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Commentary Opinion Environment: A Study on the Effect of Topic Framework Construction in Popular Online Comments

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Abstract:
In recent years, major social incidents have frequently ignited online discourse, with comment sections often featuring so-called "divine comments" that significantly shape public perceptions of these events. This study employs content analysis and audience surveys to examine the framing effects and opinion-guiding role of such divine comments. Findings reveal that during the evolution of major social incidents, viral comments attract substantial netizen attention and garner widespread endorsement. They guide comment sections towards unified thematic frameworks, demonstrating how viral comment-dominated frameworks shape opinion environments. To a certain extent, these frameworks diminish public discourse diversity, offering fresh perspectives on digital-age public opinion steering.

Keywords:
opinion environment, viral online comments, audience frame, agenda frame, public opinion guidance

1 Introduction

With the advancement of contemporary media-saturated society, digital platforms have become primary venues for public engagement in public discourse. Against this backdrop, many netizens engage with online public opinion events not merely by consuming news reports, but increasingly by reading comment sections. Comments within such events significantly influence the public's cognitive framework regarding the incident, playing a crucial role in shaping public discourse. We observe that during major social incidents, comment sections frequently feature remarks termed "divine comments". Unlike ordinary comments, these possess exceptional conciseness and distinctive interpretative perspectives, rapidly eliciting emotional resonance among audiences. They garner substantial likes and are often promoted to the top of comment sections by platforms, thereby exerting a significant guiding influence on subsequent public discourse trajectories. This raises intriguing questions: why do such comments possess such formidable agenda-setting capabilities, driving comment sections from diverse discourse to concentrated frameworks? What key factors underpin this framing power? And what societal implications does this phenomenon of framework concentration, driven by standout comments, hold for the ecosystem of online public discourse?

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2 Literature Review

2.1 Literature Review on Agenda Framework Construction

Agenda-setting as a core topic in public opinion studies has attracted multifaceted scholarly inquiry. Foreign scholar Goffman (1974) first introduced framing theory into communication studies in Framing Analysis, positing that frames constitute cognitive structures through which individuals comprehend and interpret social experiences. Communication research distinguishes between media frames and audience frames. Building upon Goffman's foundational concepts, Gitlin (1980) in The Whole World is Watching (CA: University of California Press) described the essence of media framing as a selective construction grounded in reality. Media influence audiences' diverse interpretations and understandings of events through the construction of frames. Foreign scholar Entman (1993) in Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm, from a political communication perspective, indicates that media frames influence public cognition through the functions of “selection - emphasis - exclusion - connection”. Scheufele (1999), in Framing as a Theory of Media Effects, developed a methodological framework analysis model, arguing that audience framing represents individuals’ selective decoding of media content based on experience and values. This decoding process may either reinforce media frames or generate counter-interpretations.

Domestic research on media framing has predominantly centred on news reporting texts. Chinese scholar Huang Dan (1998), in The Historical Transformation of ‘Ears and Eyes’ to ‘Voice of the Party’: Main Currents in a Century of Chinese Journalism Thought, conducted a more detailed examination of China's media framing construction from a news production perspective. His research indicates that China's media framing is profoundly influenced by the tradition of the ‘mouthpiece’ theory, a framework that may suppress the expression of diverse voices. Domestic scholar Du Tao (2014), in Framed Worlds: The Origins, Controversies, and Development of Media Framing Theory, examined the relationship between social interaction and framing effects. He noted that audience interactions on social media can enhance their capacity for self-framing, playing a significant role in social communication. Guo Xiao’an and Teng Jinda (2018), in Derivation and Convergence: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Frame Theory Research, examined the interactive effects between media frames and audience cognition from a cognitive psychology perspective, emphasising that audiences actively interpret and reconstruct information based on their own cognitive structures.

However, these studies predominantly focus on the interaction between media frames and audience frames, with limited research on frame construction within online commentary.

2.2 Literature Review of Opinion Environment

The opinion environment, also termed the opinion climate, is a concept proposed by German sociologist Noelle-Neumann (1974) within the framework of the spiral of silence theory. Since its introduction, it has garnered significant attention from scholars both domestically and internationally, yielding substantial research outcomes. Noelle-Neumann posits that when an individual’s opinion diverges from that of their group or environment, the fear of isolation prompts conformity to majority views, thereby distorting the opinion environment. Foreign scholars Lee & Jang (2010), through examining user participation in news discussions on social media, found that the opinion environment constructed by other commentators influences the public’s

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willingness to voice opinions, affecting individuals' evaluations and attitudes towards news content. Meanwhile, Hampton et al. (2016), examining online public opinion expression, noted that algorithmic recommendations distort public perceptions of the opinion environment, potentially failing to silence minority views.

Domestic scholar Liu Hailong (2001), in his article Does the Spiral of Silence Disappear on the Internet, contends that while online anonymity weakens group pressure, opinion leaders and group norms may still reinforce the silencing effect. In their paper On the Socialized Transmission of Individual Emotions in the Era of Group Communication, domestic scholars Sui Yan and Li Yan (2012) integrated the phenomenon of emotional transmission online with the opinion environment. They proposed that mass media and online platforms construct this group-oriented opinion environment through emotional resonance, thereby influencing public discourse. Jiang Weiling and Huang Chen (2016), in their study Research on the 'Spiral of Silence' Phenomenon in Social Media analyzed topics published by news media on Weibo and discovered a one-sided opinion climate on social media. They proposed that restrictions within social circles and individual self-protection awareness also influence individual opinion expression behaviour.

However, these studies have not examined the opinion environment phenomenon in online comments from the perspective of the audience agenda framework theory, and thus have not addressed questions regarding the framing effects of popular online comments.

2.3 Problem Statement

This paper therefore adopts the Audience Agenda Frame Theory to address the following questions: How does the intensity of online discourse stimulate netizens' desire to comment and repost? Can netizens absorb such a volume of comments? How do viral comments emerge? Do they narrow the primary framework of issue discussion?

3 Method

This study employs content analysis and audience survey methodologies to address the aforementioned questions.

3.1 Content Analysis Method

3.1.1 Hypothesis Formulation

Based on the aforementioned questions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: In public opinion incidents, the thematic framework of comments tends to become more concentrated after the emergence of viral comments compared to before their appearance.

To test this hypothesis, this study employs content analysis with a sample drawn from the population.

3.1.2 Sampling Method

The research subjects corresponding to this hypothesis are popular online comment content under major social public opinion events.

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First, we conducted a representative sample of such popular comments, selecting the Weibo trending comments on the Chongqing man “Fat Cat” jumping into the river incident as our research case. This incident was chosen because it entered the top 10 of Weibo’s 2024 trending topics, garnered over 100 million discussions, demonstrated significant influence, and featured prominent viral comments. As a domestic platform for public sentiment amplification, Weibo exhibits high user activity, strong comment interactivity, and reflects the agenda-setting characteristics of online discourse, thereby offering strong representativeness.

Secondly, employing random sampling, this study adopts an equidistant sampling method for the trending comment content of the public opinion incident on from 2 May 2024 to 20 May 2024 . Given the brief duration of the incident’s outbreak, earlier comments were more likely to gain likes and become trending comments. To better reflect the overall situation, this approach was selected. On the Weibo platform, keyword entries were searched and sorted by popularity. The comment sections of posts with the highest interaction rates under these entries were selected as the data source. The comment with the most likes was designated as the ‘top comment’. Using the top comment’s publication time as the reference point, the primary comment content within the 24-hour period preceding and following its publication was selected as the population. Given the earlier publication date of the standout comment, the 24-hour period preceding it contained only 35 comments. Consequently, all 35 comments within this timeframe were fully coded. For the 24-hour period following the standout comment, where comment volume was substantial, 500 comments were equidistantly sampled in chronological order to ensure balanced distribution within the sample, constituting the final analytical dataset.

3.1.3 Category Construction

This study reduced the variable ‘appearance of divine comment’ into two dimensions: pre-divine comment and post-divine comment. The variable ‘commentary thematic framework’ was reduced into: divine comment dominant framework (containing keywords, attribution targets, or conclusions identical to the divine comment), other multi-dimensional frameworks (perspectives, attribution targets, or conclusions differing from the divine comment), and irrelevant frameworks (deviating from the event's core issues). It could also be reduced into positive, neutral, and negative comments.

Table 1 Coding Results for Comment Topic Framework Distribution Before and After Viral Comment Publication

Topic Framework Type	Sentiment Polarity	24 hours prior to viral comment (posts)	24 hours after viral comment (posts)
Dominant Framework of Viral Comments	Positive	2	160
	Neutral	1	52
	Negative	0	28
	Subtotal	3	240
	Percentage	8.5%	48%
Other Diverse Frameworks	Positive	7	35
	Neutral	14	76
	Negative	4	98
	Subtotal	25	209
	Percentage	71.5%	41.8%

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	Positive	0	8
	Neutral	7	28
Irrelevant framework	Negative	0	15
	Subtotal	7	51
	Percentage	20%	10.2%

3.2 Audience Survey Method

3.2.1 Hypothesis Formulation

Based on the aforementioned issues, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The higher the public opinion heat, the greater the desire among netizens to comment and share.

H2: The greater the volume of comments, the more netizens tend to adopt the cognitive approach of reading popular comments to process information.

H3: The greater the netizens' identification with "divine comments", the more inclined they are to adopt a discussion framework dominated by such comments.

To test these hypotheses, this study employs an audience survey methodology, sampling from the population and developing a questionnaire.

3.2.2 Sampling Method

The research subjects corresponding to these hypotheses are online social media users.

First, we conducted a representative sample of this group, selecting a portion of netizens who had participated in online commenting as the research population.Secondly, we constructed a sampling frame for the population based on daily internet usage duration.

Subsequently, we conducted stratified multistage sampling within the sampling frame at a 95% confidence interval and 3% sampling error. A sample of 200 netizens was selected. In cases of refusal to participate, the next eligible individual within the same stratum was sequentially approached as a replacement.

The research subjects corresponding to this hypothesis constitute the netizen population, from which we conducted random sampling. Data collection, collation, and analysis for this survey were completed on 19 September 2025. The questionnaire primarily comprised open-ended and closed-ended questions, covering: (1) Basic information verification: including age and gender. (2) The dimension-reduction statement section for independent variable X. (3) The dimension-reduction statements for dependent variable Y. This questionnaire comprised 17 items: 5 single-choice questions, 1 multiple-choice question, 10 matrix questions, and 1 fill-in-the-blank question. It was administered through a blended online-offline approach, utilising WeChat Moments, QQ Space, the WQStar sample database, and offline distribution.

3.2.3 Sample Characteristics

This questionnaire survey collected a total of 207 responses, with a balanced gender distribution of 51.21% male and 48.79% female. Regarding age distribution, the majority of the sample (54.59%) were aged 18–25.

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Regarding educational attainment, the majority held undergraduate qualifications (60.39%). Among the samples, 158 respondents (76.33%) typically engaged with commentary and reposting of major social opinion events via Weibo. Additionally, 153 respondents (73.91%) prioritised browsing comments on such events by "directly viewing trending comments".

4 Research Findings and Discussion Points

4.1 Framework Construction of Viral Comments: Shifting from Diverse to Coherent Perspectives

In this study, content analysis was employed to examine primary comments on the Fat Cat incident, comparing dimensions such as dominant comment frameworks, other pluralistic frameworks, and irrelevant frameworks. A higher proportion of dominant comment frameworks indicates greater thematic concentration within the comment section.

The findings reveal that prior to the divine comment's publication, topic frameworks sharing identical keywords, attribution targets, or conclusions accounted for 8.5% of comments. This proportion surged to 48% post-publication. Conversely, other frameworks presenting differing perspectives, attribution targets, or conclusions constituted 71.5% before the divine comment but declined to 41.8% afterwards, falling below the dominance of the divine comment framework. Moreover, the proportion of irrelevant comment frameworks unrelated to the event's core topic decreased from 20% to 10.2%.

This primarily stems from the perspective of chaos theory: when media first report on public opinion events, the trajectory of the discourse agenda is often unpredictable. Comment sections exhibit a chaotic state of competing viewpoints, with multiple frameworks coexisting. Consequently, as the comment with the highest number of likes, the 'divine comment' plays a crucial guiding role within the comment section. The findings reveal that following the emergence of divine comments, the dominance of divine comment frameworks rose from 8.5% to 48%, while the share of other diverse frameworks declined from 71.5% to 41.8%. This shift indicates a convergence in the comment section's thematic frameworks and a reduction in diversity. This occurs because divine comments provide direction for netizens navigating chaotic information, leading them to base their own comments on the thematic frameworks established by divine comments.

From a narrative perspective, divine comments possess a high degree of conciseness and offer unique interpretative angles. They effectively capture the attention of netizens following the event, generating a Matthew effect through substantial audience engagement and likes, thereby creating a spiral of opinion conformity. For instance, in this study, the proportion of diverse frameworks peaked before the release of the standout comment. Following its publication and subsequent mass endorsement, the proportion of diverse frameworks gradually fell below that of the framework dominated by the standout comment. This demonstrates how standout comments steer the direction of commentary, thereby shaping the opinion environment within the comment section.

This demonstrates that during major social opinion events, viral comments possess formidable agenda-setting capabilities. By offering a more compelling and transmissible cognitive template, they prompt audiences

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to actively adopt their thematic framework, thereby shaping their interpretative structures. This process embodies the provision and selection of frames within audience agenda-setting theory. Such concentrated framing compresses the space for diverse viewpoints, challenging the plurality of public discourse and potentially leading to its polarization.

4.2 Motivations for Forwarding and Commenting: Public Opinion Heat as the Driving Force for Netizens

Using correlation analysis to examine the relationship between public opinion intensity and netizens' desire to comment and repost, the Pearson correlation coefficient was employed to measure the strength of association. A significant correlation was found, with a coefficient of 0.154. Regression analysis further revealed a significant linear relationship between the independent and dependent variables, with a regression coefficient of 0.315 and a significance level of 0.000. Research hypothesis H1 is supported: "The higher the public opinion heat, the greater the desire among netizens to comment and share."

This primarily stems from major social public opinion events often involving public interests and being closely related to the public. Consequently, such events command exceptionally high public attention. During the initial stages when information is unclear, netizens inevitably resort to commenting and sharing to satisfy their quest for truth. Higher public opinion heat intensifies netizens' strong emotions, leading to an urgent need for emotional release and seeking emotional resonance. By participating through comments and shares, netizens can express their views while alleviating uncertainty and seeking group belonging. From the perspective of opinion environment theory, heightened public sentiment events generate greater societal pressure. Confronted with this pressure, those aligning with mainstream views actively comment to seek belonging, while dissenters may opt for silence. Within this opinion environment, supporters of mainstream views exhibit stronger motivations to comment and share.

Consequently, heightened public sentiment correlates with increased commentary and sharing volumes. The 2022 Tangshan barbecue restaurant assault incident exemplifies this pattern: involving social justice and fairness, it generated extraordinary public fervour, with each new development triggering viral online reactions. While the incident remained unresolved, netizens, driven by sympathy for the victims and condemnation of the assailants, engaged in extensive online commenting and sharing to seek emotional resonance. This amplified the incident's influence. Under the collective expression of sentiment, the heightened public opinion intensity reinforced public sentiment towards a specific perspective, thereby exerting a profound impact on the discourse surrounding the incident.

4.3 Reasons for Reliance on Popular Comments: Excessive Comment Volume is Key

Using correlation analysis to investigate the relationship between the number of comments and netizens' tendency to adopt the cognitive approach of reading popular comments to process information, the Pearson correlation coefficient was employed to indicate the strength of the relationship. A significant correlation was found between the two variables, with a correlation coefficient of 0.276. Subsequently, regression analysis was conducted. The data revealed a significant linear relationship between the independent and dependent variables, with a regression coefficient of 0.266 and a significance level of 0.000. Research hypothesis H2 is

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supported: “ The greater the volume of comments, the more netizens tend to adopt the cognitive approach of reading popular comments to process information.”

This primarily stems from the abundance of comments during public opinion events, where netizens cannot read every viewpoint individually. Consequently, they require efficient cognitive strategies to grasp the direction of public sentiment and core arguments. As the comments receiving the highest number of likes, comments, and shares, popular comments typically represent the views most netizens deem correct, embodying the mainstream perspective on an event. Thus, reading popular comments allows netizens to swiftly perceive the opinion landscape within the comment section and discern prevailing sentiments.

This information processing method constitutes an active choice made by netizens when confronted with overwhelming comment volumes. When comment quantities exceed what can be read individually, scrutinising each post consumes excessive time and energy. “Directly viewing top comments” achieves information acquisition at minimal cost. Trending comments command high interaction rates, where this volume of engagement signals consensus - the more netizens endorse a viewpoint, the more it is perceived as mainstream. This commentary ecosystem further fuels netizens’ pursuit of trending comments, creating a Matthew effect that marginalises diverse perspectives outside the trending sphere.

This tendency to prioritise trending comments risks confining netizens’ understanding of events within the framework constructed by these comments. Yet it is precisely this tendency that allows standout comments to exert their framing influence. Take the Weibo comment section of the Fat Cat incident as an example. With 125 000 comments beneath the event’s trending post, it was virtually impossible for netizens to peruse each one individually. Directly reading the top comments thus became the most efficient method of information processing. Subsequent netizens browsing the comments were first drawn to the pinned top comments, perceiving them as representing the majority view and thereby rapidly forming a basic judgement on the incident.

4.4 From Recognition to Adoption: The Influence of Divine Comments on Audience Framework Construction

Using correlation analysis to examine the relationship between netizens’ level of agreement with standout comments and their tendency to adopt a discussion framework dominated by such comments, the strength of this relationship was measured using Pearson's correlation coefficient. A significant correlation was found, with a coefficient of 0.660. Subsequent regression analysis revealed a significant linear relationship between the independent and dependent variables, with a regression coefficient of 1.115 and a significance level of 0.000. Research hypothesis H3 is thus supported: “The higher the level of agreement with 'divine comments’ among netizens, the more their framing of topic discussions tends towards the framework dominated by ‘divine comments’.”

This is primarily because the thematic frameworks constructed by viral comments evoke emotional resonance among audiences. Netizens’ identification with these viral comments prompts them to adopt the thematic frameworks provided by such comments as their own cognitive frameworks.

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From the perspective of audience-centred framing theory, netizens do not decode information entirely according to the frameworks provided by media outlets upon receiving it. Instead, they construct their own frameworks to interpret the information. During this framework-building process, netizens discover that divine comments align with their own needs, leading to a high degree of identification with them. When netizens cognitively and emotionally identify with divine comments, they actively adopt the issue framework presented by these comments, thereby forming a stable audience framework. This framework becomes a cognitive template for netizens; in subsequent understanding, analysis, and discussion of events, they unconsciously narrate within the framework established by divine comments.

From the perspective of opinion environment theory, the substantial number of likes garnered by divine comments constitutes the opinion environment within the comment section. When netizens strongly identify with divine comments, it signifies that the perceived opinion environment aligns with their personal views. This congruence with mainstream perspectives enhances their sense of security in expression, prompting them to more actively employ the divine comment's thematic framework when posting comments, thereby further cementing the framework's dominant position. Even those holding dissenting views may choose silence under the pressure of the opinion environment.

For instance, in a popular thread concerning the murder of a junior high school student in Handan, Hebei, a viral comment read: "They made mistakes, yet still have chances to rectify them; I made no wrongdoing, yet must rest here forever." Employing contrastive rhetoric and first-person narration, this comment elicited widespread empathy and endorsement, garnering 148 000 likes. This 'divine comment' constructed a framework that redirected netizens' condemnation of the perpetrators towards discussions on the protection of minors. Countless netizens subsequently ceased merely condemning the perpetrators, instead adopting the framework of the divine comment to emphasise the criminal responsibility of minors.

Thus, driven by cognitive efficiency and emotional resonance, netizens actively adopted the comment's thematic framework. This framework, having gained widespread acceptance, formed a potent opinion environment within the comment section, thereby narrowing the scope for subsequent debate.

5 Conclusion and Reflection

This study employs content analysis and audience surveys to theoretically examine the phenomenon of topic framework construction in viral online comments ("divine comments") during major social opinion events. It seeks to address how such comments shape comment opinion environments and steer public discourse within these events. Findings reveal that comment frameworks converge around viral comments upon their emergence; heightened public sentiment fuels netizens' desire to comment and share; overwhelming comment volumes prompt readers to adopt a 'hot comment-only' cognitive approach; Netizens' identification with viral comments prompts them to align their discussion frameworks with the dominant viral comment structure. This occurs primarily because viral comments provide cognitive templates for netizens navigating chaotic information, while the front-ranking mechanism reinforces the comment section's opinion environment. Driven by intrinsic needs for cognitive efficiency and emotional resonance, netizens actively adopt the interpretative frameworks offered by viral comments.

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This study highlights the audience framework-building effect of viral comments during public opinion events, reflecting the evolution of online comment opinion environments from pluralistic competition towards framework concentration. Furthermore, it offers a fresh analytical perspective for public opinion guidance within China's contemporary online media landscape. Platforms should therefore prioritise the expression of diverse viewpoints within their algorithmic mechanisms to foster a healthy online ecosystem.

It is worth noting, however, that this study also identifies negative consequences arising from the issue-framework concentration guided by viral comments, including diminished diversity of opinion and polarization of discourse. This may lead to uncontrolled public opinion and undermine media credibility, necessitating vigilance and reflection.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations due to factors such as the singularity of the case selection, limited sample size, subjective nature of the research methodology, and specific analytical perspectives. Future research in the field of journalism and communication may need to focus more on the topic-framing capabilities of viral comments within public opinion events and the phenomenon of comment section opinion environments, as well as expand research and practice on the public opinion guidance effects of viral comments.

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