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## Coping Strategies for Dual Valence of Victimized Brands in Social Media Environments: A Group Polarization Theory Perspective

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### Abstract

Grounded in group polarization theory, this study investigates the dual-valence coping strategies of victimized brands in social media environments. Following the logical framework of group polarization theory—information persuasion strategy, group emotional resonance, and group polarization outcomes—from the perspective of victimized brands, we propose to examine the impact of corporate pathos expression strategies on bystander consumers' polarized support; from the perspective of bystander consumers, we propose to investigate the effect of corporate victim-transfer appeal strategies on their polarized support; and from the perspective of individual infringing consumers, we propose to explore how corporate activation of victim-meaning strategies can mitigate bystander consumers' polarized opposition arising from the punishment of infringing consumers.

### Full Text

### Preamble

### Double Valence Coping Strategies for Damaged Brands in Social Media Environments: A Group Polarization Theory Perspective

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### Abstract

Grounded in group polarization theory, this study examines coping strategies for brands damaged in social media environments. Following the theoretical

logic of group polarization—information persuasion strategy → group emotional resonance → group polarization outcomes—we investigate three key questions from distinct perspectives: From the damaged brand’s viewpoint, how can firms employ sadness expression strategies to influence bystander consumer group polarization support? From the bystander consumer perspective, how can firms utilize victim transfer appeal strategies to garner group polarization support? And from the infringing consumer perspective, how can firms activate victim meaning strategies to neutralize bystander consumer group polarization opposition triggered by punishing infringing consumers?

**Keywords:** social media, group polarization, sadness expression, victim transfer appeal, victim meaning

**Classification Number:** B849: F713.55

## 1. Problem Statement

In today’s social media environment, it has become an undeniable reality and inevitable trend that a single consumer can not only create various “voices/actions” but also make millions “hear/see” them. In recent years, individual consumers’ “voices/actions” that intentionally or unintentionally harm brands have been increasing, and with social media’s amplification, they easily trigger emotional contagion and resonance among consumers, forming unconscious psychological groups that generate overwhelming group polarization forces. Group polarization refers to the social phenomenon where individuals with similar viewpoints, after group discussion and mutual influence, become more entrenched and extreme in their original positions—that is, evaluative shifts between individual and group conditions (Myers & Lamm, 1976)—a phenomenon that occurs more readily in social media environments. If companies ignore this, they can only silently endure the pain of group polarization damage; yet if they respond inappropriately, they risk triggering negative group polarization outcomes among bystander consumers. For instance, in May 2021, Didi was slandered by a short-video blogger; in July 2021, the Mixue Ice City brand was vilified; and after a consumer harmed the Luzhou Laojiao brand, the company’s successful legal action in August 2021 plunged it into crisis. So how should companies, bearing the stereotype of the “strong,” respond when harmed by individual consumers with the “weak” stereotype, to either resolve the crisis or turn it into an opportunity?

This paper seeks answers from existing literature, only to find that research on mutual harm and coping between enterprises (strong stereotype) and individual consumers (weak stereotype) concentrates in three areas: corporate harm to consumers and responses (Wang Xiaoyu & Chao Gangling, 2009; Robson & Farquhar, 2021; Singh et al., 2020), consumer rights protection after corporate harm (Li Zonghui, 2021; Yang Ke & Li Ying, 2020; Larsen & Lawson, 2013), and consumer behavior that harms enterprises (Zeng Fue et al., 2011; Fombelle et al., 2020; Gong & Wang, 2022). Notably, few scholars have examined corporate coping strategies after consumer brand harm in social media contexts

—the “strong” party’ s response after being harmed by the “weak.” Drawing from interpersonal harm literature, people’ s stereotypes typically cast the perpetrator as strong and the victim as weak; otherwise, harm perception cannot form (Schein & Gray, 2018). Consequently, academia generally believes the weak lack perpetrator agency characteristics—the capacity to harm—while the strong lack victim agency characteristics—vulnerability/susceptibility to harm (Haslam, 2016; Schein & Gray, 2016). From this, we can infer that when individual consumers harm enterprises, bystanders rarely perceive the enterprise as the victim, or fail to recognize the severity of the harm. In such cases, if companies legally punish infringing consumers to protect their rights, bystander consumers easily perceive this as harming the infringing consumers, ultimately causing a reversal of victim and perpetrator identities between the damaged brand and the infringing consumer.

So what are the coping strategies for damaged brands through marketing communication rather than legal means? Group polarization theory provides excellent reference and guidance. First, the positive/negative valence of group polarization outcomes (hereinafter “double valence” ) can serve as the overall goal of coping strategies: how should the “strong” stereotyped damaged brand respond in social media environments to obtain/eliminate bystander consumer group polarization support/opposition? Second, the theoretical logic of group polarization—information persuasion strategy → group emotional resonance → group polarization outcomes (Burnstein, 1982)—offers strong support and explanation for achieving this goal. Specifically, the persuasive effect of argument-laden information plays a primary role in explaining the mechanisms of group polarization’ s double valence (Isenberg, 1986), as it easily triggers bystander emotional resonance and mobilization during harm incidents, forming group polarization outcomes (Burnstein, 1982).

Argument-laden information persuasion effect refers to the extent to which an individual’ s evaluation during group polarization is influenced by information persuasion strategies (perspective, efficacy, and novelty)—that is, from whose perspective (perspective), what is said (efficacy), and how it is said (novelty). Among these, perspective constitutes the starting point of information persuasion strategies and research. Therefore, combining marketing practice, this paper identifies information persuasion strategies from three perspectives in harm incidents—the damaged brand, bystander consumers, and infringing consumers—to address three key scientific questions: (1) Before legal rights protection, how can “strong” stereotyped enterprises, from the damaged brand perspective, express themselves as victims through information persuasion strategies to obtain bystander consumer group polarization support? (2) Before legal rights protection, how can “strong” stereotyped enterprises, from the bystander consumer perspective, form a united front with bystander consumers through information persuasion strategies to gain their group polarization support? (3) After legal rights protection, how can “strong” stereotyped enterprises, from the infringing consumer perspective, eliminate bystander consumer group polarization opposition triggered by punishing infringing consumers through information

persuasion strategies?

## 2. Literature Review

Harm and coping between enterprises and consumers has always been a key research focus in academia and industry. Literature review reveals that previous research concentrates in three areas: corporate harm to consumers and responses, consumer rights protection after corporate harm, and consumer behavior that harms enterprises, with scant attention to corporate responses after consumer brand harm in social media contexts—a scenario where the roles and power dynamics between perpetrator and victim are reversed (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]).

### 2.1.1 Corporate Harm to Consumers and Responses

This literature primarily comprises empirical quantitative studies, which can be categorized into two aspects. First, product quality harm and responses can be divided into general responses without crisis context and specific responses considering crisis context. The former follows a logic from confrontation/denial to proactive compensation (Wang Xiaoyu & Chao Gangling, 2009): corporate coping strategies include remaining silent, denial, excuse, and admission, with admission encompassing apology, forced recall, voluntary recall, and extraordinary effort (Liu et al., 2016, 2017; Bala et al., 2017). The latter mainly examines crisis types or contexts: for defensible product harm crises, excuse is optimal; for indefensible crises, reconciliation is optimal (Fang Zheng et al., 2010); for functional crises, corporate self-disclosure of crisis information effectively improves recovery, though this strategy shows limited effect for low-reputation brands facing moral crises (Tao Hong & Wei Haiying, 2016); when a brand's product crisis creates spillover effects in a category, competitor proactive denial yields more positive consumer attitudes (Baghi & Gabrielli, 2021).

Second, service failure recovery can be divided into tangible and intangible remedies. Tangible remedies involve compensation, gifts, discounts, free items, refunds, and prosocial compensation (Thomassen et al., 2020), while intangible remedies include apology, explanation, recovery speed, concern, and courtesy at the psychological level (Tmt et al., 2021). These strategies often require combined use. With network development, scholars have explored online service recovery forms, noting that optimal recovery requires combined use of compensation, rapid response, and apology (Du Jiangang & Fan Xiucheng, 2007; Sharifi & Aghazadeh, 2016). In group service failure contexts, public mode works better for economic compensation, while private mode excels for social compensation (Zhou et al., 2013). Additionally, scholars have proposed service recovery strategies from emotional and sensory perspectives. For instance, self-deprecating humor positively affects customers, though such humor must be perceived as particularly funny (Kobel & Groeppel-Klein, 2021).

### 2.1.2 Consumer Rights Protection After Corporate Harm

This literature primarily comprises theoretical and qualitative studies, which can be summarized in three aspects. First, consumer rights awareness and costs. Rights protection forms include rational rights protection and emotional rights protection. The former involves consumers safeguarding legitimate interests through legal channels or policy procedures (Guan Bing, 2013). This process incurs high rights protection costs due to three main factors: complex procedures and time consumption, difficulty in evidence collection, and large financial investment with small returns (Ying Feihu, 2004). The latter involves consumers using emotional expression for rights protection, which has become the primary means for the weak to protect their rights (Guan Bing, 2013). As the weak, consumers can leverage network publicity and convenience to expose issues online, attracting government attention and accelerating the rights protection process. Although scholars propose that sad narratives, weapons of the weak, and justice claims can serve as online rights protection methods, they also note that online rights protection exhibits pan-moralization tendencies, where consumers attempt to use moral emotions to influence legal trials, affecting the balance between human ethics and rule of law (Liu Dehai & Wang Weiguo, 2012).

Second, platform institutional design. With internet development, third-party platforms have become crucial bridges connecting consumers and enterprises. How to better assist consumer rights protection when enterprises cause harm is an urgent question for platforms. Research conclusions mainly include: platform operators should use law as a constraint, strictly control business entry thresholds, review enterprise qualifications, operational status, supply channels, source authenticity, and credit situations, conduct real-name registration, and regularly audit business information changes to exclude bad merchants from the source. Platforms should strengthen supervision to create a fair network environment; for example, platform supervision can reduce harm from merchant-induced reviews and promote fair competition (Wang Xuhui et al., 2020). Platforms should establish unified complaint and dispute resolution mechanisms, such as creating a national unified online consumer complaint and evidence center to centrally handle complaints, effectively helping consumers collect evidence and protect their rights (Li Ying & Yang Ke, 2016).

Third, legal system improvement. The government should promote rights protection knowledge dissemination to make it widely known, optimize consumer rights protection procedures, and establish matching procedures based on difficulty and complexity to enable rapid, effective rights protection after legitimate rights are damaged (Liu Changyu et al., 2019). Laws and regulations should be improved, including systems for mental damages and punitive compensation. Consumer rights protection motivation stems from two aspects: psychological and material. Psychologically, laws should improve mental damages compensation systems. For consumers, expanding the scope of mental damages compensation, especially in consumption fields, is necessary to improve rights protection

effectiveness and reduce costs. Materially, laws should continuously standardize punitive compensation systems, with existing laws clearly specifying compensation amounts (Gao Li, 2020).

### 2.1.3 Consumer Behavior That Harms Enterprises

This literature can be summarized in two aspects: unethical behavior and deviant behavior. Though expressed differently, they share substantial similarities. First, consumer unethical behavior refers to improper behavior during product/service acquisition, use, or disposal (Grove et al., 2012). For enterprises, this behavior greatly increases transaction costs and damages interests. Four offline behaviors include: actively profiting from illegal acts, passively profiting acts, actively profiting from problematic acts, and no-harm acts. Actively profiting from illegal acts refers to consumer-initiated acts considered illegal by most consumers, such as shoplifting (Cox et al., 1990) and tax evasion (Hanno & Violette, 1996). Passively profiting acts involve consumers passively benefiting while harming others, such as remaining silent when undercharged. Actively profiting from problematic acts are consumer-initiated acts considered problematic (though not illegal) by most consumers, such as arbitrary returns (Shang et al., 2017). No-harm acts have minimal negative impact, such as trying on items for extended periods without purchase. Four online behaviors include: order-disrupting acts, malicious self-interest acts, restrained harm acts, and copyright infringement acts (Zeng Fue et al., 2011). Order-disrupting acts include consumers venting frustrations through online harassment, providing false addresses to cash-on-delivery merchants, malicious voting in online surveys, and giving negative reviews. Malicious self-interest acts sacrifice enterprise interests to protect one's own. Restrained harm acts involve consumers seeking profit subjectively but causing restrained harm to enterprises. Copyright infringement mainly refers to illegal and irrational use and distribution of copyrighted products (Wagner & Sanders, 2001).

Second, deviant behavior refers to acts that infringe upon enterprise, employee, or other consumer resources, safety, and image in online or offline environments (Fullerton & Punj, 2004). These acts cause financial or other resource losses, such as damaging service facilities or brand image. Typical examples include shoplifting (Tonglet, 2002) and intentional vandalism (Cialdini et al., 2006). Moreover, evolving retail environments and technologies have spawned new deviant behaviors. For instance, self-checkout 普及 enables consumers to avoid scanning all items or checkout expensive items as cheaper ones (Taylor, 2016). Beyond traditional retail channels, consumers still exhibit deviant behaviors harming enterprises in social media environments. For example, piracy under digital media technology poses a huge problem for numerous digital information service providers (Sinha & Mandel, 2008). Additionally, many consumers realize they can damage corporate reputations by posting negative reviews or participating in online communities (Dolan et al., 2015). Social media provides great convenience for consumers to exchange information and coordinate actions, enabling

them to unite and harm enterprises (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Consequently, online anti-corporate or anti-brand communities have mushroomed (Kuo & Hou, 2017), characterized by brand hatred and intense negative emotions (Zarantonello et al., 2016), severely damaging consumer-enterprise relationships and weakening brand strength, thereby affecting corporate profits (Khr et al., 2016).

## 2.2 Literature Evaluation Analysis

First, regarding research questions, few scholars have examined corporate coping strategies after consumer brand harm in social media contexts—the “strong” party’s response after being harmed by the “weak.” Previous research mainly addressed three aspects: corporate harm to consumers and responses (strong harming weak, then strong compensating), consumer rights protection after corporate harm (strong harming weak, then weak protecting rights), and consumer behavior that harms enterprises (weak harming strong, focusing on behavior types). This creates significant differences in coping logic compared to this study. This new research question fills a gap in brand crisis response theory.

Second, from a theoretical perspective, few scholars have used group polarization as the effectiveness test criterion and explanatory mechanism for damaged brand coping strategies. Previous literature mostly measured crisis response effectiveness at the individual level, whereas this study measures individual-group condition sequential items as the basis for group polarization. Simultaneously, group polarization theory’s logic—information persuasion strategy → group emotional resonance → group polarization outcomes—effectively explains this paper’s three core research questions, providing strong theoretical support for social media environment damaged brand coping strategies and expanding brand crisis response theory construction and explanation.

Finally, regarding coping approaches, few scholars have examined information persuasion strategies from three perspectives, starting from inward motivation and targeting group polarization double valence outcomes. Previous corporate harm to consumer research focused outward, aiming to compensate harmed consumers; this study focuses inward, aiming to protect the damaged brand. Moreover, previous corporate crisis response research mostly emphasized eliminating negative impacts from perpetrator (enterprise)-victim (consumer) bilateral perspectives. This study additionally examines how to obtain positive polarization and seeks solutions from bystander consumer perspectives, enriching brand crisis response strategies.

## 2.3 Group Polarization and Research Question Fit

Mutual harm between enterprises and consumers in social media environments easily triggers group polarization. This results from network anonymity, freedom, diversity, and extensiveness, combined with algorithm-driven information recommendation on major platforms. Additionally, power imbalance between enterprises and infringing consumers contributes. Typically, compared

to balanced power dynamics, imbalance more easily triggers group polarization (Schein & Gray, 2016).

This study's overall research question: In social media environments, how should "strong" stereotyped damaged brands respond to obtain/eliminate bystander consumer group polarization support/opposition? Based on group polarization theory's logic—information persuasion strategy → group emotional resonance → group polarization outcomes—this paper addresses this question.

Regarding information persuasion strategy, the information persuasion effect serves as this study's independent variable coping strategy, referring to the extent an individual's evaluation during group polarization is influenced by information persuasion perspective, efficacy, and novelty (Vinokur & Burnstein, 1978). Perspective mainly reflects the categorical relationship between evaluator and evaluated object, manifested in this paper as from whose perspective (e.g., damaged brand perspective). Efficacy focuses on whether information content is persuasive (e.g., activating victim meaning). Novelty focuses on whether information expression methods (e.g., anthropomorphism or cuteness) are refreshing. These three aspects appear as independent variables in the research model and are reflected in logical derivation.

Regarding group emotional resonance, emotional resonance refers to the tendency to experience identical or similar emotional reactions when stimulated by others' emotional expressions (Xie & Bagozzi, 2019), primarily serving as a mediating variable. Research shows that positive/negative group emotional resonance forms positive/negative group polarization, with sympathy/anger in positive/negative moral emotions most likely to trigger positive/negative group polarization (Grappi et al., 2013). In infringing consumer brand harm incidents, how can enterprises use information persuasion strategies to obtain/eliminate bystander consumer group sympathy/anger resonance, thereby obtaining/eliminating their group polarization support/opposition?

Regarding group polarization outcomes, this paper's double valence (positive/negative) outcomes correspond to key practical problems. Compared to previous research, group polarization coping involves greater risk and difficulty but better reflects real-world social media environment coping effectiveness evaluation. While previous crisis response effectiveness evaluations were basically individual-level, this paper measures evaluation shifts or differences under individual-group conditions as coping effectiveness evaluation, representing both a practical problem solution and an important theoretical innovation.

### 3. Research Framework

This paper addresses the overarching question: "In social media environments, how should 'strong' stereotyped damaged brands respond to obtain/eliminate bystander consumer group polarization support/opposition?" by examining brand double valence coping strategies. Divided by corporate legal rights protection

time nodes, we propose research frameworks from three perspectives: damaged brand, bystander consumer, and infringing consumer.

### 3.1 Study 1: Pre-Legal Action—Expressing from the Damaged Brand Perspective

In social media environments, after infringing consumers harm a brand, how should “strong” stereotyped enterprises express themselves as victims to obtain bystander consumer group polarization support? This is an important and novel topic. Previous research rarely addressed coping strategies for the “strong” after “weak” harm. In harm literature, people typically understand perpetrators/victims as strong/weak based on perpetrator/victim agency effects (Schein & Gray, 2018). Only then can harm perception form, but this paper reverses this: perpetrator/victim are consumers/enterprises with weak/strong stereotypes. So how should “strong” stereotyped enterprises express themselves as victims? This is worth studying for mobilizing bystander consumer group emotions and obtaining group sympathy resonance and polarization support.

Through extensive literature review and marketing practice material collection, this paper finds that “strong” stereotyped enterprises can respond from three aspects: sadness, justice, and playfulness. Scholars have summarized these three points through observation and theoretical analysis in harm literature and online group incident research (Yang Guobin, 2009), but no marketing scholars have applied them to consumer brand harm contexts or conducted empirical research. Therefore, when damaged brands use sadness, justice, and playfulness to express themselves as victims, what cognitive and emotional reactions will they respectively trigger in bystander consumers, and will they ultimately cause polarization evaluations? These require testing. Below, we derive research propositions using damaged brand sadness expression (anthropomorphized vs. non-anthropomorphized) impact on brand group polarization support as an example.

Sadness expression refers to enterprises using information persuasion strategies to make bystander consumers feel the brand has been harmed by infringing consumers, thereby evoking sympathy (Sinaceur et al., 2015). After infringing consumers harm a brand, how should enterprises adopt sadness expression to show they are victims, and what are the boundary conditions for effective anthropomorphized expression strategies? First, compared to non-anthropomorphized expression, anthropomorphized sadness expression generates more bystander consumer group polarization toward the brand. While both share the same information efficacy (sadness expression), they differ in expression method (anthropomorphized vs. non-anthropomorphized), with anthropomorphized expression being more novel. Research shows information novelty drives polarization evaluation (Vinokur & Burnstein, 1978).

Second, when brands are harmed, if they use non-anthropomorphized sadness expression—presenting harm through corporate image and tone—bystander

consumers, perceiving enterprises as strong and individual consumers as weak (like a three- or four-year-old punching an adult), cannot change their perception of brand vulnerability. However, if anthropomorphized images and expressions demonstrate victim status, the situation differs. Compared to non-anthropomorphized expression, anthropomorphization makes bystander consumers perceive brand human characteristics. Bystanders are then drawn into interpersonal contexts, believing a human-like object has been harmed, more easily establishing interpersonal emotional connections with the anthropomorphized brand and perceiving brand vulnerability (Hellen & Saaksjarvi, 2013). This vulnerability increases their perception of brand susceptibility to harm. On social media, this emotion spreads contagiously, generating group empathy resonance and ultimately group polarization outcomes.

Finally, this paper introduces a new moderating variable: brand digital avatar (Miao et al., 2021), referring to computer- or human-controlled virtual digital representatives with anthropomorphized appearance and real-time interaction capabilities (e.g., Taobao's Ali Xiaomi, JD.com's JIMI, Didi's Xiao Di). It includes two dimensions: form realism and behavioral realism. Form realism refers to the visual, anthropomorphized appearance's proximity to real human images, manifested in spatial dimensions, dynamics, and anthropomorphic features. Behavioral realism refers to the avatar's behavioral performance proximity to real human behavior in meeting online experience needs, manifested in communication methods (text vs. voice), response speed, and socialization.

Based on this, we infer: when bystander consumers' prior brand digital avatar perception is low, the group polarization support effect of anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized) sadness expression will be weakened or even reversed, as consumers perceive this as too contrary to previous style and counterproductive (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). Conversely, when brand digital avatar perception is high, the effect will be strengthened, as this represents consistent brand style (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). Brand digital avatar perception can be high/low on a single dimension or both dimensions simultaneously. Note that brand polarization support measurement uses within-group individual-group condition sequential testing or between-group evaluation score proportion differences in polarization ranges. In summary, following group polarization theory's logic—information persuasion strategy → group emotional resonance → group polarization outcomes—Study 1 proposes:

**Proposition 1:** In social media environments, after infringing consumers harm a brand, enterprises using anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized) sadness expression better enables bystander consumers to generate group polarization support for the brand.

**Proposition 2:** Brand vulnerability and group empathy resonance sequentially mediate Proposition 1.

**Proposition 3:** Under high/low bystander consumer brand digital avatar perception, Proposition 1's main effect will be strengthened/weakened or even

reversed.

### 3.2 Study 2: Pre-Legal Action—Uniting from the Bystander Consumer Perspective

In social media environments, after infringing consumers harm a brand, bystander consumers often judge right and wrong in harm incidents. Beyond harm-related information cues, social identity categorization plays an important role (Mackie, 1986). From a social identity perspective, infringing consumers and bystander consumers share consumer identity, belonging to the same group (buyers or insiders), while enterprises hold an opposing role, not belonging to the same group (sellers or outsiders) (Cheng et al., 2006). Due to in-group bias, plus the previously mentioned strong/weak stereotypes of enterprises/consumers, bystander consumers easily favor infringing consumers. So how can damaged enterprises unite with bystander consumers to form a united front?

The answer lies in changing bystander consumers' identity perception through information persuasion and triggering group hatred resonance toward infringing consumers. Through literature review, this paper finds that during harm narratives, damaged enterprises can use victim transfer appeal (Ng et al., 2016) to describe harm to bystander consumers (e.g., serious deception or product experience harm), making bystander consumers feel they have transformed from observers to victims, triggering group hatred resonance toward infringing consumers, thereby supporting the victimized enterprise. Alternatively, through perpetrator transfer appeal (Warner & Branscombe, 2011), bystander consumers can be described as perpetrators like infringing consumers, making them feel they have transformed from observers to perpetrators, generating guilt or loss of justice, and abandoning opposition or negative evaluations toward the "strong" stereotyped enterprise. Therefore, both victim/perpetrator transfer appeals can yield favorable outcomes for damaged brands, depending on specific context design, stimuli, and testing. Below, we derive research propositions using victim transfer appeal (yes vs. no) impact on brand group polarization support as an example.

In social media environments, after infringing consumers harm a brand, if enterprises make victim narrative appeals, they cannot evoke bystander consumer sympathy, as enterprises bear the strong stereotype and are perceived as not easily harmed. If enterprises can deploy victim transfer appeal (Ng et al., 2016)—using information persuasion strategies to describe bystander consumers as victims, making them perceive harm and transforming their identity from bystander to victim—then relative to the damaged brand, bystander consumers transform from outsiders to insiders, while relative to infringing consumers, they transform from insiders to outsiders (Cheng et al., 2006). This fundamentally changes bystander consumers' identity category 归属, thereby altering their right/wrong evaluations of both parties.

Therefore, compared to no victim transfer appeal, damaged brand victim transfer appeal makes bystander consumers develop hatred toward infringing consumers (disgust, contempt, and anger; Fetscherin, 2019), which spreads contagiously on social media, generating group hatred resonance and ultimately group polarization support for the damaged brand. This results from both information persuasion efficacy and novelty. Efficacy lies in how to describe bystander consumers as victims, while novelty lies in the contrast between victim transfer appeal (yes vs. no) information types. For example, smoking harming smokers' health represents information persuasion efficacy, while smoking harming nearby people' s health represents information novelty. Research shows both information efficacy and novelty drive group polarization evaluation outcomes, with novelty having greater effect than efficacy (Myers & Lamm, 1976). This example also demonstrates victim transfer appeal expression and objective facts, similar to assimilation effect information cue presentation (Ng et al., 2016), implying shared loss.

However, not all bystander consumers will perceive identity transformation upon seeing victim transfer appeal. This depends on bystander consumer self-brand overlap. Self-brand overlap refers to the extension of consumers' individual psychological selves onto brands; greater extension yields higher overlap (Newman & Brucks, 2018). Higher bystander consumer self-brand overlap facilitates victim transfer appeal, as higher overlap makes consumers more likely to treat brands as themselves, triggering identity transformation perception. The opposite holds true. This moderating effect can only occur in social media environments, as without them, group polarization evaluation outcomes cannot form. Additionally, high/low bystander consumer self-brand overlap resembles or applies to brand fans/non-fans, better enabling enterprises to track and respond using big data. Ultimately, group polarization support for the brand forms. In summary, following group polarization theory' s logic—information persuasion strategy → group emotional resonance → group polarization outcomes—Study 2 proposes:

**Proposition 4:** In social media environments, after infringing consumers harm a brand, enterprise victim transfer appeal (vs. none) enables bystander consumers to generate group polarization support for the brand.

**Proposition 5:** Group hatred resonance toward infringing consumers mediates Proposition 4.

**Proposition 6:** Under high/low self-brand overlap conditions, Proposition 4' s main effect will be strengthened/weakened.

### 3.3 Study 3: Post-Legal Action—Eliminating Opposition from the Infringing Consumer Perspective

In social media environments, after infringing consumers harm a brand, enterprises commonly respond through legal channels to punish infringing consumers. This easily causes role reversal in bystander consumers' minds: enterprises trans-

form from victims to perpetrators, while infringing consumers transform from perpetrators to victims. The result is that in social media environments, this easily triggers bystander consumer group anger resonance and polarization opposition, as illustrated by the Luzhou Laojiao case. Faced with this situation, how can “strong” stereotyped enterprises eliminate bystander consumer group polarization opposition triggered by punishing infringing consumers? How can they guide bystander consumers to view punishing infringing consumers as justified and reasonable? Through extensive harm literature review, below we derive research propositions using activating victim meaning (yes vs. no) impact on brand group polarization evaluation as an example.

When “strong” stereotyped enterprises trigger bystander consumer group anger resonance and polarization opposition by punishing infringing consumers, infringing consumers’ role transforms from perpetrator to victim. If enterprises can guide bystander consumers to discover meaning in infringing consumers’ punishment process, and this meaning-seeking is initiated by bystander consumers online, we expect this information will reduce bystander consumer group anger resonance toward the brand, thereby eliminating group polarization opposition. Academically, this meaning is called victim meaning, referring to positive outcomes people obtain from negative experiences (Bower et al., 2009), such as “hardship is a form of wealth,” with the positive outcome academically expressed as benefit finding. Therefore, after infringing consumers are punished by enterprises, bystander consumers should be guided to activate victim meaning, initiating online benefit finding regarding infringing consumers’ punishment process. For example, after punishment, infringing consumers learn lessons, no longer engage in similar behaviors, and achieve personal growth (Davis et al., 1998). Therefore, we expect activating victim meaning will effectively reduce group anger resonance toward the brand, thereby eliminating group polarization opposition.

Selective exposure theory posits that people prefer contacting information supporting their existing beliefs. When encountering belief-contradicting information, they feel uncomfortable and, to reduce dissonance, prefer receiving belief-consistent information while avoiding belief-violating information (Trilling et al., 2017). Applied to this study, if enterprises can leverage platform algorithms to frequently push benefit-finding information after activating victim meaning to selective exposure-inconsistent bystander consumers, this will continuously challenge or correct their previous brand anger beliefs. With intensified information pushing and rising related comment proportions, they will form new beliefs consistent with victim meaning, replacing previous unconscious emotional conformity (Isenberg, 1986; Thompson et al., 2019). If belief-consistent comments are pushed to bystander consumers, this will continuously strengthen their previous victim meaning-consistent beliefs. Therefore, in the process of activating victim meaning’ s impact on brand group polarization opposition, selective exposure is expected to play a moderating role. In summary, following group polarization theory’ s logic—information persuasion strategy → group emotional resonance → group polarization outcomes—Study 3 proposes:

**Proposition 7:** Activating victim meaning (vs. none) weakens or even eliminates bystander consumer group polarization opposition toward the brand.

**Proposition 8:** Group anger resonance toward the brand significantly mediates Proposition 7.

**Proposition 9:** Under selective exposure consistent/inconsistent conditions, Proposition 7's main effect will be strengthened/weakened.

#### 4. Theoretical Construction

As seen from previous marketing practice examples and theoretical derivation, studying damaged brands' double valence coping strategies in social media environments is urgently needed, as it plays a crucial role in resolving brand threats or crises caused by online group polarization and protecting brand interests. Therefore, unlike previous research, this paper grounds itself in group polarization theory, following its logic—information persuasion strategy → group emotional resonance → group polarization outcomes—to address the overarching question: “In social media environments, how should ‘strong’ stereotyped damaged brands respond to obtain/eliminate bystander consumer group polarization support/opposition?” The theoretical construction is shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper], with main theoretical viewpoints as follows:

**Research Logic:** Information Persuasion Strategy → Group Emotional Resonance → Group Polarization Outcomes

- **Brand Sadness Expression:** (Anthropomorphized & Non-anthropomorphized), Justice/Playfulness Expression...
- **Victim Transfer Appeal:** (Yes & No), Perpetrator Transfer Appeal...
- **Activating Victim Meaning:** (Yes & No)
- **Brand Characteristics:** Brand Digital Avatar, Brand Personification Features...
- **Consumer-Brand Relationship:** Self-Brand Overlap...
- **Consumer Information Preference:** Selective Exposure...
- **Group Emotional Resonance:** Positive primarily through sympathy, Negative primarily through hatred
- **Testing Main Effects**
- **Group Polarization Outcomes:** Obtaining polarization support, Eliminating polarization opposition

First, regarding research questions, this paper proposes a new research direction on how enterprises should respond after consumer brand harm in social media environments, filling gaps in brand crisis response theoretical systems. Previous literature focused on brand (strong) harming consumer (weak) response strategies, while this paper reverses the perspective to study consumer (weak) harming brand (strong) responses. The role and power dynamic reversal between harm subjects and objects creates theoretical value opportunities, with conclusions improving mutual harm and coping theoretical systems between consumers and

brands.

Second, from a theoretical perspective, this paper proposes using group polarization as the effectiveness test criterion and explanatory mechanism for damaged brand coping strategies, expanding brand crisis response theoretical construction and explanation frameworks. Previous literature mostly tested crisis response effectiveness at the individual level, whereas this paper measures individual-group condition sequential items as polarization criteria (Iyer & Yoganarasimhan, 2021). Additionally, group polarization theory' s logic—information persuasion strategy  $\rightarrow$  group emotional resonance  $\rightarrow$  group polarization outcomes—serves as an effective explanatory mechanism for this paper' s three core studies, providing strong theoretical support for social media environment damaged brand double valence coping strategies and enriching mutual harm and coping theoretical systems.

Finally, regarding coping approaches, this paper proposes three-perspective information persuasion effects based on group polarization double valence outcomes and their explanatory mechanisms, enriching brand crisis response strategies. Previous corporate crisis response research mostly emphasized eliminating negative impacts from perpetrator (enterprise)-victim (consumer) bilateral perspectives. This study not only focuses on eliminating negative polarization but also examines obtaining positive polarization support; it seeks solutions not only from perpetrator (infringing consumer)-victim (enterprise) bilateral perspectives but also from bystander consumer perspectives. Moreover, the information persuasion strategies proposed from damaged brand, bystander consumer, and infringing consumer perspectives substantially differ from previous research content, further enriching and improving mutual harm and coping theoretical systems.

This paper provides references and management implications for harm coping among different subjects in social media environments. First, at the enterprise level, before legal rights protection, enterprises can use anthropomorphized sadness expression to appeal to bystander consumer groups, making them perceive vulnerability and mobilizing emotions to punish infringing consumers. They can also use victim transfer appeal to shift brand victim experiences to bystander consumer groups, prompting role transformation from bystander to victim. After legal rights protection, enterprises can activate victim meaning to eliminate bystander consumer group polarization opposition triggered by punishing infringing consumers, such as leveraging opinion leaders to find and publish life gains infringing consumers obtained after punishment. These suggestions not only reduce enterprise harm but also turn crises into opportunities.

Second, at the industry level, this study' s conclusions offer reference and guidance for similar strong-party responses after weak-party harm in government, education, healthcare, and other fields. With social media technology development, “weak” harming “strong” incidents like consumer brand harm occur not only in commerce but also emerge diversely and frequently in government, education, and healthcare, causing great distress for strong-stereotyped organi-

zations. Therefore, the coping strategies proposed—anthropomorphized sadness expression, victim transfer appeal, and activating victim meaning—can guide not only business enterprises but also other fields encountering similar incidents.

Finally, at the societal level, this study's conclusions provide effective solutions for mitigating or eliminating the enormous risks and adverse consequences of group negative polarization in social media environments for society and the nation. Currently, China's online communication exhibits prominent group polarization phenomena, with frequent online group incidents gradually becoming prominent issues affecting social stability. This study's conclusions can provide government and social management departments with effective information persuasion strategies and explanatory mechanisms to guide group public opinion based on online sentiment monitoring, such as using machine learning technologies to push positive, personalized post evaluation information to the public, reasonably avoiding negative effects of online public opinion group polarization.

*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

*Source: ChinaXiv – Machine translation. Verify with original.*