

Bar Essence: A Research on the Formation Mechanism of Irrational Expression Behavior in Network Public Opinion (Postprint)

Authors: Peng Yile

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Abstract

As an irrational expression of online public opinion, this phenomenon has become a prevalent form of internet culture since its inception, characterized by deriving pleasure from causing distress to others, leading to frequent flame wars in cyberspace and even undermining the order of the online environment. It reflects issues pertaining to social communication, personality psychology, and related domains. This paper analyzes the characteristics of this phenomenon and its formation mechanism through questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews.

Full Text

Bar Essence: A Study on the Formation Mechanism of Irrational Expression in Online Public Opinion

Peng Yile^{1*}

¹Chinese Language and Literature, Xidian University, China

*Corresponding author E-mail: 173674108@qq.com

Abstract: Bar essence, as an irrational expression of online public opinion, has evolved from an early internet phenomenon into a common form of online culture. Characterized by deriving pleasure from making others unhappy, it frequently leads to verbal wars in cyberspace and even disrupts online order. It reflects underlying issues in social communication and individual psychology. This paper analyzes the characteristics of this phenomenon and its formation mechanism through questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews.

Keywords: bar essence; irrational expression behavior; network public opinion

1 Introduction

Since China entered the internet era in the 1990s, the development of online information has been accompanied by the expression of public opinion. With the popularization of the internet and the improvement of citizen participation, the rapid development of new media platforms and we-media has increasingly blurred the boundary between public and private spaces. In this context, the destruction of rules and consensus—namely, the phenomenon of “bar essence”—has begun to emerge. These individuals take arguing as their primary mode of expression and venting emotions as one of their main purposes. We wonder: why are there so many angry people on the internet, when this is not necessarily the case in reality? Why are internet users more likely to become “bar essence” online? What is the psychological mechanism underlying this phenomenon?

2.1 Literature Review of Bar Essence Phenomenon

The term “bar essence” originated in the “Three Micro Terminals” (Weibo, WeChat, micro-video, and mobile app clients), quickly became popular across the internet, and was included in the “Top Ten Internet Terms of 2018” by the National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Center. This phenomenon has attracted scholarly attention from multiple academic perspectives. Foreign scholar Cass Sunstein analyzed the overall phenomenon of online behavior, pointing out that current online communication—especially mobile internet—gradually presents characteristics of selective exposure. Internet users can freely choose to join like-minded groups in open spaces, quickly forming circles for group identity and expanding their influence.

Domestic scholar Fan Rong, based on the “anti-spiral of silence” theory, analyzed the manifestations and causes of online “bar essence” from its specific presentations. The research shows that the emergence of “bar essence” is essentially consistent with the expression of “anti-spiral of silence.” According to the two propagation paths of “anti-spiral of silence,” the type of “bar essence” can be divided into rational and irrational categories. The study also analyzed the causes of bar essence from two aspects: the subject consciousness of “bar essence” as an internal factor and the media environment as an external factor. However, domestic scholar Xiang Wei observed and analyzed the current characteristics of antagonistic expression, discussed the causes from both subjective and objective aspects, and attempted to find methods for returning to rational expression, providing more detailed analysis.

Nevertheless, although these studies have examined the manifestations, characteristics, and causes of bar essence, they have neglected the formation mechanism of irrational expression behavior in online public opinion, and have not explained why bar essence is more active in the virtual online world while less visible in real life. Currently, the academic community has not applied interactive ritual chain theory and group infection theory to explain the practical phenomenon of bar essence.

2.2 Literature Review of Interactive Ritual Chain Theory

The interactive ritual chain is a theory developed by American sociologist Randall Collins. This theory primarily focuses on the dynamic mechanisms of individuals as they navigate the dimension of social experience. Collins notes that each interaction is a ritual that can be placed at a certain position within a continuum of ritual intensity. Since its inception, the theory has attracted considerable attention from scholars both domestically and internationally, yielding numerous research findings.

Foreign scholar JenkinsH expanded the connotation of the theory by studying TV fan phenomena in the field of participatory culture. Foreign scholar Summers-Effler supplemented the theory of ritual in the study of emotional sociology phenomena. Foreign scholars Whiteman and N supplemented the theory by examining online fan community phenomena.

Domestic scholar Han Lu combined the theory with the actual phenomenon of China's mobile social media—WeChat—proposing the interactive elements of users' communication in micro-situations and arguing that the essence of users' employment of mobile social media is the process of accumulating “emotional energy” and symbolic capital in real situations. Domestic scholars Pan Shuya and Zhang Yuqi combined the actual phenomenon of online fan communities with the theory, proposing that internet live broadcasting is an important ritual for TV fan communities, that real-time discussion forms the basis of mutual emotional connection in online fan communities, and that these communities possess unique cohesion, organization, and execution capabilities. Domestic scholars Zhu Ying and Ding Jie combined the actual phenomenon of e-government in China with this theory, finding that at the present stage, government WeChat accounts have not fully leveraged their leading power and still face problems such as lack of physical presence, dislocation of focus setting, and insufficient emotional sharing, and they put forward corresponding suggestions.

However, these studies did not examine the phenomenon from the perspective of interactive ritual chain theory, and therefore do not answer questions about the irrational expression of online public opinion.

2.3 Literature Review of Group Infection Theory

Group infection is a special transmission mechanism of collective behavior. Gustave Le Bon proposed the theory of infection in *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. He believed that collective behavior results from people's emotional infection, and that the characteristics of crowds include the disappearance of conscious personality and the dominance of unconscious personality. The contagious suggestion of emotion and concept, according to the dominant position, makes public psychology develop in a specific direction while also having the tendency to transform implied ideas into action.

In his book *The Extreme Population: The Psychology of Group Behavior*, for-

eign scholar Sunstein supplemented the theory of online group polarization by studying the psychological phenomena of online groups. Foreign scholars Stanley Baran and Dennis Davis believe in the field of mass communication that “the new media form changes our experience of ourselves and society, and this influence is ultimately more important than the content of the specific message it conveys.”

Domestic scholar Nie Liang combined the phenomenon of online violence with group infection theory, analyzing the formation mechanism of online public opinion violence from six aspects and discussing solutions to the phenomenon. Domestic scholars Zeng Qingxiang and Li Wei, combining types of information events with media reports with the theory, proposed that venting mass events can be divided into three stages: group running-in, group excitement, and social infection, corresponding to the information transmission characteristics of such events and two types of media reporting frameworks: the “witch” and “instigated” frameworks, and social conflict. Domestic scholar Li Xuemei combined the practical phenomenon of “group loneliness” with the theory, summarizing the internal relationship between social media, “group loneliness,” and the two, and explaining the complex causes of “group loneliness” in the social media environment.

2.4 Research Questions

Therefore, this article will proceed from interactive ritual chain theory and group infection theory to answer the following questions: Why is it easier for netizens to become bar essence on the internet? What is the psychological mechanism of this phenomenon?

3.1.1 Hypothesis Development

Based on the above questions, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: The higher the frequency of exposure to aggressive Weibo content, the more emotional the user becomes.

H2: The stronger the herd mentality of netizens, the stronger their tendency to publish aggressive content on Weibo.

To test these hypotheses, this study employed a questionnaire survey, sampled the population, and produced questionnaires.

3.1.2 Sampling Method

These hypotheses correspond to the subject of Weibo users. First, we conducted representative sampling of this group, selecting college student Weibo users who had been exposed to aggressive content as the overall research population. This survey completed the data collection, collation, and analysis process on April

9, 2023. The survey includes both open and closed questions, with main contents as follows: (1) Basic information confirmation: including age, gender, and educational background; (2) Dimension reduction statements for independent variable X; and (3) Dimension reduction statements for dependent variable Y.

This questionnaire contains 16 questions, including 9 single-choice questions, 1 multiple-choice question, and 2 scales. It was distributed both online and offline through WeChat Moments, QQ Space, Questionnaire Star sample library, and offline channels.

3.2.1 Interview Protocol Development

The interview questions were mainly divided into three parts. The first part covers the basic information of interviewees. The second part reduces the dimensions of the research questions to interview questions, including their views on emotional expression, specific strategies, and methods. The third part mainly involves the possibility of deep-dive questions.

During the interview study, the investigator attempted to avoid the four ethical issues highlighted by scholar Alan Bryman: (1) causing harm to study participants; (2) failing to use informed consent documents or materials; (3) violating the privacy of study participants; and (4) deceiving study participants. If interviewees had any questions or dissatisfaction they did not want to answer during the interview, they could remain silent or withdraw midway. Interview materials that respondents stated they did not want to disclose were not included or cited in this study.

3.2.2 Selection of Interviewees

In this study, 10 interviewees active on the Weibo platform participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting approximately 20 minutes each. The interviews began in early April 2023 and ended at the end of April 2023. According to the saturation principle of qualitative research methods, when the 10th respondent was interviewed, all interview content was sufficient to answer the research questions, and sample collection was closed. The respondents varied in age, occupation, education level, and region, with low homogeneity.

Interviews were conducted through both online and face-to-face methods. The interview results were compiled into verbatim transcripts totaling 3,568 words. The processing of interview content was completed by the author.

4.1 Questionnaire Survey Results

A total of 212 questionnaires were collected in this survey, among which 212 respondents had been exposed to aggressive content on Weibo, and 103 respondents had published aggressive content on Weibo. Through descriptive analysis, it was found that the majority of respondents used Weibo for less than 1 hour

per day, accounting for more than 60%. The frequency of users browsing content on Weibo is relatively moderate, with 40 percent of respondents choosing “often” and “always.” Users post aggressive content less frequently on Weibo, with more than half of respondents saying they only occasionally post aggressive content.

Through Pearson’s correlation analysis, it was found that there is no significant correlation between the frequency of exposure to aggressive Weibo content and the degree of emotion in Weibo use ($r = 0.119$, $P > 0.05$), so hypothesis H1 is not supported. There is a significant positive correlation between users’ conformity psychology and their tendency to publish aggressive content on Weibo ($r = 0.333$, $P < 0.05$), so hypothesis H2 is supported: the stronger the conformity psychology of netizens, the stronger their tendency to publish aggressive content on Weibo.

4.2 Interview Results

When we asked, “What kind of emotions do you have when you browse Weibo?” and “Will your comments on the internet be more emotional?” during further in-depth interviews, we were pleasantly surprised to find that the relevant attitudes toward the irrational expression of online public opinion supported our ideas:

“When I see one, two, or even more people [arguing], I feel that ‘it is the trend to fight together and we have a sense of belonging.’”

“For example, when an event is mixed but pending, I have a strong urge to argue.”

“I am not a person with exposed emotions in real life, but emotions need to be vented. In addition, now everyone is ‘We Media,’ so I enjoy the freedom of speech on the internet and am willing to expose my negative emotions online. Therefore, I will express my views with obvious negative emotions on the internet.”

“I don’t usually try to argue without seeing the incident because I think it’s irresponsible and brings unnecessary misunderstandings to friends who love in the comments section.”

“I’m a fan in the comments section because I think my mouth is stupid, and some people are my internet mouth. If I see something I think is wonderful, I will forward it. At this time of forwarding, I will forget the view of the event itself and simply agree with others to help fight.”

4.2.1 Conformity Psychology Orientation

Conformity, also known as “following the trend” or “following the crowd,” refers to the phenomenon where one’s own ideas and behaviors align with the majority of people around them due to group guidance or pressure. In group situations and through effective interaction with the rest of the group, group motivation

is formed. Arguing often expresses some kind of unconventional view, but this “seeking” is often driven by unconscious herd mentality. This motivation creates certain pressure on group behavioral performance, under which the group will often choose to imitate the behavior of others to alleviate it. When many netizens browse information on the internet, if they frequently encounter arguing behavior, they will choose to directly join the army of arguers. In many cases, they are not questioning and criticizing a certain point of view but simply imitating others. The overwhelming similar arguing behavior on the internet creates an illusion—making people think that arguing is a collective appeal, and the behavior of arguing is also given a sense of network security, belonging, and meaning by herd mentality.

4.2.2 Pathological Vector-Oriented Leverage

In today’s internet era, the prevalence of short videos and Weibo has fragmented content, making it difficult for people to calmly browse news and pay attention to the causes and consequences of events. “Traffic is king” has replaced “content is king.” To attract attention and earn traffic, ordinary headlines are replaced with extreme personality titles—clickbait becomes popular; common but reasonable comments are rare, while creative but cognitively dissonant comments become common. All kinds of emojis formed by imitating “arguing,” buzzwords, etc., have become fashionable.

Mainstream culture has suffered a huge impact, and the boundary with subculture has become increasingly blurred. A large number of netizens express their different views on events through “criticism,” and this expression gradually forms a trend. In a situation where everyone can be “we media” and the same content fills the internet, it is not easy to gain lasting attention. Instead, they choose to raise arguments, present different views, attract others’ attention through ridicule, and gain a sense of identity, which promotes the occurrence of arguing behavior.

4.2.3 Group Confrontation and Circle-Based Leverage

With improved social openness, the internet provides convenient conditions for people to exchange views in real time, participate in discussions of social issues, and increase engagement with controversial social issues. However, simultaneously, the views believed and conveyed by mainstream media and mass media about social issues are not necessarily exactly the same and are sometimes even antagonistic. When different voices appear, there will be antagonistic interpretations of each other, with each side striving to make their views heard and adopted. As discussion deepens and disputes continue, people tend not to care whether their own views are really correct but are content to gain the upper hand in circle confrontation. Therefore, “bar essence” will not only appear in controversial social hot discussion areas but also emerge in scattered and diversified network ecological structures.

5 Summary and Reflection

This paper conducted a theoretical study on the phenomenon of “bar essence” on Weibo through questionnaire surveys and content analysis, attempting to answer: Why are netizens more likely to become bar essence on the internet? What is the psychological mechanism of this phenomenon? The research found that the higher the frequency of exposure to aggressive Weibo content, the more serious the emotion, and the stronger the herd mentality of netizens, the stronger their tendency to publish aggressive content on Weibo. This study proposes a formation mechanism for irrational expression behavior in online public opinion. “Bar essence” often represents “non-mainstream” views and disrupts online order to a certain extent. However, it is worth noting that this study also found that the bar essence phenomenon has some practical significance.

Some “experts” are not completely irrational but simply have prominent critical thinking and should not be over-labeled. This is worth reflecting upon.

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

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