



# Online Social Media and Crisis Communication in China: A Review and Critique

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## Abstract

This article presents a review of the scholarship on the social media and crisis communication in China. Through a content analysis of research articles published in 11 journals listed in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) and in the Chinese Social Science Citation Index (CSSCI), 58 directly relevant articles are identified in the period from 2006–2016. The chapter examines the theoretical framework, methodological preferences, types of research, crisis communication practice, as an overview of current ongoing research trends. This research also explores how the

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unique Chinese characteristics affect the communication practice. Finally, critiques and suggestions for future research are provided from four dimensions, which include emphasizing on the crisis phases, extending theories and models, applying a comparative logic in discussion, and unifying the research standard between articles published in the SSCI and CSSCI journals.

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**Keywords**

Social media · new media · crisis communication · content analysis · China

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## Introduction

As China and India have risen into the world's most rapidly developing markets, new patterns of online communication and crisis management are emerging within the Asian area, thereby the twenty-first century has been called "the Asian Century" and attracted increasing attention from global scholars. In the previous 10 years, several major crises in China were broadcast to the world through the rapid transmission of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Weixin, and Weibo. Among these crises (e.g., the SARS crisis in 2003, Sanlu milk contamination crisis in 2008, China's Red Cross credibility crisis in 2011, and Japan's nuclear crisis in 2013), social media as the mediator between organizations and publics have transformed the way of sending and achieving information. On the one hand, organizations can directly send information to massive subscribed stakeholders on social media. On the other hand, current online users can actively engage in crises through collectively commenting or publishing their own news stories (Bruns 2005). This social-mediated communication may assist effective crisis communication community (Howe 2008) while meantime generate the possibility for intensive crises or risks as well (Huang and Lin 2004). Hackers, viruses, and rumors on social media can easily trigger crises and lead to large amounts of tangible or intangible cost (e.g., organizational litigation cost and customer complain cost). Studies based on interviews in 16 global companies found that 36% of crises resulted from digital security failures or online negative publicities (Burson-Marsteller and PSB 2011).

This chapter proposes to explore the form and practice of online social media and crisis communication as they exist in China. Through a content analysis of 58 articles published in 11 academic journals from 2006 to 2016, the chapter presents the theoretical framework, methodological preferences, types of research, and crisis communication practice addressed in these articles.

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## Online Social Media and Crisis Communication

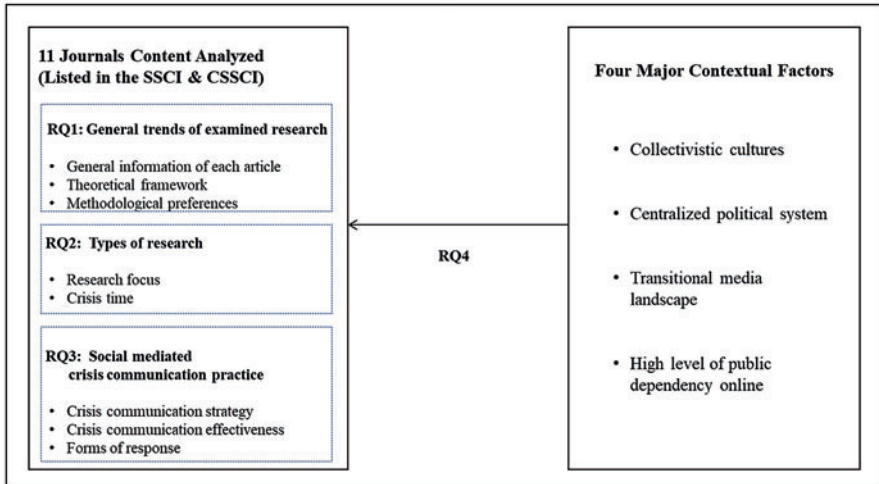
Types of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, WeChat, and Weibo are ushering in a new era of crisis communication. Previous literature has conducted numerous discussions on online social media and crisis communication, which is referred to as the "social-mediated crisis management research (SMCM)" (Cheng 2016a).

Earlier, Hearit (1999) studied the crisis management of flawed Intel Pentium chip on the Internet and found that companies were urged to use the Internet under the pressure of public movements. In turns, Taylor and Perry (2005) suggested that about half of studied 92 organizations adopted online tools in crisis management. Recently, Liu et al. (2012) constructed a blog-mediated crisis communication (BMCC) model and described how the American Red Cross uses blogs in crises. In China, Choi and Lin (2012) explored the consumer emotions posted on online bulletin boards in the crisis of Mattel product recalls. In the Chinese context, Tai and Sun (2007) found that the Internet tools particularly empower the public to challenge official claims during the SARS crisis. Wu and Yeh (2012) suggested that although the majority of Taiwan corporations rapidly respond to the crises online within the first 24 h, the crisis communication effectiveness is below the expectation. In sum, studies in the social media and crisis communication research mainly covered areas such as the use of external social media in organizational crisis communication (Huang and Lin 2004; Jin and Liu 2010; Liu et al. 2012; Taylor and Perry 2005), the management of brand image and organizational-public relationship (Moody 2011), and the crisis communication strategy and effectiveness (Utz et al. 2013; Wu and Yeh 2012).

Considering the large amount of relevant literature on crisis communication involving social media in public relations or in the field of communication, it is time that we should take a synthesized review of how global scholarship examines the realm of social media and crisis communication and provide insights for future research agendas. Research that examines the theoretical framework, methodological preferences, types of research, and public relation practice in this area is lacking (e.g., Veil et al. 2011; Ye and Ki 2012).

According to Huang et al. (2005), although crisis communication scholarship has grown rapidly over the past decades, most paradigms originated, in terms of conceptualization and operationalization, still were applied to and tested only in North America. Little research has explored the social media and crisis communication in China where cultural traits together with institutional contexts can greatly differ from those in Western countries such as the U.S.A.

Traditional Chinese society places a special emphasis on moral values such as collectivism, hierarchy, harmony, social relationships, and face-favor practice (Hwang 1987), while in Western countries, individualism, equality, freedom, and personal achievements are valued (Hofstede 2001). Contrasting with the USA, the block of international social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) and the Internet censorship serving for political regimes characterize a distinctive online media landscape in China (Jiang 2013). For example, over half (61%) of 984 million Chinese Internet or mobile web users could get access to online media. The nation's top social network, QZone gained 712 million users in 2013, 84% of which participated as active users (Millward 2013). Social media in China enjoyed large numbers of users and a high level of engagement. Sixty-one percent Renren users shared personal information online, and 58% users were willing to accept friend requests from strangers, while Facebook users showed a lower degree of openness that only 36% of them were prone to disclose personal information and only 26% users would like to accept strangers (Yin and Liu 2012). Thus, how did



**Fig. 1** The theoretical framework of the social media and crisis communication research

the forms of social media and crisis communication practice present themselves in China? How did the contexts affect such practice? A comprehensive analysis in the Chinese communication should shed light on these questions and extend Western theories of public relations in general and the crisis communication in particular.

This paper analyzed a total of 58 articles published by 11 academic journals from 2006 to 2016. Based upon the findings, this study presented the general trend of the social media and crisis communication research, in terms of the theoretical framework and methodological approach, what types of social media and crisis communication research have been studied and what were the forms of social media and crisis communication practice. Finally, the impact of the Chinese context on the crisis communication practice was explored. The ultimate goal is to provide conceptual clarity for future research that seeks to develop a better understanding of the social media and crisis communication research in China. Figure 1 depicts the theoretical framework for this study and suggests four research questions below:

- What is the general trend of social media and crisis communication research, in terms of the article number in each journal, the theoretical framework, and the methodological preferences in each article?
- What types of social media and crisis communication research have been studied (i.e., research focus and crisis time)?
- What are the forms of social media and crisis communication practice (i.e., crisis communication strategy, forms of response, and crisis management effectiveness) in China?
- How do cultural traits and institutional contexts influence the social media and crisis communication practice in China?

## The General Trend of Social Media and Crisis Communication Research

This chapter first presented research trends of all available including general information of articles, theoretical framework, and methodological preferences. Among the total 58 articles drawn from 11 journals, only SSCI (12 articles, 21%) and CSSCI (46 articles, 79%) journals were included, with 5 articles (9%) in *Public Relations Review* [SSCI], as the leading journal in the field of public relations. Twelve articles (21%) were found in the *Journal of International Communication* [CSSCI] and 11 articles (19%) in the *Journalism and Communication Research* [CSSCI] serving as major outlets for the social media and crisis communication research in China. Findings also demonstrated an increasing attention to “social media and crisis communication” over the past 10 years, with only 9 articles (16%) published between 2006 and 2008, 17 articles (29%) published between 2009 and 2011, and 32 articles (55%) published from 2012 to 2016.

### Theoretical Framework

Among the articles applying specific theories, the most frequently examined theory was image repair theory (38%), followed by situational crisis communication theory (16%), framing theory (11%), excellence theory (10%), media system dependency theory (8%), uses and gratifications (5%), spiral of silence (5%), diffusion of innovation (3%), contingency theory of accommodation (2%), and others (2%).

With regard to the use of research questions (RQs) or hypotheses (Hs), articles published in SSCI and CSSCI journals exhibited significant differences ( $X^2 = 28.55$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). For articles in the SSCI, the use of RQs or Hs increased from 2006 to 2016. As a whole, “RQ” (seven articles, 58%) was the most prevalent one, followed by “neither RQ nor H” (four articles, 34%), and “RQ and H” (one article, 8%). For those indexed in CSSCI journals, only 4 articles (9%) applied RQ; the other 42 articles (91%) applied neither RQ nor H.

### Methodological Preferences

Data showed that articles indexed in SSCI and CSSCI journals differ significantly in research method ( $X^2 = 16.60$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and data sources ( $X^2 = 45.68$ ,  $df = 14$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Among the 12 articles in SSCI journals, quantitative research was relatively more prominent (10 articles, 83%), and quantitative content analysis (32%) was the dominant method. As for data sources, the most widely used sources were traditional media such as print newspapers (six articles, 50%). In contrast, the qualitative method (39 articles, 85%) and qualitative content analysis (37 articles, 81%) were mostly used, and archival data served as the major source (30 articles, 65%) among the 46 articles indexed in CSSCI.

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## Types of Research

Types of research discussed the research focus and crisis time. Research focus refers to the main subject of specific research. In the dataset, articles in SSCI and CSSCI journals exhibited significant difference on research focus ( $X^2 = 22.22$ ,  $df = 7$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The 12 articles in SSCI showed great interests in the “public” and widely discussed public motivation of using online media, public emotions, engagement, identification, and generated online contents in crises (Choi and Lin 2012; Tai and Sun 2007), while the articles in CSSCI journals emphasized on the evaluation of crisis situation (43 articles, 93%), and few of them discussed public reactions (3 articles, 7%). Among the total 58 articles, the widely discussed crises included SARS (2003), the melamine-contaminated milk powder of Sanlu (2008), flu pandemic (2009), China’s Red Cross credibility crisis (2011), and Japan’s nuclear crisis (2013).

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## Forms of Crisis Communication Practice

This chapter also discussed the forms of crisis communication practice, including crisis communication strategy (CCS), crisis communication effectiveness (CCE), and forms of response.

### Crisis Communication Strategy (CCS)

For CCS, several clear features manifested. First, although the context studied was China, the CCS spectrum proposed by Western scholars (Benoit 1997; Coombs 2007) still dominated the social media and crisis communication research. Strategies such as modification, reduction of offensiveness, correction, accommodation, and denial were frequently utilized (e.g., Cho and Cameron 2006). Second, several new patterns of crisis communication strategies have been found in the Chinese context. Different with the recommended “two-way” symmetrical relationship in Western societies (Grunig 1992), organizations in China pertained the “enclosed control model,” which described a dominant and asymmetrical relationship with stakeholders (He and Chen 2010, p. 21). Strategies such as face-saving, risk communication avoidance, deception, lying, and offering bribes were utilized to cover up crises, manipulate the public, and reduce negative media exposure. For instance, Tai and Sun (2007)’s study disclosed the highly controlled information system in South China, where local officials lied and covered up the information on the SARS epidemic when this crisis erupted at the beginning. Veil and Yang (2012) found that in a corporate context, the covering up strategies were also applied: instead of admitting the quality problem of products, the company manipulated its relationship with the local government and media (i.e., China largest search engine Baidu and popular forums such as Sohu and Sina) to reduce negative publicity. Thus, the new strategies such as covering up and manipulation were forming an asymmetrical

pattern of crisis communication strategies (Cheng 2016a). Hundreds of dairy farms or companies, however continually announced bankruptcy due to the crisis in the year of 2012 (Veil and Yang 2012).

Third, the social media and crisis communication research in China has realized the empowering function of social media (He and Chen 2010). A transparent and symmetrical online crisis communication strategy was suggested (Cheng, 2016a; Cheng and Cameron 2017). Scholars advised that organizations could apply multi-functions of social media to monitor stakeholder generated contents, pay attention to their desired strategies, and cultivate relationships with online opinion leaders (Cheng and Cameron 2017; Choi and Lin 2012; He and Chen 2010; Veil and Yang 2012)

## Forms of Response

Three traditional forms of response (i.e., timely, consistent, and proactive) (Huang and Su 2009) were frequently applied in the social media and crisis communication research. Furthermore, a new type of form – interactive – was intensively discussed in 21 articles (36%). Scholars suggested that organizations should have “interactive” dialogues with key publics online to improve the effectiveness of crisis communication and utilize the social media tools for interpersonal communication and emotional support (Cheng 2016a; Cheng and Cameron 2017; Gilpin 2010; Lev-On 2011).

## Crisis Communication Effectiveness (CCE)

It was found that media publicity was most frequently used as a measurement of CCE (50%), followed by revenue reputation (38%), reputation (31%), cost reduction (23%), and organizational-public relationship (15%).

Meanwhile, new measurement of CCE on social media emerged: on the one hand, new items such as numbers of visitors, followers, and subscribers or attributes of comments/posts were added to measure the online media publicity (e.g., Wang 2012). On the other hand, the measurement of economic value involved reduction of negative public emotion (e.g., anger, confusion, fear, and sadness), increased account acceptance, public awareness and engagement (Cheng and Cameron, 2017)

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## The Chinese Context and Crisis Communication Practice

This chapter explored how the unique characteristics of cultural traits and institutional systems in China affected the social media and crisis communication practice. The major Chinese contextual factors include the following four dimensions: collectivistic cultures, centralized political system, transitional media landscape, and a high level of public dependency online.

First, cross-culture scholars emphasized the differences between people who live in individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Hofstede 2001). People from individualistic countries, such as the U.S.A. tend to ask for freedom and rights, prefer dominating and integrating styles, and keep short-term relationships. In contrast, people from collectivistic countries such as China emphasize on authority and order; prefer avoiding, obliging, and compromising styles; and embrace long-term relationships (Ting-Toomey 2005). The social media and crisis communication research showed that the collectivistic culture characterized the unique Chinese crisis communication practice. On the one hand, the value of “saving face” and “the ugly things in family shall not go public” resulted in the asymmetrical CCS, leading to certain unethical and unprofessional practices such as bribing officials and manipulating news reports (e.g., Veil and Yang 2012). On the other hand, “relationships” in China were particularly important in facilitating the online crisis communication. Scholars found that if no relationships established among organizations, bloggers, and followers, no information would flow on the Chinese social media (Hu 2010).

Second, contrasting to the American political system, which promotes the democracy, human rights, and free flow of capital in the public diplomacy (Thussu 2006), current Chinese political system reflects its Soviet or Leninist origins (Oksenberg 2001). Enormous power resides in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), whose power and influence are transmitted by local governments and reinforced through the control of education, media, and military systems. This centralized political system impedes a timely, proactive, transparent, and interactive crisis response form on social media. For instance, in the SARS crisis, local officials instead of responding the public timely concealed the real number of infectors until receiving instructions from the central government (Hong 2007). In the melamine-contaminated milk powder crisis, the first action of the accused state-owned corporation, Sanlu, was to hide the truth, rather than actively giving the public a timely and accurate response (Veil and Yang 2012).

Third, in Western societies such as the USA, media system belongs to the liberal model, which enjoys press freedom and enough autonomy, relies on marketization, and acts as a societal watchdog (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The functions of media in crises focus on the scrutiny and information providing. Previous literature discussed the way that online media served as the key information platform in natural crises (Greer and Moreland 2003; Murphree et al. 2009). However, in China, the transitional media system is facing a dilemma in taking responsibilities in crisis communication. On the one hand, the media, especially “state-owned media” under the central governmental control, have to promote and legitimate policies of the CCP. Both online and offline media can hardly escape from the censorship of the CCP. On the other hand, contemporary Chinese media system is in transition and moving toward the marketization and globalization. It is expected that the media could follow international professional standards and ethics to serve public interests in crisis (Xue and Li 2010). In the future, social media may act as a platform for rapid information dissemination and promotion of a transparent media environment in China (Tai and Sun 2007).



Last but not the least, media dependency relations vary in contexts and influence the crisis communication effectiveness (Tai and Sun 2007). In the USA, information transmitted by television messages is more trustworthy than the same message transmitted via social media, which suggest that traditional media exert a stronger influence on public communication than new media in crises (Jin and Liu 2010; Utz et al. 2013), while in China, individuals depend on the social media to a much higher extent than traditional media (Lyu 2012). People rely on social media as a depoliticized and decentralized online communication environment to seek all kinds of information, including rumors and gossips as well (Yin and Liu 2012). Under this circumstance, a rumor of shortage of dairy suppliers can easily stimulate social panic and irrational behavior of the public. For example, in the rush of salts crisis in 2013, despite the government informed that salts were useless in reducing the effects of radiation after Japan nuclear crisis, people still believed this rumor and spread the information quickly online. Crowded people rushed to the store to purchase salts, which led to an immediate out of stock of salts and an intense social panic (Yu et al. 2011). A similar situation of rush for the Radix isatidis (*Ban Langen*) also appeared in the SARS crisis in 2003.

Two major reasons below may help explain the high level of online engagement and the crises emerged on Chinese social media. First, since the traditional media is highly controlled and international social media is blocked, domestic social media (e.g., Renren and Weibo) emerged and provided active “live” reporting tools. Empowered by the high sharing and re-tweet rate with targeted dissemination via social media, large numbers of Chinese Internet users enjoyed the strong personal connection, massive discussion, and interaction in cyberspace, which created the possibilities for social movements (Tai and Sun 2007). In the post-Mao era, Chinese netizens have demonstrated their ability to accelerate the speed of information dissemination and act against the power of government authorities or corporate institutions (Wang 2008). The Wukan incident in 2012 served as a good example illustrating how Chinese villagers utilized new media tools to spread messages, solicit global supports, and act against the local government (Cheng 2016b). Second, the low level of trust toward the whole society may explain the high level of public dependency online. Although Chinese economy developed so rapidly, the level of social trust reached the lowest among recent 5 years (Wang and Yang 2012). Publics hardly trust the governments and traditional media system (Cheng, Huang and Chan 2017). Instead, they have to rely heavily on the Internet to acquire information and relieve stressed emotions and opinions.

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## Future Directions

In summary, both the SCCI and CSSCI journal articles showed an increasing attention to the social media and crisis communication research over the past 10 years. The literature in China has realized the empowering function of social media, and current research focus began to shift from the “organization” to the “public.” Topics such as public motivation for online media uses, public emotions,

or engagement were frequently discussed (Cho and Cameron 2006; Tai and Sun 2007). Scholars also identified the unique unsymmetrical crisis communication practice in China, and an accurate, transparent, and interactive response form was suggested to accommodate the strong online public agenda (He and Chen 2010).

Based on the review of relevant articles, this chapter also found distinct weaknesses in current social media and crisis communication research in China, including a lack of emphasizing on the crisis phases, narrow application of theories and models, the neglect of a comparative logic in discussion, and the different research standards between journal articles listed in SSCI and CSSCI. The following section offers critiques and suggestions for how scholars should move forward in future social media and crisis communication research.

### **To Emphasize the Crisis Phases**

Previous research showed within a certain “time,” organizations’ monitoring and application of strategies could effectively prevent a look-like crisis (Taylor and Kent 2007). In the social media and crisis communication research, scholars found that the length of time within which organizations were expected to react has been shortened due to the rapid timeframe of social media (Cheng, 2016a; Gilpin, 2010). Given this, scholars recommended an immediate response way (Muralidharan et al. 2011; Veil et al. 2011). Specifically, an exact response time was proposed. Wang et al. (2012) suggested the response of organizations in China within 48 h was too late for effective crisis communication. Based on the analysis of two rumor storms in China, Sun (2012) found storms usually budded within 48 h and went into the climax from the third to the fifth day. Thus, immediate response within 48 h could effectively terminate rumors and prevent crises.

Depending on the inconsistency of the abovementioned findings and only 9 out of 58 articles (20%) which discussed “time” or stages in crises, it is strongly suggested that future studies could emphasize the variable of “time” in the conceptualization of research design. A longitudinal study could be used to track changes from all involved parties over time and help to identify the critical response time in each stage of crises (Cheng 2016a; Cheng and Cameron 2017).

### **To Extend Theories and Models**

In the social media and crisis communication research, interesting phenomena on new media effects were observed. He and Chen (2010) suggested a reversed agenda setting in online media crises of China, during which the media agenda may lose the power of setting the public agenda on the Internet. Tian (2011) proposed a changing “spiral of silence” in the generation of rumors. However, most studies still adopted public relation theories such as the image repair theory and excellence theory. Little empirical research could challenge traditional media theories such as agenda-setting/building theories and establish new models to extend the area of

crisis communication. As the new technology was changing the way of communication dramatically, the creation of theories or models became necessary in future research. Below several research questions were listed for the next waves of study to rethink traditional media effects: How does interpersonal communication such as the word-of-mouth communication affect public responses in crises? How does the interactivity of social media mediate the relationship between crisis communication strategies and outcomes? How do the online media and traditional media contents intercorrelate in crises? In what conditions, the public agenda may lead the media or policy agenda in crises?

### **To Consider a Comparative Logic**

As any crisis with a certain type, stage or issue must happen within context(s), where a specific legal, media, political, or cultural system exists. Scholars in current social media and crisis communication research already realized the importance of context (s) and focused their studies on China areas (e.g., Veil and Yang 2012; Wang 2012). For example, findings showed that the unique cultural and institutional characteristics of China affect the social media and crisis communication practice and formed an asymmetrical and dominated crisis communication strategy (He and Chen 2010; Veil and Yang 2012). However, few of them applied a comparative logic in discussing multiple contexts within one study, and a cross-contextual empirical study remained lacking. Future research could consider a comparative logic and test the posited hypothesis: in the process of social-mediated crisis communication, the more likely the context has individualistic cultures and democratic political, legal, and media systems, the more frequent the symmetrical strategy and proactive, consistent, and timely response forms could be adopted by organizations.

### **To Adopt a Uniformed Research Standard**

By comparing articles published in the SSCI and CSSCI journals, it was not difficult to find that articles (21%) published in the SSCI journals usually followed the same research standard by reviewing relevant literature, generating research questions or hypotheses, applying the sampling method, and conducting data analysis to make the conclusion, while articles (79%) in the CSSCI journals did not reach the same level of research standard as those in the SSCI journals. These articles written in Chinese presented interesting discussions about the updated social events such as the China's Red Cross credibility crisis but seldom specified the research question or hypothesis, and most of them drew the conclusions based on the subjective judgment of archival data or literature. For example, although He and Chen (2010) proposed a reversed agenda-setting model in the crisis of China, this article failed to adopt systematic quantitative methods applied in the 1968 Chapel Hill study to test the relationship between the media and public agenda. Thus, without following the same research standard as other published agenda-setting articles in SSCI journals, it is

difficult to draw the conclusion that the reversed agenda-setting effects significantly exist in the Chinese crisis context. As social media is becoming an emerging research area in the field of crisis communication, future scholars may adopt a uniformed research standard and produce more innovative empirical studies on the social media and crisis communication in China.

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