

Post-Truth Era: Gender-Related Reversal Events —Taking the Case of “Ying Liang and Guanjun Luo” as an Example

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Abstract: Given the high transmission efficiency and the vast loads of users on social media platforms, Weibo in China is used by victims to reveal immoral or illegal behaviors to the public. In the post-truth era, an individual's subjectivity on the Internet outweighs objective truths in exerting significant impact. Taking the event of 'Ying Liang and Guanjun Luo' as an example, this study analyzes how digital culture constructed and reinforced public opinion direction by citing statistics on <https://ef.zhiweidata.com> and several representative comments on Weibo. It can be concluded that the priming effect influences how people evaluate this case and the development of public opinions. Furthermore, this reversal event eventually caused a decline in public trust among netizens, created more obstacles for other female victims who genuinely needed help, and induced a discredit towards feminists radically participating in supporting the female victim.

Keywords: Post-truth, Online public opinion, Female victim, Priming effect, Weibo

1. Introduction

"Post-truth" is not a new concept. The first use of "truth becomes irrelevant" can be traced back to 1992, and Oxford Dictionaries declared it its 2016 international word of the year. Post-truth is an adjective relating to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinions than emotional appeals. According to Casper Grathwohl, the academic product director of Oxford Dictionaries, the phenomena related to this term have not shown any signs of decline, and he would not be surprised if it becomes one of the defining words of his time.

His prediction is accurate: there was a spike in the post-truth phenomena in political elections and votes; additionally, the post-truth phenomenon, whether correlated with political propaganda or rights protection, can also be seen widely on social media platforms, especially Weibo in China.

Social events related to group benefits and goals can evoke consistent emotional reactions and behavior, and this emotional evocation is the main reason why tendentious and massive sentiments can be formed. Post-truth era does not necessarily mean the truth is no longer crucial; however, truth has to give its way to emotional appeals and moral trials [1].

In the case of "Ying Liang and Guanjun Luo", Liang published a long passage accusing Luo, who claimed to rape her under the name of love. This blog on Weibo kindled netizens' sentiment, and even several mainstream media like Phoenix Weekly spoke up for her [2]. However, six days later, Liang released an announcement that Luo did not rape her and apologized to Luo and Luo's families. On September 18th, Luo published an officially granted notification that he did not commit any related crimes, and the case was decided not to place on the police's file.

Most articles studying gender-related reversal events feature rationales and ways to restore public trust while neglecting potential impacts on other female victims and even feminism in China.

Combining primary rationales of digital communication, statistics of the specific cases, and netizens' reactions, this study aims to work out the reasons for this public opinion's explosion in this case, and, more importantly, impacts on other upcoming female victims and feminism on the Chinese Internet.

2. Case Study—Ying Liang and Guanjun Luo

2.1. Case Development and Public Opinions Direction

The entire process and the direction of public opinions development are shown in Figure 1

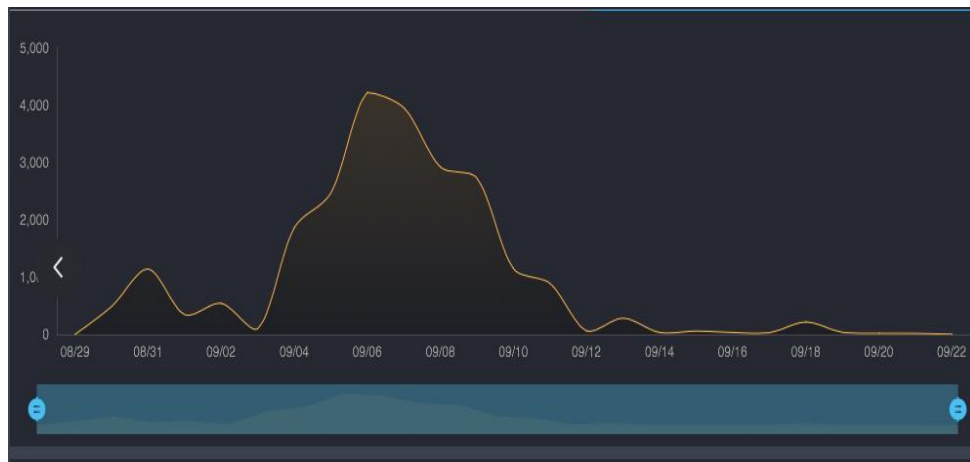


Figure 1: Transmission tendency of the 'Liang and Luo' case.

This data graph is based on a comprehensive study of Internet media such as Weibo and WeChat.

In a broad sense, it can be observed that the whole case's development can be separated into a process of 'formation—the culmination—dissipation of public opinions.

On the other hand, this graph can be disintegrated as several ups and downs with different amplitudes, indicating implications of new events happening in this case.

On August 29th, a Weibo user named 'jiayouba Vicky'(Ying Liang) posted a lengthy blog accusing Guanjun Luo of raping her during their date under the name of love. In that blog, Liang charged Luo's compulsive sexual behaviors and his devastating influence on her. On the same day, Luo posted a blog claiming that he would no longer consider Liang's request to reconcile before the session as a response. On August 31st, Luo updated a series of chatting records, photos, and recordings, countering Liang and mass netizens' accusations. This symbolized the first culmination of the whole event. The process before September 4th was the formation of public opinion, and both sides(Liang and Luo) had different sayings about what they did. During this 'formation' period, Liang claimed she had received 200k messages, with many women netizens reporting their similar experience of being assaulted. A large proportion of netizens supported Liang, sent money to her Weibo account, searched Luo's privacy, and photoshopped his face onto graves or jail.

This case culminated on September 5th, when Liang's lawyer elucidated that Luo did not commit date rape and that all her accusations were unreal. Meanwhile, Luo published an article named 'my confession and appeal', which explained several questionable points in this case and called for stopping slanders toward him and his family. The general public opinion has shifted directly, with numerous netizens being angry at Liang's behavior of fabricating the truth. On September 6th,

Liang posted her apology statement, echoing her lawyer's blog. Some government agencies and media also commented on this case: 'all heated discussions are eventually for approaching to the truth'(the Political and Judiciary Commission under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China); "do not let internet right protection be the story of The Boy Who Cried Wolf" (The Beijing News).

This case's popularity gradually dissipated. There was a minute culmination of public attention on September 18th, when Luo posted the official notification saying that Luo had not committed any related crimes, and the case was decided not to place on file. That declared an end to this case, despite Liang's failing attempt to fight back later.

Both this entire case and mass netizens' responses exhibit signs of the post-truth era, the reasons behind those phenomena are discussed below.

2.2. Priming Effect

The strength of the priming effects is determined mainly by starting stimuli's transmission frequency and recency [3], and more frequent and recent stimuli can create a more substantial priming effect and influence new information [4]. That is why many scholars regard information accessibility as one of the key factors influencing the strength of the priming effect.

Information accessibility has two types: chronic accessibility and temporary accessibility, with the first referring to frequency and the latter recency. In this study, accessibility is discussed, and it is used as a standard for evaluating the popularity of the Liang and Luo case. As a result, cognitive priming and emotional priming are introduced to elucidate how information accessibility influenced public opinion.

2.2.1. Cognitive Priming

Cognitive priming refers to the effect that certain stimuli have on cognition. For example, after seeing a plot (such as committing crimes) in an automobile commercial, some of the people's cognition (such as the notion of security) can be evoked, so people will use this cognition to comprehend the contents of the commercial [5]. Therefore, cognitive priming informs people of a specific approach gained from previous information to comprehend new information.

Temporary accessibility is a crucial factor, meaning that similar social events happening within a specific time can mutually prime others [6]. Before the Liang and Luo case, there were cases where male criminals accused of sexual assault by female victims on social media were sentenced, such as the male professor who reported raping female students at the University of Fuzhou in May 2020. In addition, Yuming Bao, accused of raping a juvenile, kindled heated discussions on Weibo. All these rights-protection events, especially those that happened in the same year, gave mass netizens a mindset: once a victim accuses someone on the Internet, it is probably true. This mindset caused mass netizens involved in the Liang and Luo case to believe that Liang's accusation and the experience were true until Luo defended himself. That is one of the reasons why Liang received overwhelmed support at the beginning.

Chronic accessibility, generally referred to as transmission frequency, also triggered cognitive priming and influenced public opinion. The more frequently a piece of information is transmitted, the more possibility that people can access it, and the more the information influences people's mindset [7]. At the very beginning, Luo's blog said he was waiting for a court session and claimed he would no longer consider Liang's request for reconciliation and received 1.5k retweets, 24k likes, and 40k comments. Among comments posted on August 29th, it can be observed that some netizens started to question the credibility of Liang's accusation. From August 31st to September 5th, Luo posted twelve blogs, each receiving more than 5k likes. Near the culmination of the event of Liang

and Luo, Luo's blog 'my confession and appeal' on September 4th received 102k retweets, 703k likes, and 60k comments. At the climax of public opinions on September 5th, following the confession blog of Liang and Liang's lawyer, Luo posted his announcement, which received 6549 retweets, 334k likes, and 27k comments. As time went by, it can be concluded that voices questioning Liang and believing Luo intensified.

Massive retweets, discussions, and Luo's frequent blogging boosted chronic accessibility, making the information more accessible to netizens. Whenever Luo posted his blog, cognitive priming militated and reinforced, making more netizens believe Luo's saying rather than Liang's accusation.

News covers of this event released by influential media, such as People's Daily, which has more than 100 million followers, also boosted chronic accessibility and influenced public opinions.

All retweets and likes also created an echo of the chamber, making netizens who paid attention to Luo's status have more access to his blogs. Therefore, those netizens' extent of trusting Luo intensified within the blind chamber. This rationale is the same about Liang's supporters.

2.2.2. Emotional Priming

Amygdala is vital to human beings' experiences of emotion and is involved in responses of aggression and fear. When people encounter risks or specific stimulation, the activation of the amygdala is prior to other parts of the brain. That explains why people have a preference for emotional cognition rather than rational cognition.

In addition to human's preference for sentiments, people have a preference for negative emotions than positive ones [8], which elucidates that negative emotions can evoke more transmission dynamics. Namely, blogs with more negative emotions can be spread more quickly than those with positive emotions. With more people transmitting the information, chronic accessibility increased. Based on that theory, why Liang's accusation received broad support and why Luo's confession can gain massive responses can be explained.

On Weibo, nearly every piece of information and sentiment associated with the Liang and Luo case flooded into it without any filter. Human beings are gregarious, and they all have ideas and need to blend in certain groups, and 'conformity' is the most effective way to establish a sense of identity and a sense of belonging [9]. Therefore, individuals involved in this event were likely to be influenced by mainstream opinions. That explains why massive netizens supported Liang during the formation of public opinions and why they started to reproach Liang's behavior after Luo provided his evidence.

2.3. Impacts

As the popularity of the Liang and Luo case dissipated, mass netizens, along with some influential media, started to introspect. The Beijing News, Tencent, and Netease News published their opinions: do not let internet rights protection become the story of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*. After Luo posted the official notification, many netizens started to apologize for their previous behavior of cursing him, and some extreme netizens dubbed Liang a 'liar' and 'film director'. This case seemed closed, but its impacts remain profound, on netizens and women groups.

2.3.1. Impacts on Mass Netizens

After Luo posted 'My confession and appeal', in the latest 40 comments below this blog, 24 comments clearly expressed 'I am sorry for cursing you before' and 'do not let her go'.

In the latest 10 blogs about Luo, 6 of them expressed, 'when similar things happen, I will never blindly believe what one side claims. Weibo user haizaixiangqushenmingzi_ posted 'if you

remember the Liang and Luo case's public opinion direction, it is impossible for you not to have the ability to tell right from wrong and to understand how human beings are likely to follow others' opinions blindly.

That is a good sign, for more netizens are rethinking their behaviors and less innocent people may get stigmatized.

In addition, the broader of voluntary sex and sexual assault is another center of the heated discussion. Some netizens said that Liang was regarded as voluntary at the time when she agreed to enter the hotel room with Luo, while other people, predominantly women, expressed that even though they might enter the same room, Liang might have refused to have sex with Luo, and when she said 'no', Luo should have stopped.

That shows an ambiguous line between voluntary sex and sexual assault, and a legal distinction between the two is needed. It also raises young people's awareness that couples should not have sex when they have not been familiar with each other.

2.3.2. Impacts on Other Female Victims

On September 25th in 2020, just one week later after Luos notification blog, national first-class actor, Rui Tian, was accused of indecency and was arrested by the police.

Except for netizens fury, there were some netizens and Weibo VIPs saying that 'let us wait for reversion' and 'this is probably not the truth'. Under one Weibo VIPs blog saying that this event is not very likely to have reversion just like the Liang and Luo case, Weibo user Enhuolania commented 'if there is reversion, please kneel down and apologize to Rui Tian.' Weibo VIP shanyaolingchenx blogged 'I am so afraid of reversion, so I will not comment on this event.' Some netizens even questioned that the female victim might bribe Shanghai police to arrest him.

Netizens did introspect on Liang and Luos case, and someone refused to participate in discussing the event. However, this is never a good sign for those true female victims. They may be questioned, and they may never receive massive support from netizens, their accusation and appeal may vanish in waves of peoples doubts, and they may never receive influential medias attention.

Liang and Luos case opened a pathway for netizens to introspect, but it also posed a dire threat to women who indeed need attention. Just like Weibo user yenaijiabingbujiatang_s comment: Ying Liang made those women who contributed their experiences of being sexually assaulted to her suffering.

2.3.3. Impacts on Feminism in China

Feminists on Weibo are nicknamed 'women fist' or 'extreme feminists' by other users. The Liang and Luo case again made more netizens accuse their behaviors.

At the very beginning, when Liang accused Luo of committing sexual assault, numerous women netizens supported Liang, and someone even dubbed Luo 'the rapist' and photoshopped Luo's portrait on graves. After Luo posted several evidence and notifications, some netizens were complaining that those 'extreme feminists' stigmatized the innocent and never apologized. Those netizens started to blame Liang and her women supporters.

Under Luo's blogs accusing netizens of cyberbullying, numerous Weibo users accused those 'extreme feminists' of not having the essential ability to tell right from wrong. Weibo user shihaofengqiujiuchui_Y's comment under Luo's blog says: but those extreme feminists who cannot tell right from wrong and who cursed you to go to hell will never apologize to you. They simply deleted their curses as if nothing had happened, and they will still wait for the next time when they can defame others again. The comment received 372 likes. Another Weibo user baisedeniao55130 commented: when similar events happen, blindly supporting the male side is always correct, and

those men are stigmatized by women every time. It can be observed that the women victim Ying Liang and her supporters, including some 'extreme feminists', are once again labelled 'too emotional', 'no brains', and 'often stigmatized'. That damages the reputation of Chinese feminism, causing it to be stigmatized.

3. Conclusion

This paper discusses the influence of the priming effect on the development of public opinions in the Liang and Luo case and the case's impacts on the general public and women groups. The mental system of the receiver is like an invisible "magic box", playing the function of an energy converter so that the information passed through it can be transformed into psychic power, which can then be externalized into behavior [10]. After new media, especially social media, has developed, each gains 'visibility', enabling individuals to discuss online and share and communicate ideas, and these behaviors are regarded as the externalization of psychic power. This study shows that people's psychic powers transfer into waves of public opinions by priming effects, and it shows that the impacts of Liang and Luo's case boosted netizens' ability to think calmly and, at the same time, created burdens for other female victims and even feminism in China. When discussing the impacts on other female victims and feminism in China, this article cites a few netizens' comments to exhibit the impact. However, a small number of comments may not represent a whole trend of public opinions, and a more sophisticated and quantitative approach is needed to figure out a trend of public opinions. Also, reversal events in the post-truth media require a suitable strategy to mitigate extreme public opinions between two sides and inform netizens what to do.

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