

Exploring the Impact of Opinion Leaders' Perspectives on Participants in Weibo User Groups: A Case Study of the Controversy over Pre-prepared Dishes

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Abstract. In an era of an accelerating social pace, a host of issues pertaining to public relations management and interest distribution have contributed to a growing frequency of sudden public incidents concerning people's livelihoods. Against this backdrop, this study focuses on the impact of opinion leaders on ordinary participants within Weibo user groups. This paper conducts the collection and analysis of cases by means of a comprehensive case study approach. It analyzes the impact of opinion leaders on the views of Weibo users by examining the differences in their expressed opinions and perspectives before and after the release of statements by opinion leaders. This study finds that online opinion leaders exert three types of influences on users: opinion reversal, referring to users who initially hold divergent views but eventually converge with those of the leaders; complete conviction, meaning users fully endorse the perspectives of the leaders; and outright opposition, denoting users who hold views contrary to those of the leaders. In addition, there exist unaffected users who, despite their relevance to the core incident, remain immune to such influences.

Keywords: Internet, opinion leaders, agenda-setting.

1. Introduction

This study is situated against the backdrop of the rapid surge in the number of internet users; in this context, social hotspot events often attract extensive attention and discussion among netizens online, while online public opinion frequently plays a significant role in numerous incidents.

This study is of great significance for exploring the evolution trajectory of internet-based sudden public incidents concerning people's livelihoods and the shifts in online public opinion trends. It mainly unfolds from the perspective of how internet opinion leaders influence and alter the views of other ordinary participants. The literature analysis method is adopted to search for and review relevant materials and documents; the advantage of this method lies in its ability to conduct rational analysis of typical cases, thereby deriving valid conclusions and facilitating the smooth progress of the research. Against this backdrop, the ultimate objective of this study is to clarify and dissect the

impacts and alterations that internet opinion leaders exert on the viewpoints of other netizens, so as to better guide the trends of online public opinion.

To achieve this objective, the analysis and interpretation of a third typical case were carried out, ultimately identifying that internet opinion leaders are capable of exerting three types of influences on netizens: opinion reversal, outright opposition and complete conviction.

2. Research background

On July 21, 2025, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) released the 56th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development in Beijing. The report indicates that during the "14th Five-Year Plan" period, China has made remarkable achievements in internet construction. Specifically, new information infrastructure has been accelerating its deployment, and internet basic resources have continued to enrich, providing a solid foundation for internet penetration and digital economy development. As of June 2025, China's internet user base has reached 1.123 billion, with an internet penetration rate of 79.7%, indicating that an increasing number of population groups are sharing the fruits of digital development [1].

China's current internet environment is highly sophisticated, with an enormous size of internet users; as a result, news events rapidly escalate into online hot topics upon going viral on the internet. As one of China's major social platforms for interpersonal and group communication, Weibo provides an open space for public discussion and has gradually evolved into a vital arena for public opinion. Media outlets, opinion leaders and ordinary netizens jointly drive the rapid and extensive dissemination of social events. Meanwhile, against the backdrop of high internet penetration, netizens play an important role in various sudden public incidents concerning people's livelihoods. Among them, internet opinion leaders have forged their own spheres of online influence by virtue of their topic sway and fostered the formation of imagined communities. Under the emotional contagion of such imagined communities, online groups tend to exhibit an emotional inclination in their opinion expression. Behaviors such as sensationalization, criticism, and habitual skepticism will accelerate the spread of negative emotions, thereby driving groups to form a black-and-white oppositional mindset and eroding the space for rational discussion [2]. Meanwhile, the excessive influence of internet opinion leaders can also affect fans who are not opinion leaders themselves.

Against this backdrop, the influence of traditional media's discourse has gradually diminished, and correspondingly, the opinions of ordinary netizens have been manifested and expressed. The agenda-setting function of traditional media is no longer effective; instead, the high attention paid to online celebrities has given rise to agenda-setting. The growing attention on online celebrities enables their remarks to generate enormous effects instantly. This signifies that opinion leaders possess increasingly strong agenda-setting and public opinion guiding capabilities.

The influence of Weibo opinion leaders is not a one-dimensional superposition of fan numbers, but consists of four core indicators: activity level, communication power, coverage, and recognition. Among them, communication power is directly reflected in the number of effective users and posts that comment on, repost, or mention their views; coverage, on the other hand, depends on the scale and interaction quality of active fan groups [3]. With opinion leaders exerting such significant effects nowadays, studying their influence on ordinary netizens can facilitate a better understanding of the direction and trend of events.

3. Concept interpretation

Internet opinion leaders refer to individuals or organizations that, on internet platforms, frequently provide information, viewpoints, and interpretations by virtue of professional knowledge, social capital, or personal charisma. Through high-quality content and interactions, they exert a significant impact on the cognition, attitudes, or behaviors of other netizens, and serve as key communication nodes connecting mass media and ordinary audiences. In the online public opinion field, opinion leaders have replaced traditional media as important agenda-setting subjects. By continuously enhancing the exposure of specific issues, they can effectively guide the discussion focus of ordinary netizens, aggregate originally scattered public attention toward core issues, and thereby dominate the direction of public opinion evolution [4].

Ordinary netizens influenced by internet opinion leaders can be roughly divided into three categories. In this case, they are roughly categorized as those holding a supportive attitude towards prepared dishes, those opposing prepared dishes, and those with an indifferent stance towards prepared dishes. These three attitudes affect their initial positions: whether to support the opinion leaders, oppose them, or pay no attention to the topic. As the incident ferments and expands, the views of internet opinion leaders will also exert an influence on them. Weibo users' trust in information is not entirely based on fact-checking, but more on the identity endorsement of the information publisher. When the publisher has positive persona labels such as "daring to speak the truth" and "speaking for the public", the trust and acceptance of their views will be significantly improved, and the cost of information screening will be reduced accordingly [5]. Therefore, well-known opinion leaders with the label of "daring to speak the truth" like An opinion leader are more likely to gain recognition from netizens, and their opinions and viewpoints are also more likely to influence netizens' views.

What are sudden public incidents concerning people's livelihoods? They refer to incidents that occur suddenly and cause or may cause serious harm to the basic lives of the people. Due to their close connection with the vital interests of the public, the evolution of public opinion on such incidents in social media presents typical characteristics of "rapid outbreak - emotion dominance - multi-party game - slow decline". The intervention of opinion leaders often becomes a key node for public opinion to break through circles and spread [6]. Precisely for this reason, the influence of opinion leaders in sudden public incidents concerning people's livelihoods is extremely significant, often exerting unpredictable effects and impacts.

4. Concept interpretation

This study focuses on the analysis of specific cases. It selects some users who expressed and evaluated their views on prepared dishes before the outbreak of the incident, and conducts an analysis by comparing these views with their views after the incident, so as to make the research results more reasonable and credible.

Meanwhile, due to the information cocoons on social platforms, users who are already familiar with prepared dishes will pay more attention to such incidents, making them more suitable for the case study. However, under the algorithm recommendation mechanism, social media users are highly likely to fall into the predicament of "information cocoons". The core issues set by opinion leaders will be continuously pushed through algorithms, keeping users in a homogeneous information environment where it is difficult to access information from diverse perspectives, thereby strengthening their recognition of specific views [7]. Therefore, the selection of users is not limited to An opinion leader's fans; it is hoped that they hold different initial views and are not

affected by information cocoons. Users on social media platforms tend to be exposed to ideologically homogeneous information, and this homogeneity is further reinforced by algorithmic recommendation and the discourse guidance of opinion leaders, making it difficult for users to access diverse perspectives [8].

4.1. Zipper

Zipper (with the username "zipper") is a Weibo user with a certain fan base. Before the September 8th incident, he posted a message stating his views on prepared dishes, arguing that it is quite terrifying that prepared dishes have been demonized. In his opinion, the hygiene standards of large-scale prepared dish factories are much higher than those of most restaurants. Moreover, with the improvement of laws, the standards of the entire industry have been raised. Although the national standard has not yet been released, the production environment of large factories is still very good, so he is not that resistant to prepared dishes. Thanks to his own fan base, his remarks also triggered dozens of comments and reposts. Influence on the Internet does not solely depend on the number of fans; a large number of comments and reposts can also make more people access one's views, thereby enhancing the influence of one's words. There is a fallacy that the number of followers equals influence in social media. The real influence of a user is not determined by the size of followers, but by the ability to drive followers' interaction behaviors such as forwarding, commenting and practical action transformation [9].

After the incident escalated, in his Weibo post published on September 12th, Zipper explicitly mentioned the time when An opinion leader criticized Xibei, which confirms that he was influenced by An opinion leader's views. Under the influence of An opinion leader's opinions, he believed that the use of prepared dishes in restaurants is not beneficial to ordinary people. In his view, ordinary people go to restaurants for fresh, freshly-cooked food. Therefore, the selling point of "more hygienic prepared dishes" should not be used in restaurants, as restaurants are business premises. To a certain extent, he changed his initial views on prepared dishes. He is a typical case of initially holding a supportive attitude towards prepared dishes but reversing his stance under the influence of opinion leaders, which is also a common type of influence exerted by internet opinion leaders on ordinary netizens, namely opinion reversal.

Furthermore, the difficulty in realizing the right to know about prepared dishes has made An opinion leader's remarks more persuasive and credible, and precisely for this reason, Zipper has become more likely to recognize and believe An opinion leader's views and opinions. There are significant difficulties in realizing consumers' right to know in the prepared dish industry: most catering operators do not take the initiative to clearly indicate the use of prepared dishes, some merchants even deliberately conceal it, misleading consumers by taking advantage of information asymmetry. At present, the lack of clear mandatory indication standards has led consumers to face problems of difficulty in burden of proof and high costs when safeguarding their rights [10].

4.2. Sansi Xiaoyao

Like Zipper, Sansi is also a blogger with a certain number of fans and influence on the Internet. On September 6th, before the incident, he shifted his focus from whether astronauts' food is prepared dishes to whether prepared dishes are healthy and whether they represent a further innovation in industrial products. In his view, since prepared dishes can be used as astronauts' food, they are also healthy and reliable enough to enter students' campuses and daily life.

After the outbreak of An opinion leader's incident, Sansi's views were not biased by An opinion leader's opinions immediately; instead, he delved into the potential ambiguous and undefined parts of An opinion leader's remarks. This is difficult for most users to achieve. As a person with the identity of safeguarding rights and speaking the truth, An opinion leader's words are likely to mislead the general public and make them easily believe. The influence of internet opinion leaders' words is deeply bound to their identity construction. By continuously strengthening personas such as "being earnest about safeguarding rights" and "daring to question authority", they can form stable credibility assets. Their discourse expression often anchors public pain points in the posture of "speaking for the people", realizing the rapid dissemination and recognition of views [11]. However, Sansi was not greatly affected; on the contrary, he found that An opinion leader completely categorized central kitchen dishes as prepared dishes, which he did not agree with. This constitutes the resistant influence exerted by internet opinion leaders. As someone who initially had a favorable attitude towards prepared dishes, Sansi still insisted on his own views after An opinion leader expressed his opinions, refuted the imprecise parts of An opinion leader's views, and expressed his opposing opinions.

4.3. Yifan

An ordinary user posted two pictures of self-made prepared dishes both before and after the incident, expressing certain recognition and affection for prepared dishes. Throughout the incident, this user was not explicitly influenced and still chose prepared dishes as a meal option before and after the incident. This is a scenario where internet opinion leaders have not exerted any influence, and the user still maintained their own judgments and opinions.

5. Incident process and analysis of mass users

On September 10, 2025, An opinion leader criticized Xibei Catering via his Weibo account, alleging that "nearly all its dishes are prepared dishes with exorbitant prices". He also called on the state to enact legislation that mandates the mandatory labeling of prepared dishes, which instantly ignited widespread attention across the entire internet.

In response, Xibei first made clarifications through its customer service team, and then its founder Jia Guolong held a press conference. The company denied the claim of using prepared dishes, stating that its practices were fully compliant with the relevant definitions jointly issued by six national ministries and commissions. Xibei further announced that it would open the kitchens of all its stores nationwide to public scrutiny, and even revealed its intention to file a lawsuit against An opinion leader.

Subsequently, An opinion leader offered a reward of 100,000 yuan for evidence supporting his allegations, and continued to voice his doubts through live broadcasts and published articles. During this period, Xibei stores were exposed for issues such as non-compliant sanitation standards and disputes over the pre-processing of some ingredients. Jia Guolong's remark referring to An opinion leader as a "cyber smearsman" further intensified the conflict.

On September 15, Xibei released an official apology letter and put forward 9 rectification measures. On the same day, An opinion leader stated that he would abandon further pursuit of the matter, marking the end of the core controversy of this incident.

Emergencies related to people's livelihood are often accompanied by the infringement of public interests, and once they ferment on the internet, they tend to trigger a huge public outcry. The core public opinion pain point of livelihood-related emergencies lies in the failure to meet the public's

core demands for interests, such as food safety and consumers' right to know. The spread of public opinion regarding such incidents usually starts with the expression of individual demands, which are then amplified by opinion leaders and quickly transformed into the collective demands of the public for their legitimate rights and interests [12].

At the initial stage of the incident, An opinion leader quickly seized the high ground of public opinion, and the vast majority of Weibo users were more inclined to endorse his viewpoints and opinions. The dispute over prepared dishes between An opinion leader and Xibei in September 2025 made it to the hot search rankings within two hours after Luo posted his critical Weibo on September 10, with the reading volume of related topics exceeding 100 million. At the early stage of the incident, public opinion showed a one-sided trend of criticizing Xibei, and over 90% of netizens supported An opinion leader's appeal for mandatory labeling of prepared dishes. Xibei's subsequent measure of opening its store kitchens failed to effectively reverse the negative public opinion [13].

As a matter of fact, An opinion leader's original argument contained a number of fallacies and ambiguous areas. According to official definitions, products from central kitchens do not fall into the category of prepared dishes. However, Luo explicitly categorized central kitchen products as prepared dishes in his statements, and leveraging his own influence, this misclassification exerted a significant impact. False news spreads faster and more widely than true news on social media, mainly because false news is more likely to trigger emotional resonance among users. Opinion leaders' improper interpretation of events can easily become the source of false information diffusion, leading to public cognitive bias [14].

The wording in An opinion leader's initial Weibo post—"Finding that almost all dishes are prepared ones, and they are so expensive—it's really disgusting."—enhanced his approachability through emotional vocabulary, making his opinions and remarks more convincing. Emotional contagion on social media follows the path of "core node triggering-interactive communication diffusion-group emotional aggregation". Emotional vocabulary used by opinion leaders spreads rapidly through interactive behaviors such as comments and reposts, transforming individual negative emotions into group emotions, which in turn dominate the public's cognitive judgments [15]. Meanwhile, An opinion leader has long maintained a persona as an anti-counterfeiting advocate and truth-teller on Weibo; naturally, relying on this persona has further increased the trust that more users place in him. The credibility of information on Weibo is affected by multiple indicators, including the user's identity background, the emotional tendency of language expression, and the consistency with public cognitive stereotypes. The positive identity label of opinion leaders can significantly improve the credibility of their expressed views [16].

It was precisely through the exertion of these personas and behaviors that An opinion leader's remarks successfully convinced more people, thereby seizing the high ground of public opinion. Therefore, though his remarks were not entirely true and contained many ambiguous areas, he ultimately forced Xibei, as a restaurant, to make concessions to him. The dynamic measurement of the influence of Weibo opinion leaders needs to take into account two dimensions: "static persona credibility" and "dynamic event participation". The former is reflected in the long-accumulated public trust, while the latter is manifested in the frequency of opinion output, the speed of interactive response, and the ability to elevate issues in specific events [17]. It was this combination of static persona credibility and dynamic event participation—including An opinion leader's subsequent live broadcasts and evaluation surveys—that further enhanced his credibility. At the same time, the lack of personal discernment among the public also enabled him to successfully persuade the vast majority of users.

Individuals' ability of information discrimination is the key factor to avoid falling into false news. The lack of analytical thinking ability makes people more likely to accept the views of opinion leaders passively, while improving media literacy can effectively enhance the ability to distinguish the authenticity of information [18].

6. Conclusion

The governance of public opinion in sudden public events related to people's livelihood needs to balance the positive value and risk control of opinion leaders. Although the involvement of opinion leaders can quickly focus on the public's core interests and demands, promote the exposure of industry problems and the improvement of regulations, it may also intensify conflicts by amplifying emotions and spreading false information. Therefore, for platforms, it is necessary to optimize algorithm recommendation mechanisms, break information cocoons, and ensure the dissemination of diverse viewpoints; for regulatory authorities, they should accelerate the formulation of standards and legislative processes in people's livelihood fields (such as prepared dishes) to resolve the pain points of public demands at the source; for ordinary netizens, it is necessary to improve media literacy and information discrimination capabilities to avoid blindly agreeing with the views of opinion leaders; for opinion leaders, they should cherish their credibility assets, verify the authenticity of information before speaking out, and avoid replacing factual arguments with emotional expressions.

This study reveals the influence laws of internet opinion leaders on ordinary netizens through specific cases, which include three scenarios: conviction, opposition, and reversal. When similar incidents occur in the future, these three scenarios can be used to analyze influences and viewpoints, making the entire internet discourse environment more sincere and friendly.

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