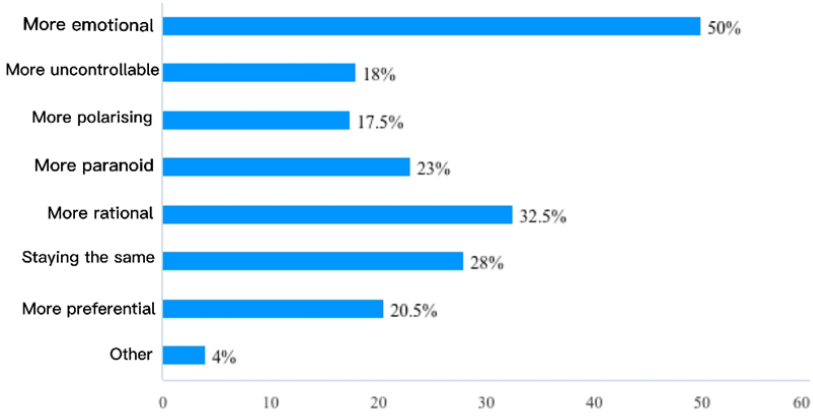
**Table 3 How to enhance the credibility of their own views**




4.2.3 Speech tendency in anxious situations

In addition to the users 'anxiety situation survey, this study also investigated the users' tendency to speak in anxiety situations. Fifty percent considered their anxious statements more emotional; 32.5% are "more rational"; 28% "stay unchanged" and 23% are "more paranoid". It can be seen that users in the case of anxiety, emotional speech tendency is more obvious. While emotional expression is more likely to produce extreme speech, and users who are in a state of emotional excitement are also vulnerable to agitation and influence by polarized speech. Hypothesis 2 is valid. The author believes that the anonymity of the network platform is an important reason for netizens to vent their emotions without reckless consequences. Current pace of social life, users' daily pressure and anxiety, and in the anonymous network world, people can hide their real identity, the real life nowhere to vent negative emotions, dare not express special views can show in cyberspace, consequence cost also was reduced to a low point, can even be defended in order to maintain justice.

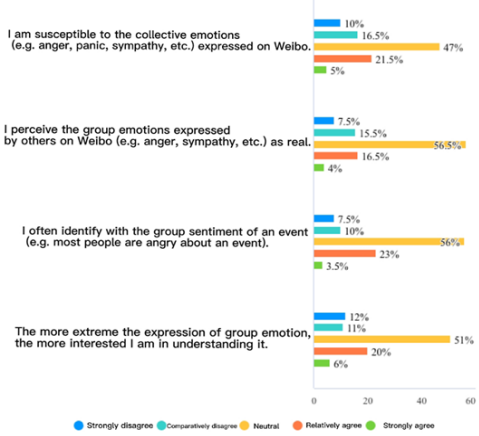
**Table 4 Speech tendency in anxious situations**




4.2.4 The influence of intergroup emotions on oneself

Emotional expression is an important feature of public opinion polarization, so this study also investigates the influence of group emotions on users. Among them, "I often agree with the group sentiment of an event (such as most people are angry about an event)" has an average score of 3.05 (out of 5); "I think the group sentiment (such as anger, sympathy, etc.) expressed by others on Weibo is real" has the lowest average score of 2.94. This shows that even though users may question the authenticity of group emotions on social media, they will still have a certain sense of identity. It shows that users will be affected by the emotions of social media platforms, and will even have echoed comments, which will further deepen the polarization of public opinion. Hypothesis 3 holds.

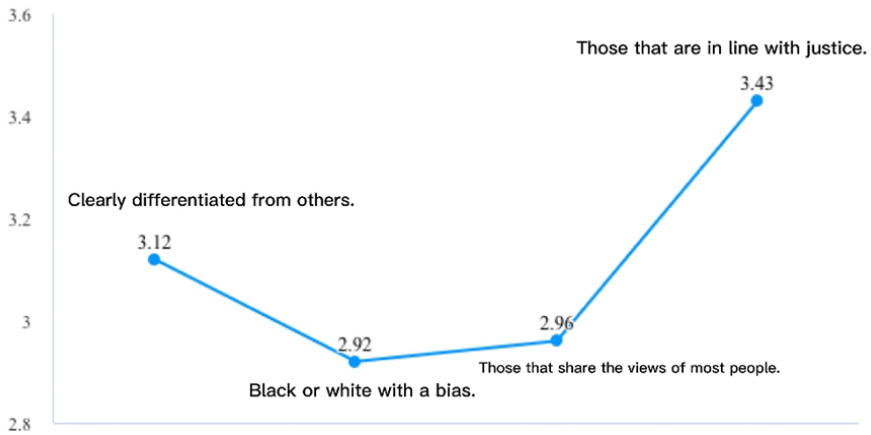
**Table 5 The influence of intergroup emotions on oneself**



4.2.5 Preferred speech tendency

In order to study the causes of public opinion polarization, the tendency of the user is also investigated. The average score of "consistent with justice" is 3.43 (out of 5), and the user is more inclined to the second average score of "clearly different from others" with 3.12, where the users' curiosity is also reflected. Scholar Peng Lan called the irrational, blind, extreme and other phenomena caused by group interaction "group lost", which is a small number of speech hatching most of the blind obedience. The results show that the more extreme users browse the Weibo platform, the more users' attention and infection. The comments, forwarding and thumb up behaviors driven by this emotion will also affect the emotions and behaviors of other netizens, and this highly infectious emotion will quickly spread viral in cyberspace. Since then, the spiral effect of silence has been recognized by some users and gained more and more supporters. However, other users with different views dare not speak out and even join the big army. When the event in the process of the development of the new details are constantly exposed, causing another round of ideas to come, it will cause a new round of public opinion polarization, the whole audience in an uproar.Some scholars have pointed out that in the digital age, the dissemination of news and information is characterised by immediacy. Since it is an established fact that polarised emotions can attract the attention of audiences more than the truth, not only do the self-media use radical narratives and shocking headlines to create hotspots and public opinion, but the traditional media are also not exempt from it, and some reversal stories are still first published by the traditional media. Therefore, there is a basis for the frequent occurrence of polarised reversals of online opinion.

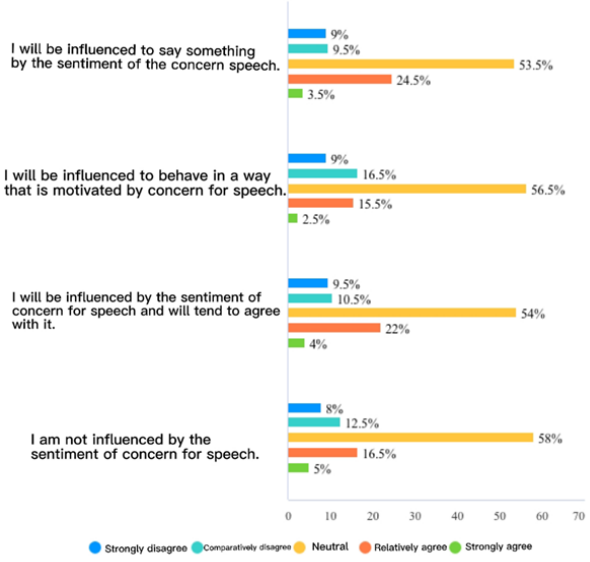
**Table 6 The impact of the speech on the users themselves**



4.2.6 The impact of the speech on the users themselves

In the polarization of public opinion, we also need to consider the reaction of users to social media comments and its impact. Among them, the average score of "I will be affected by the concerned sentiment and make some comments" is up to 3.04; then, "I am affected by the sentiment of concerned sentiment and prefer to agree with this view" is 3.01, indicating that users will be affected by the emotional influence of social media platforms and even compatible remarks, which will further deepen the polarization of public opinion. “I will be affected by the emotion of attention and make some behavior" has the lowest score, which also shows that the impact of these remarks will not be overextended to real life. However, it is unclear whether the network polarization will affect users' real life in a subtle way.

**Table 7 The impact of the speech on the users themselves**




# 5 Summary and reflection

## 5.1 Polarization of public opinion generates follow-up issues and discussions

The pseudo-environment first appeared in Lippman's book Public Opinion. Pseudo-environment, which is the subjective image of the real environment in people's mind, is a virtual environment formed by the description and reflection of the external environment processed by people through consciousness. Due to the limited nature of people's knowledge, they cannot fully understand the real environment, so for some things that they cannot feel personally, people will

always construct a picture about these things according to the media reports. Domestic scholar Li Liangrong once said that online public opinion is not only a spontaneous expression of the wishes of netizens, but also a game between the interests of all parties. Especially in such a real-time interactive environment with extensive data, it relies on encouraging and relying on user view output and discussion to convey information. Therefore, information from all directions is complicated, and people, as individual individuals, are unable to cope in the whirlpool of data, and can only take sides quickly. In addition, with the promotion of such a suggestion mechanism, in the face of controversial social issues, the audience's emotions are ahead of rational thinking, and the pursuit of news authenticity is no longer limited to the truth of the results, but strives for the truth of the process. It is not surprising that we will first show their own views according to the irresponsible we-media guidance such as the marketing number before making a rigorous judgment. This also leads to another concept, the "post-truth" era: emotions are in the front, and the truth is back. In the post-truth era, people's emotions prevail, the truth is bound by emotional attacks, even if someone wants to speak for the truth will be drowned in the noise.

The polarization of public opinion is like a flood, which should be both sparse and blocked. When managing the network environment and ecology, the microblog platform should strengthen the audit mechanism to ensure the authenticity of the news published. At the beginning of the phenomenon of public opinion polarization, the official media must use timely and efficiently ways to seize the opportunity and guide the general direction of public opinion, as well as investigate the truth of the incident, increase on-site reports and enhance users' trust. What is more, media should also guide netizens to form a positive media literacy, so that some polarized remarks can be controlled and guided. Extreme remarks with obvious purpose should be deleted to prevent affecting the normal judgment of other users.

### 5.2 Summary

This study proposes the influence degree of intergroup emotion and users' own anxiety on the polarization phenomenon of microblog speech, which reflects the further development of public opinion polarization from the perspective of situational collapse. On the other hand, it also provides the basis and ideas for the subsequent research direction and reasons of public opinion polarization of various platforms and provides a direction for further understanding user psychology and reducing the frequency of public opinion reversal events. However, it is worth noting that if the comments made by users are not correctly guided and reasonably guided, the phenomenon of public opinion polarization will also have a negative impact on the positive construction of the network ecology, which is worthy of vigilance and reflection. However, for the reasons like the audience scope and the social level are not enough and comprehensive, this study still have some flaws. In the future, study on public opinion polarization may need more attention to different age level, different social class user investigation verification, and expand the user views and public opinion polarization directly between research and practice.

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