

A Study on Taiwan-related Public Opinion and Its Attitude Differences Among Mainland Chinese Netizens: An Analysis of the Topic of “Seeking Independence by Epidemic” on Weibo

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Abstract: This study explores the timing of the outbreak of Taiwan-related public opinion and the corresponding public opinion events among mainland microblog netizens under the theme of “seeking independence through the epidemic.” Utilizing the “interpretation package” theory, “encoding/decoding theory,” and emotional polarity analysis, the study establishes a framework for analyzing netizens’ sentiment in terms of priority, negotiation, and confrontation. The study extracts five distinct emotional differences in national identity, including “acknowledging the legitimacy of the Chinese central government and actively participating in the formation of national identity,” “having strong confidence in China’s military power,” displaying “nationalistic and resolute views on sovereignty issues,” “disapproving of certain harmful policies and subjects,” and “patriotic sentiments fueled by Internet populism.”

Keywords: mainland Chinese netizens; public opinion involving Taiwan; emotional differences

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1 Introduction

The novel coronavirus pneumonia epidemic is a major global public emergency and represents what Giddens and other scholars describe as the contemporary “risk society” in the context of “unprecedented changes” in the world today (Giddens, 1999). The epidemic presents a significant challenge to a country’s ability to govern

socially and guide public opinion.

Despite China's strong cohesion and institutional excellence in preventing and controlling the spread of the epidemic, it has successfully contained the domestic outbreak in a timely manner, creating "China speed," "the most beautiful retrograde," and "never lie flat" anti-disaster miracles. China has also actively carried out an international assistance policy based on the community of human destiny, demonstrating its role and style as a great country. However, some countries and regions have disregarded China's efforts in resisting the epidemic and have deliberately smeared China's image in the public opinion arena, inciting national hatred and attempting to gain inappropriate political benefits. During the epidemic, the DPP administration, led by Tsai Ing-wen, repeatedly criticized China as an "international epidemic gap" and prohibited Taiwan from exporting masks to the mainland, and conspired with the US government to allow Taiwan to join the World Health Organization in a vain attempt to become "de facto independent."

These actions have sparked intense debates and emotional fluctuations among China's netizen groups, who have expressed and constructed phenomenal public opinion events closely related to national identity through online interactive platforms, such as microblogs. Investigating the self-generated discourse logic and attitudes and emotions of netizens in this complex public opinion field is an efficient way to uncover differences in patriotic concepts, gather value consensus, and deepen identity (Xu, M. H. & Li, D. N., 2020). Since Weibo is a social platform and news acquisition medium used by most people in mainland China (to a certain extent, it is equivalent to the combination of Twitter and Facebook functions), therefore, this article chooses the relevant public opinion situation of Weibo as the starting point, and uses the public opinion analysis tool "Micro Hotspot"^① produced by Weibo Company, which is directly related to the Weibo corpus, to analyze the differences in the attitudes of mainland netizens towards Taiwan-related public opinions, and help optimize relevant public opinions reasonable construction (the time span and sample size of data collection will be described in Chapter 3).

2 Related studies of microblogging netizens' comments

With the advancements and growing popularity of Internet technology and mobile devices, social media platforms with low barriers, anonymity, group discussions, user-generated content, and self-selection have become primary means for individuals and various social groups to comment on public issues they are concerned with, disseminate information or exchange emotions. These platforms are crucial carriers and windows for reflecting social opinions, and academic research in the field of public opinion governance has often focused on the comments of internet users on social media, such as microblogs (Bi Hongmei & Huang Yilin., 2020; Zhang J, Zhang Yaping & Zhao Feng., 2020; Liu, Chunnian & Xiao, Di., 2020)

^① "Micro Hotspot", previously known as Sina Micro Opinion, is positioned as a big social data tool, with the primary functions of checking the hotness index, communication analysis, word-of-mouth analysis and microblogging sentiment of a certain person, company or event, with sections of microblogging event analysis, competitor analysis and big data report. This article uses the "Weibo event analysis" function. The corpus crawled by this function includes bloggers, commentators who have publicly published the input keywords (such as "Seeking Independence by Epidemic" in this article) on the entire Weibo platform. And it can also analyze which related posts or media have the most replies and reposts, so as to discover opinion leaders.

The cutting-edge research approach often involves analyzing socially-mediated internet users' comments by incorporating theories related to semiotics, structuralism, or the sociology of emotions. For instance, Yin Lian-Gen uses Gamson's "interpretive packages" theory and Stuart Hall's "encoding/decoding" theory to construct a paradigm with "metaphor, exemplars, catchphrases, depiction, roots, consequences, appeals/principle", the audience event interpretation framework was constructed with "metaphor, instance, aphorism, description, cause, effect, and principle" as the horizontal axis and confrontational interpretation, preferential (hegemonic) interpretation, and negotiated interpretation as the vertical axis to analyze the strong participatory characteristics and mass psychology of audiences in microblog space (Yin, Lian-Gen., 2014). Based on cognitive emotion theory and rooting theory, Deng Chunlin and Jia Yi et al. pointed out that microblog users tend to have emotional tendencies based on the stimulation of certain public opinion events, which can be divided into five categories: "strongly derogatory, generally derogatory, objective, generally positive, and strongly positive," while general users' emotional tendencies are frequently influenced by opinion leaders. These emotional tendencies of general users are often influenced by opinion leaders (Deng, Chunlin, Jia, Yi, Long, Zhengfan & Jiang, Liu., 2020); while Peng Guanglin believes that the analysis of internet users' comments should focus on the individual, collective, and social emotions behind them (Peng Guanglin., 2020).

Combining the existing research, it is not difficult to find that digging deep into social platforms represented by Weibo and news acquisition media to mine netizens' comments is a more feasible way to analyze the public opinion of mainland netizens in the "Seeking Independence by Epidemic" event that occurred along with the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, first of all, a basic judgment on their views and attitudes is made according to Hall's decoding/encoding theory in previous research, and then Gamson's "interpretation package" theory is adopted to analyze in detail what kind of emotional attitudes among netizens and how these emotions reflect national identity. Although the integration of the above studies can build a basic explanatory framework for this paper, there are also certain problems in these studies. On the one hand, many studies simply list the emotions or opinions reflected in the review texts according to the explanatory framework, without further subdividing the corresponding groups of people; On the other hand, many studies neglects to analyze the psychological identity, ideology, and social mentality reflected in the comments' emotions or opinions. Therefore, this study will overcome the above-mentioned deficiencies, and use the logic of sentiment analysis to go deep into the decoding/encoding point of view judgment and the analysis of "interpretation packages" and investigate the specific situation of Weibo netizens and Taiwan-related public opinion during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In summary, this paper will adopt the idea of sentiment analysis to investigate the specific situation of Taiwan-related public opinion of microblogging netizens during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3 Analysis of mainland netizens' public opinion on "seeking independence through epidemic"

3.1 Overview of mainland netizens' public opinion on "seeking independence through epidemic"

In this paper, we used the "Microblog Event Analysis" section of the data crawling and analysis tool "Micro

Table 1 Key opinion leaders and agenda setting of the topic of “seeking independence through epidemic” on Weibo

Name of opinion leader	Overview of blog content
CCTV News	CCTV comments on female journalists using Taiwan issue to deliberately provoke WHO: Hong Kong female reporter using Taiwan issue to deliberately provoke WHO, WHO makes the cleanest and most hardcore reaction
People’s Daily News	Taiwan Affairs Office: Seeking independence by the epidemic will never succeed: The head of the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council issued the following statement on Taiwan-related issues at the World Health Organization on Feb. 6.
Jun Zhengping	Jun Comment: Seeking independence by the epidemic and Taiwan independence is a political plague more virulent than a virus: Taiwan and its affiliated islands are a sacred and inseparable part of China’s territory, and it is reasonable, legal and sensible for the Chinese army to patrol them in combat readiness.
China Anti-Cult	Foreign Ministry: China strongly condemns the personal attacks against Tan Desai WHO. Director-General Tan Desai said Taiwan has been making racist attacks against him, to which Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said: ...
Gulou Micro News	Hot: China strongly condemns the personal attacks against Desai Tan. WHO Director-General Desai Tan said that Taiwan has been making racist attacks against him, to which Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said: ...
Communist Youth League Central Committee	Taiwan’s “Internet army” is running rampant, the global “bombing” non-stop. They still think they have won the face for Taiwan, but do not know that in the eyes of people around the world, they are just a group of laughing clowns.
Planet Huang Zhixian	2020 May 6, “Huang Zhixian night question” full version of the editorial notes: the new coronavirus spread in France at the end of December last year? Seeking independence with the epidemic?
Jiangxi Anti-Cult	Foreign Ministry China strongly condemns personal attacks against Tan Desai @ ChinaAgainstCult

First of all, from the hot word cloud after big data analysis, we can see that among the public opinion events related to the theme of “pursuing independence by epidemic” on Weibo, eliminating the words “China”, “Taiwan”, “mainland”, “new crown” and so on have been eliminated. In addition to “China”, “Taiwan”, “mainland”, “new crown” and other words with unclear direction, “WHO”, “mask”, “journalist”, “personal attack”, “America”, “politics” and so on hotter and more frequent comment words. The main opinion leaders on this topic made remarks such as “CCTV comments on female journalists using Taiwan issue to deliberately provoke WHO”, “China strongly condemns the personal attack on Tan Desai”, “Taiwan independence is a political plague more poisonous than a virus.” The following specific netizens’ comments are filtered and analyzed around the media related to the events discussed in the table.

Table 2 Chronology of incidents in which the Taiwan authorities “sought independence through epidemic”

Timing	Events
January 2020	Taiwan Customs checked mail sent overseas and intercepted a total of about 90, 000 masks mailed to the mainland on the 30th and 31st.
February 2020	Feb. 6: The head of the State Council Taiwan Affairs Office issued a statement on World Health Organization issues related to Taiwan. Feb. 14: The spokesman of the State Council Taiwan Affairs Office condemned the DPP authorities and Taiwan independence forces for taking advantage of the new crown epidemic to engage in political maneuvering, which is a plague more poisonous than a virus.

continued

Timing	Events
March 2020	<p>Mar. 24: The Taiwan Affairs Office pointed out that the so-called “joint statement” on epidemic prevention issued by Taiwan and the U. S. once again exposed the DPP administration’s despicable act and political agenda of “seeking independence through epidemic.”</p> <p>Mar. 28: A female reporter from RTHK English repeatedly asked WHO whether it would reconsider Taiwan’s membership in a video interview with Bruce Elder, a senior adviser to the WHO director-general, who hung up immediately.</p>
April 2020	<p>Apr. 9, WHO Director-General Tan Desai said that Taiwan has been making racist attacks against him. A spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said: “China strongly condemns the personal attacks and racist remarks and actions against Director-General Tan Desai”; a spokesman for the Taiwan Affairs Office said that the DPP authorities “seek independence with the epidemic” by any means possible, viciously attacking the WHO and its director, and allowing the green net army to spread racist remarks indiscriminately, which we strongly condemn.</p> <p>Apr. 16, Taiwan’s DPP authorities wanted to take advantage of the epidemic when other countries did not have time to care, the “China Airlines” to “Taiwan Airlines”, but after considering the costs Su Zhenchang finalized, not to change the Chinese, but to change the English.</p>
May 2020	<p>May. 6, the Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations Office in Geneva said: Taiwan has open channels of communication with the WHO and the mainland, and there is no so-called “epidemic prevention gap”, opposing the stigmatization and politicization of the epidemic.</p> <p>May. 20, Tsai Ing-wen refused to recognize the “1992 Consensus” in her inauguration speech on May 20.</p>
August 2020	<p>Aug. 5, news broke that the U. S. Health and Human Services Secretary Azar will visit Taiwan on. A spokesman for the Taiwan Affairs Office said that the DPP authorities are holding foreign countries hostage, willing to be pawns, and colluding with the U. S. side to gain political self-interest and harm the common interests of compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.</p>

3.2 Analysis of the differences in the attitudes of mainland netizens in the incident of “seeking independence by epidemic”

As cited in the literature review, Gamson’s “interpretive parcel” theory, Stuart Hall’s “encoding/decoding” theory, and the related theories from the sociology of emotions can be used interchangeably in the study of Internet users’ group comments. Among them, Yin Liangen’s research combined the above-mentioned Gamson and Hall’s research more closely. Therefore, this paper will incorporate the analysis of emotional polarity based on Yin’s “audience event interpretation framework” to further interpret the influence of different emotions of Internet users’ comments on the construction of national identity. It should be mentioned that since the events and public opinion of Taiwanese authorities’ “seeking independence by epidemic” had not yet completely stopped at the beginning of this research, the “results” in the original framework were eliminated and the tangible causes were incorporated into the “principles”. The concrete reasons were also incorporated into the “principles”. In addition, according to relevant studies, the influence of online netizens’ comments on the audience is much greater than the influence of the articles they comment on, and the top ten most popular comments on online news frequently determine or portray the basic positions and emotions of the rest of readers on a certain event (Wang Xiaohong & Zhou Chu. , 2019). Therefore, in the following, this study focuses on the top ten comments of the top ten microblogs under a certain event to investigate.

3.2.1 The framework of commentary attitude of netizens’ preferential interpretation

According to Stuart Hall’s theory, “preferential interpretation” is the most favored way of decoding by the

information coder^①, i. e., the audience recognizes the information and expresses emotions according to the original intention of the information coder. The Internet users' comments that fall into this interpretation mode in this study can be categorized as strongly agreeing with the one-China principle, largely disparaging the DPP and the US authorities, and generally agreeing with the WHO (See Table 3).

Table 3 Framework of commentary attitudes of preferential interpretations by netizens

	Strong endorsement of the one-China principle	General derogatory comments about “Taiwan independence” and the U. S. authorities	General endorsement of WHO
Metaphor	“Taiwan Province of China”, “Motherland Mother”	“Taiwan Foundry”, “Rebel Kids”, “Puppet Government”	None
Exemplars	“Since ancient times, those who split the motherland have not ended up well” “The end of Taiwan independence is reunification ... The mainland has long circled Taiwan around the world with the one-China principle to keep Taiwan from splitting up”	“Appearing in the U. S. might be easily contained? How did 5 million cases come about?” , “a country with the worst epidemic to work with you, don’t be funny, ‘Cai Cai’ (a kind of Tsai Ing-wen’s contemptuous name)!”, “Taiwan people are innocent, this government, must be severely punished”	“The official replied to her that we had just discussed China. This is a great reply”, “This WHO official is very sensible and resourceful!”
Catch phrases	“ The rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the reunification of both sides of the Strait are historical necessities” “China cannot be left out at all!”	“Intervention is not without cost”, “doing nothing is not possible, political showmanship first”, “do not take advantage of the situation to engage in division. This time the most important thing is to unite against the virus! ”	“Count me in as a joint supporter of the Secretary-General” “As the Director-General of WHO has been able to do so without taking sides with any country and being truthful, I hope someone will see your contribution to the world and your efforts for peace.”
Depiction	“Chinese territory is not to be questioned”	“Make a fool of yourself”, “Stupid and bad”, “don’t interfere in China’s internal affairs”, “Block ‘Taiwan independence’ artists”	“Protect Mr. Tan” and “Go Director-General”
Appeals/principle	Maintaining the unity of the motherland	Upholding the reunification of the motherland and opposing political conspiracies	Support International Justice

In general, the emotional attitudes of the above three “preferred interpretations” of Internet users’ Taiwan-related public opinion comments can be distilled into two characteristics, namely, that this group of Internet users emotionally identifies with the legitimacy of the Chinese central government and spontaneously and actively participates in the rational construction of national identity.

First of all, Michel Walzer once said: The state is an invisible but perceptible presence for the citizen, and for the citizen to experience the object of the state, it must be personified and symbolized (Kertzer, D. I., 1988)). Comparing China to “the Motherland” and Taiwan to “rebellious children” is a classic symbol of discourse for constructing national identity and proclaiming the unity and sovereignty of the country. The long-term use of this symbol can foster the natural identification of the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait with

^① In the context of this paper, it is the news publisher represented by the mainstream media such as “People’s Daily”.

the country.

Secondly, these Internet users, who share a common national, ethnic, and regional identity, realize in the microblogging space the construction of a community that can be a source of social meaning for its members, as most advocated by Manuel Castor in his book *The Power of Identity*. According to Castells (2010), such a community has three significant characteristics, one of which is a response to general social trends, and a resistance to these social trends for the sake of an autonomous source of meaning. This is embodied here in the spontaneous resistance of netizens to the tendency of international public opinion to stigmatise our country, and in their support for the one-China principle and their derogatory attitude towards “Taiwan independence” and the US authorities who seek to create a split; secondly, they are defensive identities from the outset with “protective and unifying functions.” In other words, they offer protection against a hostile outside world. Thirdly, they are all constructed through unique symbols of self-identity (e. g. , ethnicity, faith, culture, geopolitics, etc.), and it is obvious that netizens with national patriotism at their core and indivisible territory as a discursive representation of this model sentiment are highly compatible with it. Such a cultural/emotional community can contribute to the stability and internal cohesion of the nation.

3.2.2 The framework of commentary attitude of netizens’ negotiated interpretation

Negotiated interpretation refers to a situation in which the audience can basically understand the meaning of the information disseminated by the coder, but due to their own interests, knowledge frameworks, and technical bases, they present information coding that they neither fully reject nor produce some misinterpretation’. There are two types of sentiments in this model, i. e. , strong approval of the reunification of Taiwan by force and a general negative sentiment towards the incident of the detention of masks in Dali (See Table 4).

Table 4 Framework of commentary attitudes of netizens’ negotiated interpretations

	Strong endorsement of the “unification by force” of Taiwan	A general derogatory comment on the Dali withholding of masks
Metaphor	“Sycamore” (In Chinese, the pronunciation of Sycamore is similar to force unity)	“Dali owes to reason” (the Chinese word for Dali is the same as the word for reason)
Exemplars	“If we want to unify by force, I will donate one month’s salary when we march out” and “This incident shows that Taiwan’s sense of identity with China is almost non-existent. The possibility of peaceful reunification basically does not exist anymore”	“1. when will Dali return the supplies; 2. how many supplies Dali returned; 3. when will the supplies arrive in Chongqing; 4. in addition to returning Chongqing’s and other cities?” The government’s response to the issue is that it is not only a matter of time, but also a matter of time.
Catch phrases	“Right now, we should strike hard! Fight against Taiwan independence! Unify Taiwan by force!”, “After the epidemic is over, let’s unify Taiwan by force”	“South of the colorful clouds, the masks of the interception” (rhymes with “ south ” and “interception” in Chinese), “Prince Duan: Dali is independent!” (The Duan family name, which once ruled the Dali region, rhymes with “block” in Chinese)

continued

	Strong endorsement of the “unification by force” of Taiwan	A general derogatory comment on the Dali withholding of masks
Depiction	“Action in the morning, liberation at noon, issuance of mainland second-generation ID cards (to the people of Taiwan) in the afternoon and watching the news broadcast at 7 p. m”	“Taiwan side to intercept the confiscation of masks sent to the mainland, Dali also want to do so?”
Appeals/ principle	The position of the “iron-blooded” patriots	Oppose similar bad policies and subjects

In terms of information decoding, the two negotiated interpretations of netizens’ comments in this study basically agree with the mainstream media’s condemnation, attitude and value of the “Taiwan independence” incident, and strongly support the leadership of the Communist Party of China and uphold the reunification of the motherland in terms of political stance but have different opinions or doubts about the implementation of specific policies or the resolution of analogous incidents.

First, in the first case, the so-called “strong support for armed reunification with Taiwan, i. e. ,” advocating the use of military means or waging war or threatening to use force to make Taiwan officially return to mainland China, the group of netizens who have such feelings can be classified as the “iron-blooded patriotism” group, which has been classified by scholars such as Gui Yong and Li Xiume (2015). In the academic context, they refer to the group of netizens who are “nationalist”, have high confidence in mainland China’s military power, and have strong nationalist and hardline views on the sovereignty issue. However, it should be noted that their identification with the nation-state is not necessarily the same as their identification with the government, and they also criticise government policies on issues such as corruption. Therefore, these Internet users should be directed to become a source of voice in our public opinion field for the policy of “not giving up the unification of Taiwan by force” and a symbol of public sentiment for the unification of the motherland, instead of slipping into the populism on the Internet cited below.

Secondly, the second incident is about an incident in which the Dali City Health and Welfare Bureau in Yunnan illegally seized emergency masks from the regional SF company that were to be sent to Chongqing during the epidemic. This incident had nothing to do with Taiwan-related public opinion, but since the DPP authorities’ practice of withholding emergency masks sent from Taiwan to the mainland was similar, some netizens posted condemnatory comments on the matter under the relevant microblogs condemning the DPP’s actions. The author believes that this incidental incident of Taiwan-related public opinion can prompt reflection on the policy’s contribution to politics to the construction of national identity. In addition to identity, modern national identity has added the element of political identity, and the most superficial element of political identity is policy identity (Hu J. , 2021). The core of policy identity is the people’s trust based on the legitimacy, effectiveness, and stability of policy, and when there are distortions in the formulation and implementation of major policies, such as in the above-mentioned incident, even if it is a local government, the overall image of the state and the government will be damaged, and national identity will be damaged.

3.2.3 *The framework for commentary attitudes of confrontational interpretations by netizens*

Confrontational interpretation is a subversive interpretation of the audience’s intention of the symbols compiled by the message coder due to different cultural structures and production relations, which usually manifests as extreme or negative emotions and complete misunderstanding, misinterpretation, or shifting of the focus of the message. The sentiments of netizens’ comments in this model in this study are manifested in irrational strong derogatory meanings towards Taiwan and Taiwan compatriots and irrational general derogatory meanings towards some national policies concerning Taiwan (See Table 5).

Table 5 A framework for commentary attitudes of confrontational interpretations by netizens

	Irrational and strong derogatory references to Taiwan and Taiwan compatriots	Irrational and strong derogatory comments on some of the Chinese government’s Taiwan-related policies
Metaphor	“Dumb Bay”, “Frog Island”, “Taiwan Frog”, “Green Frog” (all of the above in Chinese pronunciation with Taiwan or for the “Taiwan Green” contemptuous name)	None
Exemplars	“don’t talk to me about what compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, from the ungrateful son refused to sell masks completely chilled, now as long as the island does not want people”, “in fact, not unified and not independent is best, because there is a reference”, “I only recognize Taiwan is part of China, Taiwan frogs do not count, Taiwan frogs belong to the bottom of the well”	“don’t slow down to help Taiwan, also prohibit the mainland from traveling to Taiwan, when their economic recession is strong, what need the central government to help then negotiate with them; otherwise they will be left to fend for themselves”, “Taiwan society in the 7, 80s identify with one China is mainstream, now Taiwan independence consciousness is the mainstream The government has proved that the past Taiwan-related policies are a failure. It’s better to review and seriously reform than to paralyze yourself!” The government has also said that it is “sure that it is a very small number of Taiwan Independents? If it is a very small minority, how did Tsai Ing-wen come to power?”
Catch phrases	“Remember folks, and it’s not the same people.”, “Rather not grow grass there, must recover the island of Taiwan!” , “Froggy really made mainlanders resent them more this time.”	“The satisfaction rate of the Taiwan Affairs Office should be the lowest among all departments” and “The lip service is of no use, but the Taiwan-related work is a mess.”
Depiction	“Bay frogs stink to high heaven”, “green baby roll”	“The same old story” and “raising the enemy”
Appeals/principle	Extreme Patriotism under Internet Populism	Extreme Patriotism under Internet Populism

From Table 5, it can be seen that netizens who belong to the confrontational interpretation show a great deal of clamour and excitement in their commentary sentiments, and the comments of this type of netizen groups show the characteristics of patriotism under Internet populism, such as extremism, clustering, parody and limited information selection. Although this kind of commentary is still a kind of national identity in some sense, it is extremely detrimental to the construction of a reasonable and robust national identity, which can be derived from the following two points.

Specifically, patriotism under online populism is a kind of emotional catharsis that is keen on shaping the dichotomy between various issues such as “people and authority” or “us and you” with inflammatory slogans, dissatisfaction with the current foreign policy of the Party and the government, simplistic thinking with the “zero-

sum game” theory in international relations, building internal blind arrogance, and mocking reality through the orgy of online entertainment discourse (Shi L. C., Luo Junwen & Liu S. C., 2018). The reason why this “emotional catharsis” is detrimental to the construction of national identity is, first of all, that it is difficult to develop such emotions in a sustainable way; the convergence of such netizen groups is often only due to a specific event (e. g., “Taiwan independence”, “Diaoyu Islands incident”, “Huangyan Island incident”, etc.), and lacks the cohesive power to maintain the moral norms of normative public life and common interests (e. g., “constructive opinions, the pursuit of common ideals, etc.”), but only “one-way criticism” of negative social events, for example, in this study, such netizen groups not only selectively ignore the achievements of the Taiwan-related exchanges of the State Administration of Taiwan Affairs over many years, but also only flirt with the current policies and the State Administration of Taiwan Affairs without making any substantive suggestions (Cui, Cong & Zhang, Li-Ren., 2020).

Furthermore, the above-mentioned network populist national identity is contrary to rational national identity. On the one hand, patriotism and national identity are a comprehensive identification with the values and common elements of the motherland, not just a love of one’s own ethnicity, place, or even personal political views. The comments of netizens in the confrontational interpretation in this study, such as “we want the island but not the people” and “it stinks to high heaven”, are a fragmentation of the “compatriots” identity of the Taiwanese people. The view that the establishment of ECFA^① is an “act of capitalizing on the enemy” and the frivolous remarks are irrational behavior similar to the logic of “smashing and looting” Japanese goods in the “Diaoyu Islands” incident. To a certain extent, it has brought the peaceful reunification across the Taiwan Strait to a standstill. (Wu Zhiyuan., 2018).

4 Conclusion

The study of mainland netizens’ attitudes towards Taiwan-related public opinion during the COVID-19 Pandemic on a microblogging platform has shown that these attitudinal differences reflect and influence their participation in national identity construction. Moreover, these differences create challenges for the interpretation of their messages and deepen the symbolic communication effects of coders like mainstream media. This study concludes that the sentiment difference in netizens’ comments during public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 Pandemic reflects the tension of society under the increasing risk and uncertainty and the importance of political identity in emergency management. Hence, there is a need for active public opinion management measures to be considered and guided correctly. To foster good governance in the future, the following three aspects can be considered:

(1) Strengthening the promotion of rational values and innovating the policy interpretation mode: The media should actively promote and explain the rational core and practical benefits of concepts such as “Chinese

^① ECFA, or Cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement, is essentially a preliminary framework arrangement for the negotiation of a free trade agreement between the two mainland and Taiwan economies, and includes several early harvest agreements. This agreement is constantly questioned in confrontational netizen comments as one of the main tools to assist Taiwan, and this group of netizens believes that the ECFA should be “broken” to sanction the DPP authorities.



Dream”, “Chinese National Community Consciousness” and “ECFA” through relatable, popularized and figurative narratives. This will help netizens break out of the “information cocoon”, and “group polarization” caused by cultural degradation, eliminate extreme or negative populist views, and direct people to form rational patriotism.

(2)Setting measures to divert the flow of public opinion: The government should establish a moral baseline for online patriotism by introducing legal regulations based on the rule of law. Additionally, it should broaden and guarantee the supply of institutional discourse channels for ordinary Internet users (e. g. , to set up new media windows for the government to ask questions about people’s livelihood, to strengthen the discourse interaction with Internet opinion leaders, etc.) respect their fundamental right to reasonably express patriotic feelings. These efforts will help preserve the right to express patriotic feelings and create a public opinion pioneer and the beacon of public sentiment.

(3)Strengthening mutual understanding among the nationals and expanding the breadth, depth and speed of cross-strait civil integration. The report of the 20th National Congress states that “resolving the Taiwan issue and realizing the complete reunification of the motherland” is “the common aspiration of all Chinese sons and daughters”, and we should devote ourselves to “Insist on uniting the majority of Taiwan compatriots ... Promote the spiritual togetherness of compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait”. This “spiritual bond”, which is rooted in the solidarity of the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, is exactly what Habermas advocates: “The two parties are in a position of mutual equality, respecting each other, communicating equally, and interacting with each other in the process of interaction... The two parties are in a state of mutual equality, respecting each other, communicating equally, and interacting with each other ... (Wang Ying. , 2021)” Previous studies and research have shown that stereotypes, ideological struggles, and differences in lifestyle are among the factors contributing to the alienation of national identity between mainland and Taiwanese citizens, leading to irrational comments from both sides on social media(Tang Hua, 2020). To address this issue, future cross-strait relations should shift from an official-led exchange model to a deeper integration model that promotes daily interactions between people in areas such as social media, culture, education, and employment. By eliminating misunderstandings and promoting direct contact, a community of life across the Strait with shared awareness, information, identity, and lifestyle can be established, resulting in a revitalization of public opinion and bringing us closer to peaceful reunification.

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