# Research on the Dissemination of Controversial Events on Chinese Social Media Platforms: A Case Study of the Issue of "Fat Cat Incident"

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*Abstract:* The social media platform represented by Weibo, due to its immediacy, interactivity, and large user base, exerts a profound impact on the formation and development of public opinion. In this context, events that are the subject of controversy on social media can spread rapidly, triggering widespread social discussion and emotional fluctuations in a very short time. The "Fat Cat Incident" is a case in point, as it rapidly ignited public opinion through social media and became a widely discussed topic. The actions and statements of the various stakeholders involved in the incident, including public figures, companies, and the media, significantly influenced the dissemination of the event and the direction of public discourse on social media platforms. This phenomenon has sparked extensive discussions about how social media shapes public opinion, guides public emotions, and reflects deeper societal issues. This article will examine the mechanisms of dissemination and the formation of public opinion surrounding controversial events on social media platforms, with the "Fat Cat Incident" serving as a case study.

*Keywords:* Fat Cat Incident, Social Media, Online Influencers, Public Opinion, Controversy Online Incident.

## 1.    Introduction

Social media platforms, exemplified by Weibo, which is one of the biggest social media in China with about 5 billion monthly active users in 2024 second quarter financial results, profoundly influence the formation and development of public opinion in China due to their immediacy, interactivity, and extensive user base. In this context, controversial events on social media can rapidly spread in a very short period, leading to widespread societal discussions and emotional reactions.

The issue of the "Fat Cat Incident" was a typical case, as it quickly ignited public opinion through social media and became a widely discussed societal incident. In April 2024, "Fat Cat Incident" which was a nickname on social media used by Liu Jie allegedly broke up with his girlfriend Tan Zhu due to relationship issues, which led to his subsequent suicide and sparked widespread discussion. On

May 2, Liu's elder sister publicly stated that her 21-year-old brother had been in a relationship with the woman for over two years. Now that her brother has committed suicide, the sister opened up a vociferous denunciation of Tan Zhu according to the transaction between Tan and Liu during their relationship on social media platforms. Various stakeholders in this incident, including public figures, businesses, and media, had a profound impact on the event's dissemination and the direction of public opinion through their actions and statements on social media platforms.

For instance, some of the enterprises including ChaPanda and Wallace, which both are engaging in the catering industry, stated on Weibo on May 3, expressing deep sorrow and regret for Liu's death upon learning about the issue of the "Fat Cat Incident". Regarding the issue reported by the public — where the delivered beverage was ordinary drinking water instead of the ordered drink—a special task force has been established to investigate the matter immediately, and on the afternoon of the 3rd, ChaPanda announced that it had donated 1 million yuan to the "ChaPanda Charity Fund" of the Sichuan Youth Development Foundation under the "Fat Cat Incident" name, aimed at supporting youth-related public welfare projects. Then ChaPanda experienced an astonishing 8,524% increase in search volume compared to the previous period on May 3rd according to Baidu Index data. On May 3rd, the information index for ChaPanda was nearly on par with that of "Fat Cat Incident", though it quickly declined afterward on the following day, the index for "Fat Cat Incident" continued to rise, and it finally became the most trending topic across the entire internet in Chinese social media at one point. Subsequent police investigations revealed that Liu's sister had used the online controversial incident of Liu's death to cyber-violate and manipulate public opinion, resulting in Tan suffering invasion of privacy, cyber-attacks, and security threats. These actions seriously disrupted Tan's life and the cyber order, and the police have confirmed that she has violated the law and is dealing with Liu's elder sister by the law. In addition to the impact on Tan, Liu's sister's behavior has also affected brands such as ChaPanda and Wallace's, exposing them to public censure, and the motives for their actions have been questioned as possibly having an element of profit gain.

In order to investigate how such phenomena trigger widespread discussions on how social media shape public opinion and guide public sentiment. This paper will conduct a deep analysis of how the "Fat Cat Incident" garnered significant attention and triggered a chain reaction under the combined influence of media power, information dissemination mechanisms, and user emotions, and it will explore how these factors interweave to drive the development of the event. Besides, excluding high-frequency terms related to gender issues, this paper will examine the underlying dissemination mechanisms and preconditions for opinion formation associated with the high-frequency vocabulary of hypothetical events. It aims to delve into the deeper, implicit reasons behind these phenomena, with the goal of uncovering and exploring broader and more profound online communication mechanisms.

## 2. Literature Review

With the rise of social media platforms represented by Weibo in the Internet era, morally controversial events in society have provided immediate and extensive ways for the public to receive information and guide public opinion under the communication mechanism of social media platforms. Many scholars have studied the dissemination mechanism of information and the formation and guidance of public opinion for the dissemination of hot events or topics on social media. According to Peng Yujie's research, We-Media, exemplified by Weibo, is different from traditional mass media in that it initiates agenda-setting first and expands the scope of users' subjects [1]. At the same time, He Jia suggests that under the non-institutionalized communication behaviors of the Internet community, the formation and spread of topical events demonstrates the multiplication of collective energy, and thus the scope of its spread is often unpredictable [2]. Chen Jia argues that in the process of event dissemination, the party that is the first to voice out the event in the media network has a natural

advantage in accessing information, which offers dependable and stereotypical access to information for the public [3].

Although there are few studies on the Fat Cat Incident itself, there is no lack of research on the formation and guidance mechanism of public opinion in controversial events on the Internet. Xiong Fei and Liu Yun, in their study of opinion formation, pointed out that public opinion often forms an ordered state during the collection of user behavior patterns, in which a dominant viewpoint will exist [4]. As suggested by Kyungmo Kim, Young Min Baek, and Narae Kim, public opinion arises in debates, where the public goes from an individual to public through opinions generated on topics, and online public opinion can be more prone to polarised views than offline public opinion [5]. This is corroborated by Ni Chuanyan's observation that, with the diversification of We-Media, the public is prone to group revelry due to information overload, but at the same time, the reporting of events is often reversed over time due to a lack of objectivity [6]. "Fat Cat Incident has followed this pattern of development, with multiple reversals over time. In addition, You Kuan suggests that during the fermentation of controversial events through online platforms, the labeled naming of events tends to inflame the public's stereotypes of opinion groups, thus triggering extreme public opinion tendencies [7].

The direction of public opinion in controversial events is not static. Up to now, scholars' research on the factors that can influence the change of public opinion has laid a deep foundation for analyzing the guidance mechanism of public opinion. In the "Fat Cat Incident", influencers who expressed their opinions on social media platforms were the most vocal individuals in the opinion maelstrom. Fine F. Leung, Flora F. Gu, and Robert W. Palmatier in 2022 suggested that online influencers are significantly influential digital opinion leaders for fan networks [8]. The opinions and consumer behavior of the fan base are influenced by the behavior of influencers, and the same applies to the opinion-guiding effect of influencer user behavior under controversial events such as the "Fat Cat Incident. Unfortunately, however, the study does not dwell much on the marketing of brands on the Internet. This is an element that this study needs to dig deeper into. Meanwhile, in the previous studies, the information dissemination research and public opinion impression of the "Fat Cat Incident" itself are minimal, and the participation of commercial brands and influencers as factors are rarely considered. Moreover, while influencers are shaping public opinion, this is also vulnerable to manipulation and misinformation [9]. Similarly, the emotions and sentiments displayed by influencers lead to similar emotional associations with the empathic expressions of the general public [10].

Hence, this study will explore the communication of the "Fat Cat Incident" on Chinese social media platforms based on previous studies, through the communication mechanism of We-Media and the online influencer's guidance of public opinion and emotions.

## 3.　Methodology

In order to ensure the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the study, this study adopts a qualitative research method and uses a third-party software, Sina Opinion, to screen the data on the topic of "Fat Cat Incident" on the mainstream platforms in China. The screening results show that Sina Weibo has a significant amount of information and activity on this topic, so it is selected as the main data source to explore and analyze the relevant information in more depth and provide solid data support for the study as a whole.

First, this study analyzes in depth the vocal behavior of a specific online influencer in the "Fat Cat incident". In order to scientifically identify the significant changes in the trend of public opinion, the study adopts the method of calculating and comparing the derivatives of the public opinion index before and after the online influencer spoke, and visually observes the changes in the index. Thus, the study explores the impact of his influence on the dynamics of public opinion.

Second, using Python crawler technology, the study constructed a comprehensive data set covering the microblogging topic of "Fat Cat Incident". In the data pre-processing stage, the study carefully excluded non-media user data to ensure the accuracy and relevance of the data. The study also focused on popular posts related to the "Fat Cat Incident" in microblogs with a high level of attention and interaction. To ensure that the analyses focused on widely followed posts, the study established strict screening criteria: posts had to be published within the study period and receive at least 300 likes within 30 days of publication. This criterion helped ensure that the content analyzed in the study had a significant social impact. In this study, a total of 511 posts were collected through conditional screening between April 11, 2024, and September 1, 2024.

During the data export and collation phase, this study fine-tuned the datasets that met the screening criteria and imported them into a Python-based sentiment analysis environment for in-depth sentiment analysis. The study classified the sentiment trends of media reports and social media messages into three categories: positive, neutral, and negative. By analyzing these data, the study examines the relevance of media reports and social media messages in the public's understanding and interpretation of the "Fat Cat incident".

## 4.    Results

This article analyzes the reasons for the fermentation and spread of the "Fat Cat Incident" on social media platforms from three aspects.

To investigate whether the remarks of Internet celebrities led to the rapid spread of the "Fat Cat Incident" and the phenomenon of collective action in public sentiment.

This study selected the user behavior of "Yin Shihang 77" who is an influencer on the Sina Weibo platform as the research object. At 7:15 am on May 4, 2024, in the early stages of the escalation of the incident, the user "Yin Shihang 77" posted a post related to "Fat Cat and his girlfriend". In this post, Yin Shihang 77 announced his intention to provide financial and legal support to the protagonist of Fat Cat. After the post was published, "Yin Shihang speaks for Fat Cat" became a popular search term on Weibo, with a total of 110 million views and 266,000 interactions.

Initially, the user activity surrounding Fat Cat on online platforms was limited to the gaming sector, which was the starting point for the escalation of the incident. "Yin Shihang 77" represents a type of key opinion leader known for his appeal. When "Yin Shihang 77" expressed his support for Fat Cat's family, the message spread significantly among his large base of over one million followers, reaching users who had no previous involvement in the gaming sector. This, to some extent, facilitated an increase in the visibility of the incident. According to Weibo index data, on May 4, 2024, the day "Yin Shihang 77" published his post, the total volume of information about the "Fat Cat Incident" on the Weibo platform peaked at 1,455,588 posts (as shown in Figure 1).
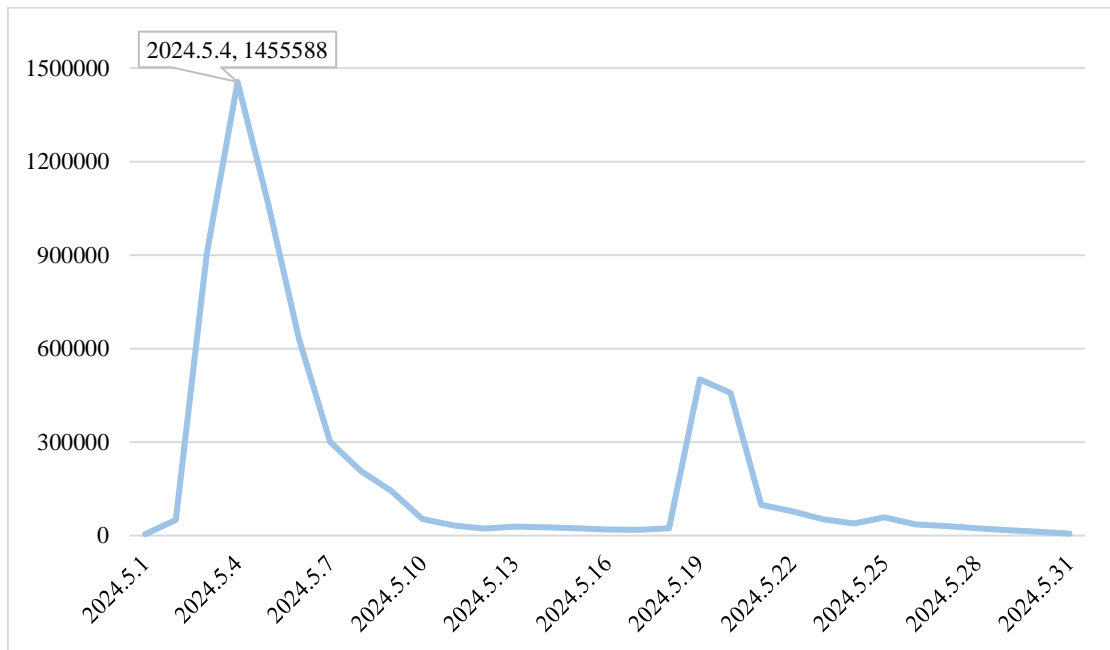
Figure 1: The trends of total information regarding the "Fat Cat incident" on Weibo

It is obvious that the situation reached its peak on May 4. The same day also saw a peak in interaction volume, with a total of 285,145,381 interactive messages posted (as shown in Figure 2).
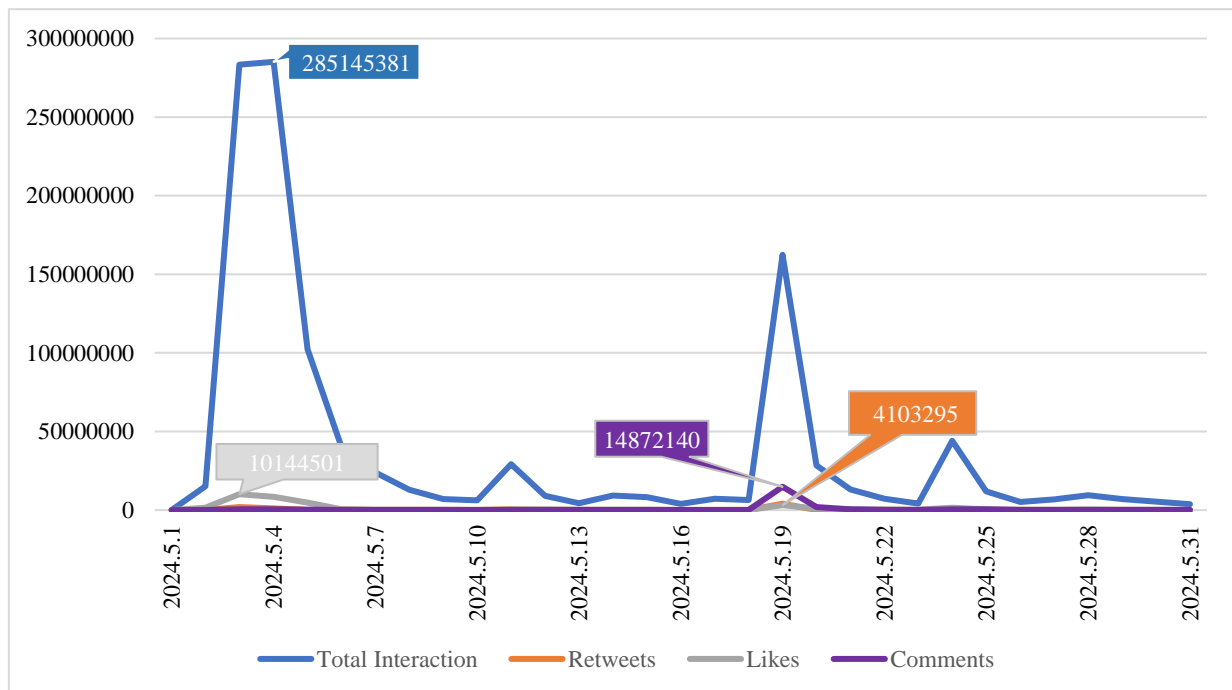


Figure 2: The various data trends of different posts

There is another interesting point. "Yin Shihang 77" expressed support for Fat Cat's family, which contributed to the public's emotional guidance. According to the "Weibo Emotion Map", excluding neutral attitudes, the most common emotions expressed in ordinary users' posts are "anger" and "sadness" (as shown in Figure 3).
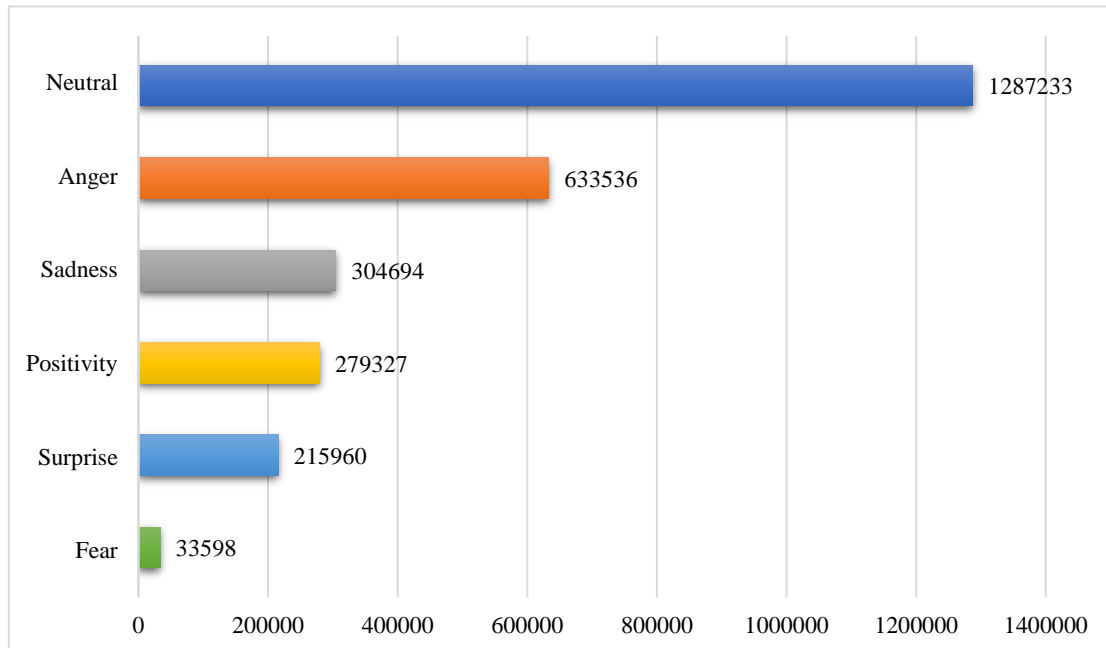
Figure 3: Sentiment analysis of other ordinary users' posts

Another important factor that can influence the "Fat Cat Incident" can be observed. Media reports and social media information are critical to the public's understanding and interpretation of the incident. The form of these messages, the integrity of the content, and the opinions expressed can directly or indirectly influence the public's perception of the incident. The integrity and objectivity of the information are particularly important in shaping the public's confidence and understanding of the incident. However, most media reports are not based on first-hand observations, but on the integration and interpretation of secondary data. Given the media's central role in disseminating information, if the report lacks objectivity or the information is incomplete, it is likely to mislead the public and cause misunderstanding or prejudice. In order to ensure the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the research, the study decided to use Sina Weibo Data Mining, a data collection tool, to focus on a Chinese mainstream media platform and systematically collect postings on the platform from official and popular media about the "Fat Cat Incident".

According to the data from Sina Weibo's public sentiment tool, the information volume on Sina Weibo reaches 2,752,528 posts, accounting for 43.85% of the total information volume (Figure 4), significantly surpassing other social media platforms. Based on this notable data distribution characteristic, we selected Sina Weibo as the primary social media platform for our research, focusing on in-depth and detailed collection and analysis of high-traffic content.
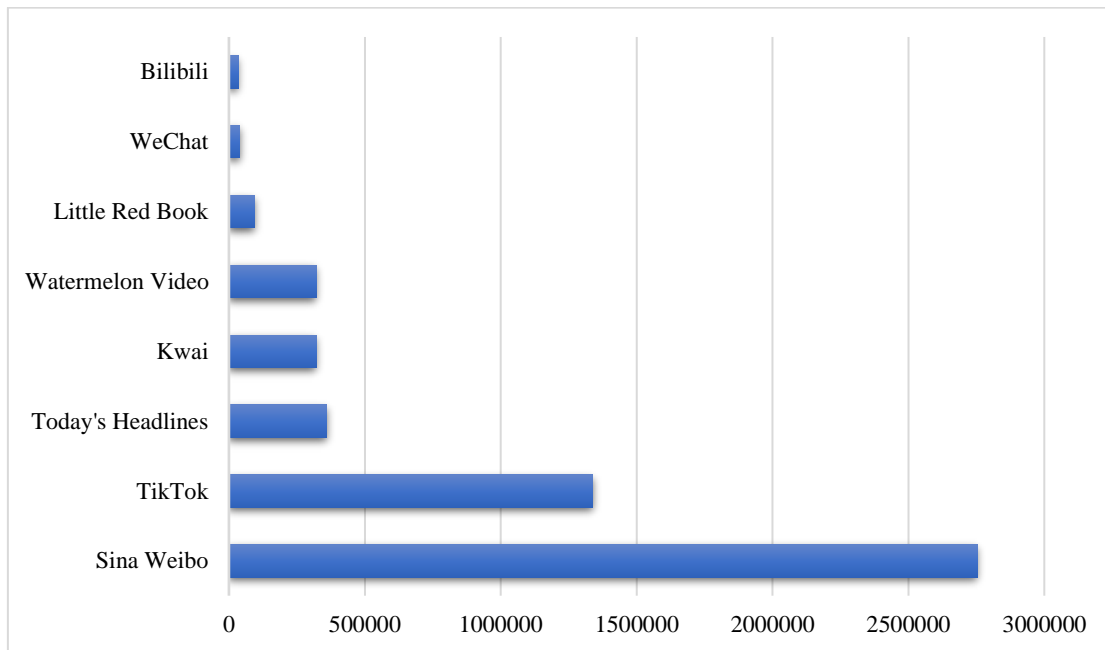
Figure 4: Number of articles on the Fat Cat incident in Chinese mainstream media

Python crawler technology was used to collect data on discussions about the "Fat Cat Incident" topic on Weibo. To ensure the authority and accuracy of the data, we first excluded content posted by non-media users. Then, we systematically collected Weibo data closely related to the "Fat Cat Incident." In order to accurately target posts with high attention, we set strict screening criteria: only posts published between April 11, 2024, and September 1, 2024, and posts that received 300 likes or more within 30 days of posting were included in the study.

The research finally selected 511 posts from numerous posts published by official and mass media and constructed a dedicated dataset accordingly. Next, we imported the dataset into our self-developed Python-based sentiment analysis software for more in-depth analysis. The software can deeply analyze various emotional words in the posts, including positive and negative emotional words, degree words, and negation words, so as to accurately capture the emotional tendency of each post and calculate the corresponding positive emotional score, negative emotional score, and total emotional score. In order to more intuitively display this data, we further organized the analysis results into an emotional analysis chart.

According to the analysis presented in the figure (as shown in Figure 5), we can observe that although most of the content in official media reports and public media discourse strives to show a positive attitude, as many as 24% of official media reports and public media discourse still reveal a clear negative sentiment. At the same time, these reports also show a certain degree of one-sidedness in the transmission of information.
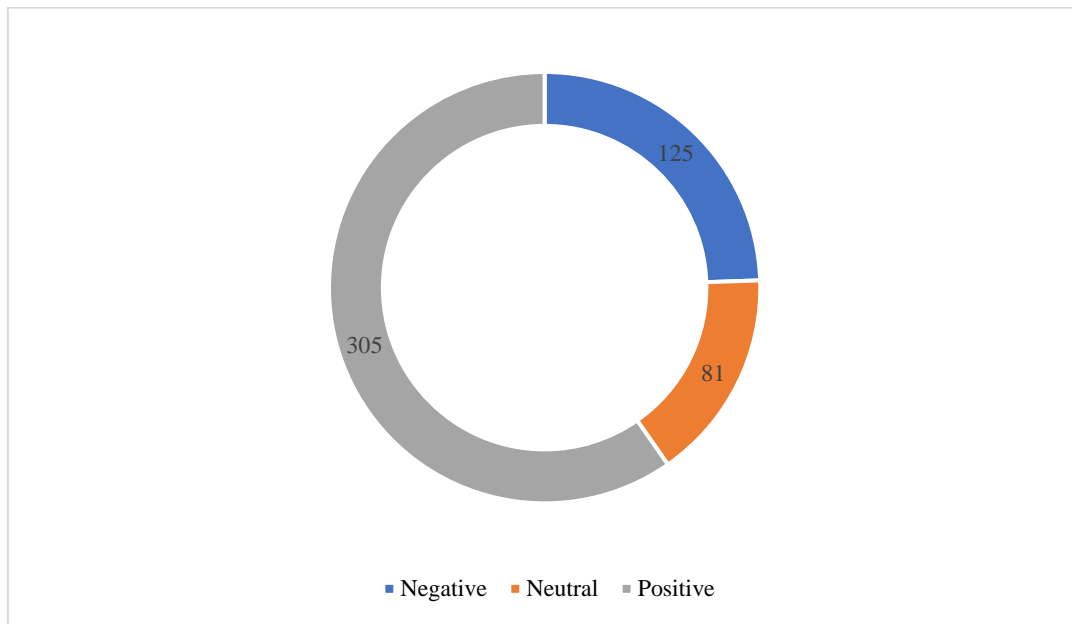
Figure 5: Sentiment analysis of official and public media-published articles

To study how some people are affected by it. Therefore, there is a graph showing the proportion of people's reactions when interacting with the "Fat Cat Incident". We found that the number of retweeted tweets was as high as 2,134,731, accounting for 77.5% of the total. In contrast, the number of original tweets was relatively low, only 619,930, or 22.5%.

## 5.  Discussion

Regarding our first result, online influencers accelerate the speed of information dissemination in controversial events such as the "Fat Cat Incident". First, online influencers' voicing of an event accelerates the diffusion of the event itself across a wide range of their fan bases. With online influencers' wide audience reach, every word they utter becomes a powerful channel for spreading information and emotional appeals. The example of "Yin Shihang 77" mentioned in the previous article demonstrates this phenomenon. Before Yin Shihang's involvement in the incident, the discussion of the Fat Cat Incident was mainly confined to smaller online communities, such as the gaming sector. However, "Yin Shihang 77", as an online influencer in the fashion and lifestyle sectors, had a large fan base and a high interaction rate that spread the story to a larger online community, eventually becoming a hot topic throughout China.

At the same time, thanks to social media's algorithm that prioritizes the display of highly interactive content, the high level of interaction brought about by online influencers such as "Yin Shihang 77" after their participation in a certain topic also increased the visibility of the topic itself. As a result of this high visibility, the content goes beyond its immediate fan base and reaches a new audience that may not have been aware of the topic in the first place. This means that online influencers can break down the silos of information that exist when they intervene in a topic, and even a topic that has emerged in a niche area has the opportunity to become widely publicized through their intervention. With online influencers involved in such a communication mechanism, the speed of information dissemination snowballs with the instant visibility and influence they provide.

Regarding the influence of online influencers on the communication mechanism, in addition to accelerating the dissemination of information, they also provide guidance for the generation of public sentiment and opinion; by sharing their own personal views and emotional reactions, online influencers also set the initial public sentiment tone of the incident among their corresponding fan

communities. In "Fat Cat Incident", "Yin Shihang 77" expressed his sympathy and support for the Fat Cat's family, which greatly influenced the public's reaction to the incident. His emotional response and stance guided the public's emotional framework of the incident, and the public group represented by the fans also expressed similar emotional responses.

According to the emotional analysis mentioned in the previous section, emotions such as anger and sadness became the dominant emotions in public discussion. This reflects the fact that the emotional framing of "Yin Shihang 77's" own reactions also largely influenced the emotional reactions of his followers. Thus, online influencers are not only gas pedals of information but also shape the way the public interprets information. By taking a stance on the event, "Yin Shihang 77" steered the public discussion in a specific direction, amplifying the emotions that echoed the collective sentiments of the audience.

In addition, online influencers' channeling of public emotions may also have a polarizing effect. When online influencers use emotionally charged language or frame issues in a personally biased way, their followers may take more extreme positions as a result. In the case of the "Fat Cat Incident", the emotional appeal of "Yin Shihang 77" fueled stronger emotional responses, including collective anger and calls for justice. This demonstrates the ability of Internet celebrities to channel individual emotions into collective action and deepens the public's emotional engagement with events.

Media reports and social media information play a crucial role in the public's understanding and interpretation of events. The form of these messages, the integrity of their content, and the opinions expressed can directly or indirectly influence the public's perception of events [11]. The interaction between the media and the audience in constructing the meaning of an event together shapes the cognitive framework of contemporary society. In Craig's view, the reporting behaviors and attitudes of mass media workers are often deeply influenced by multiple factors such as specific interests, social customs, industry norms, and values, which in turn determine the specific presentation of media information [12]. This approach subtly guides popular culture and influences public judgment. However, Gordon warns that most media reports do not originate from first-hand observations, but are based on the integration and interpretation of secondary data [13]. Given the central position of the media in the dissemination of information, if reports lack objectivity or are incomplete, they are likely to mislead the public, leading to misunderstanding and prejudice. In order to ensure the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the research, the study decided to use the Sina Weibo Data Mining Tool.

According to the data provided by Sina Weibo Tong, we found that Sina Weibo has a significant advantage in the amount of information published, with 2,752,528 pieces of information accounting for 43.85% of the total, a proportion significantly higher than other social media platforms. Given Sina Weibo's prominent position in information dissemination, it was selected as a representative of mainstream social media platforms in this study.

Python crawler technology was used to collect data on discussions on the topic of "Fat Cat Incident" on Weibo. To ensure the authority and accuracy of the data, we first excluded content posted by non-media users. We then systematically collected Weibo data closely related to the "Fat Cat Incident". In order to accurately target posts with high attention, we set strict screening criteria: only posts published between 11 April 2024 and 1 September 2024 and posts that received 300 likes or more within 30 days of posting were included in the study. This screening criterion focuses our research on posts that have received a significant social response, thereby improving the pertinence and effectiveness of the research.

After a rigorous selection process, the study finally selected 511 articles from official and mass media, and a dedicated dataset was constructed accordingly. We then imported the dataset into our own Python-based sentiment analysis software for more in-depth analysis. In this software, we have set clear sentiment scoring standards: A sentiment score between -10 and 0 indicates a negative

attitude, with 0 representing a neutral stance, while scores from 0 to 20 reflect a positive attitude. The software can analyze in detail the various sentiment words in the post, including positive and negative sentiment words, degree words, and negation words, to accurately capture the emotional tendency of each post and calculate the corresponding positive sentiment score, negative sentiment score, and total sentiment score. In order to present this data in a more intuitive way, we further organized the analysis results into an emotional analysis graph, thus achieving a high level of data visualization.

According to the analysis in the figure, we can observe that although most of the content in official media reports and public media discourse tends to show a positive attitude, there is still a high of 24% of official media reports and public media discourse that shows obvious negativity. At the same time, these reports also show a certain degree of one-sidedness in the transmission of information. At the same time, based on the observation of the data during the research period, we found that the number of forwarded tweets was as high as 2,134,731, accounting for 77.5% of the total. In contrast, the number of original tweets was relatively low at only 619,930, or 22.5%. This comparison of data shows that during major public opinion events, individual users are often susceptible to the herd effect and may make irrational comments, further exacerbating the phenomenon of "disordered public opinion". Based on this, we conclude that the influence of media reports and social media information is positively correlated with the public's understanding and interpretation of the "Fat Cat Incident".

At the beginning of the "Fat Cat Incident", a large amount of emotional information and opinions quickly appeared on the Internet, which not only set the agenda for discussion among netizens but also stimulated strong emotional reactions. This phenomenon is consistent with Marcuse's concept of the "unidirectional human". In the context of the information explosion era, people's critical thinking and questioning spirit have been suppressed to some extent, and they are more inclined to unconditionally trust and accept the views conveyed by information publishers or key opinion leaders [14]. Take the "Fat Cat Incident" as an example. Irrational comments spread quickly on the Internet. Those who lack the ability to make rational judgments blindly follow the trend under the influence of inflammatory comments, which further exacerbates the confusion in the field of public opinion [15]. This is in line with Surette's view. Based on these observations and analyses, we have good reason to conclude that media reports and social media information play an important role in shaping public perception, but they can also lead to public misunderstanding of events.

## 6.    Conclusion

Based on the above research, this research has concluded that the statements of online influencers can impact the public's emotional ferment. Influencers such as "Yin Shihang 77" played a guiding role in the event dissemination. His voice amplified the impact of the event and guided the direction of public sentiment. After he posted relevant blog posts on May 3, the event's popularity soared, reflecting the online influencer's ability to guide public opinion on social media.

Meanwhile, the completeness of media reports and information on social media equally influences the intensity of public opinion. The emotional and incomplete nature of media reporting can mislead the public, resulting in distorted interpretations of events. Through relevant analytical investigations, it was observed that during the "Fat Cat Incident", the interaction between media and social platforms amplified emotional expressions, affecting the public's judgment and even leading to a phenomenon of "disorder in public opinion".

After excluding the high-frequency terms related to the gender on the surface, the study further reveals broader social and cultural issues underlying the "Fat Cat Incident". These issues pertain to the sense of responsibility among influential users on social media, as well as the objectivity and completeness of media in information dissemination. Such in-depth discussions provide new perspectives for understanding the complexities of information dissemination and public opinion formation in contemporary society.

## Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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