



Research on the Influence of Social Media Public Opinion Communication on Tourism Destinations: A Case Study of Harbin

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Abstract. Since December 18, 2023, Harbin tourism has rapidly gained popularity, becoming a phenomenon of online "tourism going viral." This paper delves into the field of public opinion communication and meme theory, and deeply analyzes how social media public opinion communication has led to the phenomenon of tourism destinations going viral, revealing its influencing mechanisms.

Keywords: Social media; Tourism public opinion; Meme theory

1 Introduction

With the advent of the digital age, social media has profoundly changed the way people communicate and the patterns of information dissemination. Especially in the field of tourism, the influence of social media is increasingly significant, playing a crucial role in the rise and fall of tourist destinations. Destination managers can rapidly spread the image of the destination on a large scale. Therefore, public opinion events, as one of the manifestations of the concentration of social media traffic, will have a significant impact when appropriately used to shape the image of tourist destinations. This method of promotion not only has relatively low costs but also yields significant results, quickly attracting the attention of tourists and stimulating their desire to travel, thereby achieving the so-called "tourism going viral." Current research on domestic and international network public opinion mainly focuses on theoretical research, including network public opinion dissemination models, user behavior patterns, etc. Due to the characteristics of foreign languages such as English, foreign countries have relatively complete public opinion analysis systems. There has been a large amount of interdisciplinary research on meme theory abroad, including computer science, economics, etc., while domestic research has focused on the integration of linguistic disciplines. However, research results in the field of communication by scholars at home and abroad are still relatively scarce. This paper starts from the process of public opinion event dissemination, using public opinion communication and meme theory to explain the reasons for the phenomenon of tourist destinations going viral, providing ideas for the development of publicity in the cultural and tourism industry.

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2 Literature Review

ZhanXin classified the communication channels of public opinion hot spots in recent years according to the strength of public opinion communication. By analyzing the characteristics and changes of each communication channel, ZhanXin deeply elaborated on the generation path and communication mode of public opinion communication. Two scholars, Fan Hong and He Jiayu, took the Zibo Barbecue internet celebrity event in China as an example to analyze the interactive relationship between Zibo Barbecue, a hot event, and city brand construction from multiple perspectives. Zhang Ronghua and Li Hongyu analyzed the characteristics of online public opinion on social media and the entire process of online public opinion on the murder of a college teacher in Shanghai. They proposed that the difficulty in guiding online public opinion is mainly due to the rapid development of media technology, which has lowered the threshold of communicators and is complex and audiences with cognitive limitations are prone to emotional reactions, and corresponding guidance strategies are proposed.[1]

In view of the differences between online public opinion and traditional public opinion, ZhangFangyuan further explained the communication and evolution mechanism of online public opinion, and put forward two major suggestions: increasing the supervision of online public opinion and giving full play to the effective influence of the authority of "opinion leaders". The scholar believes that through The study of Internet public opinion can analyze the behavior of non-social Internet public opinion users and play an important role in revealing its essential laws. Scholars Xiaoyang Liu and Daobing He proposed a new IPNN (Information Propagation Neural Network) model of information dissemination and public opinion evolution based on artificial neural networks, which revealed the formation process of online public opinion and the nature of public opinion explosion in online social networks.[2]

Drout (2007) explains the concept of meme as the simplest unit of cultural reproduction and explores how the spread of memes affects culture. Spitzberg (2014) proposed the Meme Diffusion Model (M3D), which integrates multiple theories to explain how memes spread and provides a framework for theoretical development in the fields of big data and new media. Liu Wenjia constructed a framework of influencing factors for the spread of Internet buzzwords. Taking "word-pleasing syndrome" as an example, he concluded that Internet buzzwords with the characteristics of simple form, clear emotional attitude, and the ability to spread in multiple media forms on multiple media platforms are easier to become a powerful meme and spread widely.[3]

3 Public Opinion Dissemination and Evolution

With the advent of the Web2.0 era, social media continues to iterate and rapidly develop, permeating into various aspects of people's lives, and changing the social behaviors and cognitive ways of the masses, providing a new channel for public expression. Diversified communication subjects are connected by social networks to form a complex network of relationships, which can be divided into "strong ties" and "weak ties"

based on the intimacy of the relationship network. "Strong ties" have a strong dissemination effect, mainly occurring between familiar individuals, while "weak ties" have a wide dissemination range, mostly occurring between groups, such as on platforms like Douyin.[4] According to QuestMobile database (QuestMobile Research Institute, 2023), as of September 2023, the total number of active users on China's top five social media platforms (Douyin, Weibo, Kuaishou, Bilibili, Xiaohongshu) reached 1.088 billion, accounting for 88.9% of China's internet users. With such a large user base, the dissemination influence of social media undoubtedly maximizes. After a tourism crisis event occurs, tourists and other members of society act as information disseminators, posting the details of the event, their perceptions, and opinions on social media.

Meanwhile, government and other official departments obtain information through social media and release decision-making information, forming the subject of public opinion. This information then spreads to internet celebrities, marketing accounts, and other media organizations, as well as netizens, forming public opinion among internet users and media. Through the social relationships and expression of opinions of these users, public opinion is further fueled. The response measures of the authorities during this process also influence the direction and impact of public opinion.[5] Moreover, due to the real-time nature and high interactivity of social media today, the speed of event dissemination is greatly increased compared to traditional media, while also significantly reducing the time for decision-making given to the authorities.

3.1 Public Opinion Dissemination Regarding the Refund Incident at Harbin Ice and Snow World

Based on the fragmented, real-time, and efficient dissemination characteristics of today's social media, as well as the high level of public attention, the evolution cycle of tourism public opinion has been significantly shortened, and widespread dissemination and fermentation now only require a few hours. In the "Harbin Ice and Snow World refund" incident, due to the conflict between the lack of facilities and service mechanisms at the scenic spot and the continuously growing demand for tourism services from tourists, a large number of contradictions, including tourists' dissatisfaction and malicious refund requests, collided with each other through social media in a short period, causing a huge wave of public opinion on social networks. However, under the rapid response of the local cultural and tourism department, the scenic spot was supervised to optimize services, and a public apology was issued on social media, allowing tourists to obtain refunds. By taking on the responsibility of guiding public opinion leaders, a weak image was presented to the public from a psychological perspective, which won the favor and sympathy of the public for Harbin and the Ice and Snow World scenic area, and quickly controlled the emotional trend of public opinion. Within three days of public opinion development, according to the official Weibo media account's voting statistics, only 20% of the people expressed dissatisfaction with the response from the scenic area authorities.

3.2 Reversal of Public Opinion and Traffic

The cause and effect of the government turning crisis into traffic in this incident are analyzed based on opinion leadership and crisis management theories. The incident originated from the release and dissemination of short videos. Due to the stimulating and impactful nature of visual content such as short videos and images on the public, a large amount of emotional responses and emotional interactions are easily capable of resonating with the emotions of network communities, and these resonances become the catalyst for the outbreak of public opinion. Opinion leaders, as the name suggests, are individuals who express their own emotions and opinions during public opinion events and gain the support of a large number of netizens, thereby to some extent guiding the direction of public opinion. In this incident, official media outlets such as People's Daily undertook the responsibility of opinion leadership. Official media, due to their authority and credibility in providing information, have a significant advantage, and their views are more likely to resonate with the public, thereby guiding the emotions and opinions of the public towards positivity and suppressing the negative impact of public opinion on the tourism industry in Harbin. Crisis theory is a theoretical system related to the formation, dissemination, and control of crisis events. The government's rapid response to the crisis in this incident stemmed from personal and public psychological aspects. Measures were taken to reduce the losses caused by public opinion, actively address the conflicts and dialogues between tourists and scenic spots, restore the image of Harbin as a tourist destination, rebuild the confidence of tourists visiting the area, and establish consensus in peaceful interaction with the scenic spots.

4 Memetics Theory in Social Media

The "memetics theory" was proposed by British scholar Richard Dawkins in his book "The Selfish Gene" in 1976. He believed that biological evolution is based on the replication of genes, while cultural evolution is based on the replication of human behavior. In the field of linguistics and communication, a meme refers to a replicator with replicative ability in the process of cultural development, leading to the phenomenon of continuous self-replication.[6] The process of meme propagation involves replication, imitation, variation, dissemination, and diffusion.

4.1 The Replication, Variation, and Dissemination of Harbin Memes.

The climax of this viral event originated in the "Letter to the People of Harbin" released by the Harbin government on December 25, 2023 (Harbin Municipal People's Government, 2023). The letter called on citizens to be ambassadors of the city's warmth and showcase the hospitality of the people of Harbin to tourists. The Harbin municipal government provided thoughtful and considerate infrastructure services for tourists, such as non-slip carpets on Central Avenue, in response to geographical and dietary differences among tourists. Inspired by the government's actions, local residents spontaneously joined the service ranks to facilitate tourists' activities and travels. Meanwhile,

the government attached great importance to the feedback from tourists on social media. For example, in response to some tourists' feedback regarding the limited variety of scenery for photography, artificial moons and hot air balloons were introduced. These events, posted in the form of short videos online, once again elicited enthusiastic responses and attention from a large number of netizens, leading to the emergence of terms such as "Erbin" and "pleaser personality." Moreover, the most regionally distinctive catchphrase, "Southern Little Potato," also spread widely on the internet.

"Southern Little Potato" originated from a self-claimed title by a female netizen from the southern regions. When some southern tourists used this title in their travel vlogs, it triggered empathy among netizens. Within a month, this self-claimed title became a widely used tag by netizens, completing the process of meme replication and imitation. In order to express their warm hospitality, northeastern people also began using "Southern Little Potato" to refer to tourists, expressing their affection and expectations for exchanges between the north and south. These beautiful and sincere visions led to the mutation of the replicator. Under the high-profile topic, opinion leaders on various platforms, such as self-media marketing accounts, also joined in the dissemination and forwarding, forming inter-platform linkage, further expanding the influence and popularity of "Southern Little Potato."

4.2 Virality of Harbin Memes

According to Baidu's official heat index statistics (Baidu Baike, 2024), searches for "Southern Little Potato" began to surge from the 25th of December and showed exponential growth during the New Year holiday, reaching its peak on January 4th, with a search index of 25,883 and an information index of 30,661,356 on that day. On Little Red Book, notes related to "Southern Little Potato" received over 1.96 million likes, more than 280,000 saves, over 290,000 comments, and over 170,000 shares in the past 30 days, with individual notes generating up to 110,000 interactions. Analyzing the popularity of "Southern Little Potato" based on the memetics theory, it is not difficult to see that its propagation process bears striking similarities to the "Zibo Barbecue" phenomenon that emerged in mid-2023. On January 5, 2024, the Harbin Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, and Tourism revealed that the image of "Little Potato" had been handed over to a professional development team for IP image development. Currently, it has also been promoted through live broadcasts and short video marketing to promote tourism products in Harbin. According to big data calculations provided by the Harbin Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, and Tourism (Harbin Municipal People's Government, 2024), as of the third day of the New Year holiday, Harbin had received a total of 3.0479 million tourists, achieving a total tourism revenue of 5.914 billion yuan. Both tourist reception volume and tourism revenue reached historical peaks. Among them, the Harbin Ice and Snow World received 163,200 visitors, an increase of 435% compared to the previous year, with revenue of 46.18 million yuan, an increase of 494%.

5 Conclusion

In terms of public opinion dissemination and evolution, the real-time nature, high interactivity, and efficiency of social media platforms such as Weibo and Douyin allow the public to freely express personal opinions and emotions and interact and resonate with others. The social psychology and individual behaviors of netizens contained therein will drive the development of public opinion, leading to a shorter time for explosive dissemination. This also means that authorities need to formulate and implement measures for guiding public opinion and making decisions within an extremely short period. Regarding the application of memetics theory, in this event, we can see that the virality and mutation of "Southern Little Potato" meme not only stem from its inherent logic but also from the promotion by official channels. By integrating marketing communication as a memetic mutation, it goes beyond its original self-label semantics, covering values across society and becoming a hotspot. With brand association to the event and leveraging the brand to drive traffic, the self-designation by tourists has been transformed into a term of endearment for Harbin. This conversion of event heat into brand heat, along with the brand's influence, also extends the timeliness of dissemination, thereby continuously promoting Harbin tourism through sustained brand traction.

5.1 Strengthening Media Opinion Intelligence Collection and Control

5.1.1 Media Information Collection.

Emphasize and actively respond to social media public opinion information, which is currently a key means for governments to establish the image of tourist destinations and enhance the regional online image. Local cultural and tourism departments should arrange dedicated personnel to strengthen monitoring and collection of public opinion information about the cultural and tourism market on social media, formulate standardized internal mechanisms for handling public opinion information, and effectively repair tourism public opinion and tourism image maintenance. Utilize social media public opinion as a new way to promote the local tourism economy.

5.1.2 Public Opinion Information Control.

In the era of all media, the internet has become the main way for the public to perceive and understand a region. It is essential to handle both positive and negative public opinion information correctly, seizing positive guidance and dissemination while also having emergency response mechanisms for negative information. The Harbin incident utilized a negative crisis of public opinion information, and after timely and correct handling, it quickly promoted information fermentation, causing a sensation.

5.2 Enhancing the Ability to Integrate Cultural and Tourism Brands

5.2.1 Embrace Trending Topics to Create Hot Cultural and Tourism Brands.

Increase sensitivity to short-term "trending" tourism events on social media, adeptly capture hot topics, refine the social focus and social effects behind events, and seamlessly connect hot topics with official media in a planned manner, transforming them into hot tourism brands.

5.2.2 Building "Official Media + Internet Celebrities" to Boost Internet Celebrity Popularity.

Leveraging the influence of "internet celebrities" media, through planning by cultural and tourism departments, integrate effective resources such as scenic spots, transportation, shopping, accommodation, etc., with the cooperation of official media. Invite celebrities, introduce policies, organize special events, etc., to increase positive effects of public opinion output.

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