

## Research on the Phenomenon of Public Opinion Polarization on Weibo from the Perspective of Situational Collapse (Postprint)

**Authors:** WangYingQi

**Date:** 2023-07-23T00:00:00+00:00

### Abstract

Since the 21st century, the rapid development and widespread adoption of the Internet have provided a broad platform for the general public to express themselves. Among numerous social media products, Weibo is characterized by its strong timeliness, rich thematic diversity, and dual attributes of media and social networking, making it an important platform for user discussion and communication. As of November 2022, Weibo had 584 million monthly active users and 253 million daily active users on average. Under conditions of Internet anonymity, free speech possesses characteristics of anonymity and is difficult to control. This paper investigates the causes and impacts of this phenomenon through a questionnaire survey. Research has found that emotional expression is an important characteristic of public opinion polarization, and when users' personal anxiety levels are higher, they are more likely to make extreme comments. When users browse the Weibo platform, their attention is often captured by extreme remarks, which can also influence users. This study proposes the degree of influence of inter-group emotions and users' personal anxiety on the polarization of microblog discourse, reflecting the further development and impact of public opinion polarization from the perspective of context collapse.

### Full Text

#### Preamble

#### Research on the Phenomenon of Public Opinion Polarization on Weibo from the Perspective of Context Collapse

Wang Yingqi, Fujian University of Technology, 2459493191@qq.com

**Abstract:** Since the 21st century, the rapid development and widespread adoption of the Internet have provided a broad platform for public expression.

Among numerous social media platforms, Weibo stands out for its strong timeliness, rich thematic diversity, and dual attributes of media and social networking, making it a crucial venue for user discussion and communication. As of November 2022, Weibo had 584 million monthly active users and 253 million daily active users on average. Under conditions of online anonymity, free expression becomes both anonymous and difficult to control.

This paper investigates the causes and effects of public opinion polarization through questionnaire surveys. The findings reveal that emotional expression is a key feature of polarized public opinion, and that users with higher levels of anxiety are more likely to make extreme comments. When browsing Weibo, users' attention is frequently captured by extreme remarks, which can also influence them emotionally. This study proposes that intergroup emotions and users' own anxiety significantly impact the polarization of discourse on Weibo, reflecting the further development and influence of public opinion polarization from the perspective of context collapse.

**Keywords:** Weibo, context collapse, public opinion polarization, anxious situations, intergroup emotions

## 1 Introduction

Weibo serves as an important platform for user discussion and communication. In this unique social space, extreme language and conflicts occur frequently. Under conditions of anonymity, users exhibit tendencies toward one-sided or multilateral attitude polarization, observable in the comment sections beneath many trending events. The author observes that on Weibo's communication platform, when audiences interact with other anonymous users, the original context breaks down and is thrust into a new, complex situation, while the behavioral modes and discursive systems from the original context become inadequate, resulting in confusion. Audiences on the microblogging platform are prone to conflict during discussions, leading to phenomena of collision and polarization across the entire public opinion field, visible in the comment areas of many hot events. Accordingly, this paper attempts to interpret the causes and mechanisms of public opinion polarization on the Weibo platform through the lens of context collapse, using questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews to examine the subsequent effects of this phenomenon.

### 2.1 Literature Review of Context Collapse

The theory of context collapse has attracted academic attention, though targeted studies remain limited. When discussing contextual changes in social media, foreign researchers typically begin with Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory and McLuhan's Media Ecology Theory. Scholar Boyd points out that as social media technology integrates socially diverse environments from the physical world, it gathers heterogeneous audiences from different contexts onto a single platform, resulting in "context collapse." Wesch (2009) argues that context col-

lapse creates a new complex situation arising from the collapse of infinitely many contexts, yet the concept of context remains relatively independent. Zhang Jie (2022) notes in “Context Collapse: Platform Supply or New Social Situation?” that context collapse is not only related to platform availability but also closely connected to the overlap, conflict, and reorganization of contextual definitions, with conflict and collapse of contextual definitions serving as the premise and core. Ma Yikun (2022) observes in “From Context Collapse to Context Separation: Based on WeChat Moments’ ‘Only Visible for Three Days’” that the core of context collapse lies in the overlap of different separated situations, with the new situation affecting how various audiences interact. Context collapse and situation collapse are synonymous and can be used interchangeably. Jia Zhouzhou (2022) argues in “Emotional Compensation After ‘Context Collapse’” that context collapse creates difficulties for digital communication, exploring how offline physical spaces might compensate for future interpersonal communication under collapsed contexts.

Overall, these studies explain the theory of context collapse from different perspectives, describing the preconditions, causes, and core elements of its formation, with greater emphasis on conceptual descriptions of characteristics before and during the collapse. However, they devote less attention to discussing the practical problems and consequences presented by individual internet users from the perspective of context collapse.

## 2.2 Literature Review of Public Opinion on Weibo

With the rise of “platform society” in the mobile digital era, social media represented by Weibo has gradually become common “infrastructure” for online user communication. Current Chinese research on Weibo public opinion has yielded numerous achievements. A CNKI search for “microblog public opinion” returns 4,728 academic journal articles and 5,970 theses, covering various aspects including form, characteristics, formation mechanisms, and communication patterns of Weibo public opinion. Jiao Dewu (2013) defines microblog public opinion in “The Emotion and Impact in Weibo Public Opinion” as the common opinion of netizens on recent topics via the Weibo platform, arguing that microblog public opinion possesses dual characteristics of public and private spheres. Yan Yuyan (2014) notes in “Study on the Guidance of Netizens’ Behavior in the Microblog Public Opinion Field” that the microblog public opinion field constitutes an important component of the civil public opinion sphere, with real-life behaviors in this field increasingly influencing its overall trends. Regarding communication mechanisms, Mu Wei (2013) identifies the grassroots and fission characteristics of microblog public opinion, the content manifestation of public opinion, and the speed and aggregation of public opinion dissemination.

Overall, research focuses on Weibo’s role in public opinion formation, particularly its guidance function during emergencies, as well as its social mobilization and supervisory functions. However, these studies primarily summarize theoretical frameworks, examining public opinion formation mechanisms and focusing

on public emotions—both individual and collective—in hot news events.

## 2.3 Literature Review of Public Opinion Polarization

Research on public opinion polarization exhibits different foci domestically and internationally. Currently, no unified standard definition exists in China. Scholar Wu Yue (2022) notes in “Review of Public Opinion Polarization Research” that the key lies in polarization itself, and interpretations should return to its original definition: public opinion polarization divides people into two groups with completely opposing views on a particular topic, representing a phenomenon of polarized group perspectives. Domestic scholar Ge Yan (2020) argues in “Is Social Media Bound to Polarize Public Opinion?” that social media promotes polarization only under conditions of social instability and when mainstream media loses credibility. Scholar Wang Qiwen (2017) directly discusses group polarization rather than public opinion polarization in “Popular Public Opinion Polarization and Prevention under the Background of New Media.” Scholar Li Fang (2022) contends in “Information Cocoon Room, Masses and Biases of Public Opinion” that most domestic scholars use the concepts of public opinion polarization and group polarization interchangeably, primarily citing group polarization concepts when explaining public opinion polarization.

Overall, foreign research on public opinion polarization is closely related to political polarization, while Chinese scholars focus more on online hot topics and entertainment subjects. Research primarily uses the new media environment and digital age as contexts to explore causes and prevention of public opinion polarization. However, none of these studies clearly define their research scope, mostly focusing on conceptual elaboration based on foreign scholars’ findings rather than analyzing actual situations.

## 2.4 Research Questions

This paper proceeds from context collapse theory to address the following questions: Why are diverse audiences on microblog platforms prone to conflict? What factors influence audience opinions? How do these conflicts evolve into public opinion? What are the impacts of public opinion polarization phenomena?

## 3 Research Methods

Based on the above, this paper employs questionnaire surveys to address these questions, attempting to deeply explore the influence of public opinion polarization on the Weibo platform from the perspective of context collapse.

### 3.1.1 Hypothesis Development

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

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

H2: The more severe users' anxiety, the more likely they are to make polarized comments.

H3: When browsing the Weibo platform, the more extreme the discourse, the more attention users pay and the more likely they become emotionally infected.

To test these hypotheses, this study used questionnaire surveys to sample the population and generate data.

### 3.1.2 Sampling Method

The target population for these hypotheses comprises user groups who frequently use the microblog platform. The study adopted simple random sampling, opportunity sampling, and snowball sampling methods, distributing questionnaires primarily through online channels.

### 3.1.3 Sample Selection

Through analysis of the Weibo platform's content, structure, utilization rates, and audience characteristics, the research identified the target group as audiences who frequently use Weibo. The study first conducted non-representative and judgment sampling for this group to ensure sampling effectiveness. With the Questionnaire Star platform, the research input questions, created, and distributed questionnaires through WeChat, Weibo Super Topics, Xiaohongshu, QQ Space, Zhihu, and the Questionnaire Star community. Distributed from March 24 to March 26, the questionnaire targeted people of different ages, education levels, regions, and incomes to ensure respondent diversity and reliability.

## 4 Research Findings and Discussion

The questionnaire passed reliability and validity tests, enabling investigation of users' extreme remarks on the microblog platform and the underlying reasons for public opinion polarization. Using random sampling, the study collected 200 questionnaires during the distribution period, with preliminary verification yielding 200 valid questionnaires, meaning 200 respondents participated in the survey.

### 4.1.1 Social Media Dependence

This study provides a detailed measure of users' social media dependency. Among the items, "After I post my views on social media, others' comments and likes give me a sense of accomplishment" received the highest score of 3.37 (out of 5), while "If others don't recognize my views, I will experience anxiety and self-doubt" scored 2.8. This indicates that respondents' dependence on social media primarily manifests in the sense of accomplishment derived from user

recognition, while anxiety about lack of recognition remains relatively low. It can be concluded that users yearn for a sense of identity that connects them with social media engagement.

Social Media Dependence

#### 4.2.1 Practices When Encountering Disagreement

Public opinion polarization is a common phenomenon across social media platforms like Weibo, manifested in users' obviously biased attitudes toward specific events or opinions. This study investigated users' practices when they consistently disagree with others' views. Among respondents, 42.5% chose to "hold opinions but remain silent," the highest proportion. Another 19.5% chose to "dare to make different remarks, debate, or refute"; 14.5% chose to "reply only to a few messages sharing the same opinion"; and 16.5% chose to "ignore." Therefore, only a small number of users express their differing opinions when they consistently disagree, while most tend to remain silent or ignore opposing views. Consequently, the author believes that users' extreme commenting tendencies may be influenced by the social media platform environment, though existing survey data is insufficient to support a direct relationship between the two. Hypothesis 1 is not supported.

Practices When Encountering Disagreement

#### 4.2.2 Strategies for Enhancing View Credibility

In the face of public opinion, this study explored how users express their views to gain greater recognition, revealing reasons for platform polarization. Among respondents, 33% chose to "align with highly recognized views," 15% chose to "bring others into the situation and increase the altruism of speech," 13.5% chose to "increase bias and guidance in speech," and 11% chose to "appropriately increase problem severity." Thus, on the Weibo platform, to better express their views and gain approval from other users, individuals often employ techniques such as aligning with popular views or using exaggerated, biased, and guiding expressions—all of which easily generate extreme speech and attract user attention. The finding that most users choose to align with highly recognized views may lead to greater recognition and more supporters for those views, though their correctness remains unverified. As fewer users hold differing views, public opinion polarization intensifies.

Strategies for Enhancing View Credibility

#### 4.2.3 Speech Tendencies in Anxious Situations

Beyond surveying users' anxiety levels, this study investigated users' speech tendencies in anxious situations. Fifty percent considered their anxious statements more emotional; 32.5% became "more rational"; 28% "remained unchanged"; and 23% became "more paranoid." This shows that users' speech tendencies

become more obviously emotional in anxiety situations, while emotional expression is more likely to produce extreme speech. Users in emotionally excited states are also vulnerable to agitation and influence by polarized discourse. Hypothesis 2 is supported. The author believes that network platform anonymity constitutes an important reason why netizens vent emotions without fearing consequences. Given the current pace of social life, users' daily pressure and anxiety, combined with the ability to hide real identities in anonymous online worlds, allow negative emotions that cannot be vented in real life and special views that dare not be expressed to surface in cyberspace, where consequence costs are minimized and can even be defended as maintaining justice.

Speech Tendencies in Anxious Situations

#### 4.2.4 Influence of Intergroup Emotions on Individuals

Emotional expression is an important feature of public opinion polarization, so this study also investigated the influence of group emotions on users. The item "I often agree with the group sentiment about an event (e.g., most people are angry about an event)" received an average score of 3.05 (out of 5), while "I think the group sentiment (e.g., anger, sympathy) expressed by others on Weibo is real" received the lowest average score of 2.94. This shows that even though users may question the authenticity of group emotions on social media, they still experience a certain sense of identification. It demonstrates that users are affected by emotions on social media platforms and may even make echoing comments, further deepening public opinion polarization. Hypothesis 3 is supported.

Influence of Intergroup Emotions on Individuals

#### 4.2.5 Preferred Speech Tendencies

To study the causes of public opinion polarization, this research also investigated user tendencies. The average score for "consistent with justice" is 3.43 (out of 5), while users show stronger inclination toward the second item "clearly different from others" with a score of 3.12, reflecting users' curiosity. Scholar Peng Lan termed the irrational, blind, extreme, and other phenomena caused by group interaction "group lost," where a small amount of speech hatches majority blind obedience. The results show that the more extreme the discourse users encounter on the Weibo platform, the more attention and infection they experience. Comments, forwarding, and liking behaviors driven by these emotions also affect other netizens' emotions and behaviors, with this highly infectious emotion spreading virally through cyberspace. Subsequently, the spiral of silence effect leads some views to gain recognition and increasing supporters, while other users with different views dare not speak out and may even join the majority. When new details emerge during event development, triggering another round of ideas, new public opinion polarization occurs, throwing the entire audience into an uproar. Some scholars have pointed out that in the digital age, news and information dissemination is characterized by immediacy.

Since polarized emotions attract audience attention more than truth, not only do self-media use radical narratives and shocking headlines to create hotspots and public opinion, but traditional media are not exempt, with some reversal stories still first published by traditional media. Therefore, there is a basis for the frequent occurrence of polarized reversals in online opinion.

The Impact of Speech on Users Themselves

#### 4.2.6 Impact of Speech on Users Themselves

In public opinion polarization, we must also consider users' reactions to social media comments and their impacts. Among the items, "I will be affected by the concerned sentiment and make some comments" received an average score of 3.04; "I am affected by the sentiment of concerned sentiment and prefer to agree with this view" scored 3.01, indicating that users are affected by emotional influences on social media platforms and may even make compatible remarks, further deepening public opinion polarization. "I will be affected by the emotion of attention and make some behavior" received the lowest score, showing that these remarks' impact does not extend to real life. However, it remains unclear whether online polarization subtly affects users' real lives.

The Impact of Speech on Users Themselves

### 5.1 Public Opinion Polarization Generates Follow-up Issues and Discussions

The concept of pseudo-environment first appeared in Lippmann's book *Public Opinion*. Pseudo-environment refers to the subjective image of the real environment in people's minds—a virtual environment formed through the description and reflection of the external environment processed by consciousness. Due to the limited nature of human knowledge, people cannot fully understand the real environment. Therefore, for matters they cannot personally experience, they construct mental pictures based on media reports. Domestic scholar Li Lian-gong once stated that online public opinion is not only spontaneous expression of netizens' wishes but also a game between various interest groups. Especially in such a real-time interactive environment with extensive data, which relies on encouraging and depending on user viewpoint output and discussion to convey information, information from all directions becomes complicated. As individuals, people cannot cope within this data vortex and can only quickly take sides. Additionally, with the promotion of such a suggestive mechanism, when facing controversial social issues, audience emotions outpace rational thinking, and the pursuit of news authenticity is no longer limited to the truth of results but strives for the truth of the process. It is unsurprising that audiences first express their views according to irresponsible self-media guidance such as marketing accounts before making rigorous judgments. This leads to another concept: the "post-truth" era, where emotions precede facts. In the post-truth era, people's

emotions prevail, and truth is constrained by emotional attacks; even those who wish to speak for the truth are drowned out by the noise.

Public opinion polarization is like a flood that should be both channeled and blocked. When managing the network environment and ecology, the Weibo platform should strengthen its audit mechanism to ensure the authenticity of published news. At the initial stage of public opinion polarization, official media must use timely and efficient methods to seize opportunities, guide the general direction of public opinion, investigate the truth of incidents, increase on-site reporting, and enhance user trust. Moreover, media should guide netizens to develop positive media literacy, enabling control and guidance of some polarized remarks. Extreme remarks with obvious purposes should be deleted to prevent affecting other users' normal judgment.

## 5.2 Summary

This study proposes the degree of influence of intergroup emotion and users' own anxiety on the polarization phenomenon of microblog speech, reflecting the further development of public opinion polarization from the perspective of context collapse. On the other hand, it provides a basis and ideas for subsequent research directions and reasons for public opinion polarization across various platforms, offering a direction for further understanding user psychology and reducing the frequency of public opinion reversal events. However, it is worth noting that if user comments are not correctly and reasonably guided, the phenomenon of public opinion polarization will negatively impact the positive construction of network ecology, warranting vigilance and reflection. Nevertheless, due to limitations in audience scope and social levels, this study still has flaws. Future research on public opinion polarization may require more attention to investigations and verification across different age levels and social classes, as well as expanded research and practice directly between user views and public opinion polarization.

## References

- [1] Ding Jing. (2023). Research on the moral hazard of network group polarization and its prevention and control countermeasures — Based on the “Yu Zheng cat abuse storm.” *Data*, (02), 16-17. (in Chinese)
- [2] Zhang Jie & Ma Yikun. (2022). From situational collapse to situational re-separation: User social media practice in social-relational context — Research based on “only three days visible” in WeChat Moments. *International Press*, (08), 28-48. doi:10.13495/j.cnki.cjjc.2022.08.003. (in Chinese)
- [3] Jia Zhouzhou. (2022). Emotional compensation after “context collapse”: Livehouse contextual characteristics of interpersonal communication. *Encyclopedia Knowledge*, (09), 41-42 + 55. (in Chinese)

- [4] Li Fang. (2022). Information cocoon room, mob and public opinion bias: Research on the phenomenon of public opinion polarization in network community. *News Research Guide*, (12), 19-21. (in Chinese)
- [5] Wu Yue & Li Fagen. (2022). Review of public opinion polarization research. *Intelligence Journal*, (04), 98-103 + 110. (in Chinese)
- [6] Wang Qiwen. (2017). Polarization of popular public opinion and its prevention under the background of new media. *Western Radio and Television*, (09), 10. (in Chinese)
- [7] Ge Yan, Qin Yulin & Zhao Hanqing. (2020). Does social media necessarily polarize public opinion: The story of the Moore Country. *The International Press*, (02), 67-99. doi:10.13495/j.cnki.cjjc.20200317.009. (in Chinese)
- [8] Zhang Jie & Ma Yikun. (2021). Context collapse: A platform availability or a new social context? — Concept traceability and theoretical stimulation. *News Reporter*, (02), 27-38. doi:10.16057/j.cnki.31-1171/g2.2021.02.004. (in Chinese)
- [9] Wang Tianyi. (2020). “Pride and Prejudice”: Media emotions in the spread of COVID-19. (eds.) *Science and Education · Proceedings of 2020 Remix Education Conference* (pp.165-174). Proceedings of the 2020 Remix Education Conference. (in Chinese)
- [10] Lu Xing & Jin Yingchun. (2021). “Who is visible” and “When is visible”: The self-presentation management of social media users under the dual context collapse — An investigation of the visibility control of WeChat Moments. *New Media Research*, (18), 37-41 + 55. doi:10.16604/j.cnki.issn2096-0360.2021.18.009. (in Chinese)
- [11] Ma Yi Yi. (2022). Study on the influence of microblog opinion leaders on public opinion. *Media Forum*, (03), 23-26. (in Chinese)
- [12] Lu Dongqing. (2016). Qualitative study on “context resolution” in WeChat circle of friends. *Friends of the Editor*, (08), 62-67. doi:10.13786/j.cnki.cn14-1066/g2.2016.08.012. (in Chinese)
- [13] Van Dijck, J., Poell, T., De Waal, M. *The platform society: Public values in a connective world* [M]. UK: Oxford University Press. 2018: 154.
- [14] Tian, X. Embodied versus disembodied information: How online artifacts influence offline interpersonal interactions [J]. *Symbolic Interaction*, 2017(40): 190-211.
- [15] Walther, J. B., Burgoon, J. K. Relational communication in computer-mediated interaction [J]. *Human Communication Research*, 1992 (19): 50-88.
- [16] Jenny L. Davis & Nathan Jurgenson. Context collapse: Theorizing context collusions and collisions. *Information, Communication & Society*, 2014(17): 476-485.

[17] Jessica Vitak. The Impact of Context Collapse and Privacy on Social Network Site Disclosures [J]. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 2012 (56): 451-470.

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

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