LEADING WITH HEARTS AND MINDS:
Emotion Contagion in China’s Online Activism

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Who are the prominent actors leading the diffusion of emotional messages in China’s online activism? What roles do they play in this process in an emotion-discouraging context? In this exploratory study, Nian Lu, Department of Advertising, School of Culture and Communication, Capital University of Economics and Business, Beijing and Jun Liu, Department of Communication, University of Copenhagen, examine networked patterns of anger diffusion within the Red-Yellow-Blue kindergarten child abuse scandal on the Chinese social media Weibo. Using supervised machine learning for emotion labeling and a social network analysis approach, we identify three types of actors and profiled their distinctive roles in the process of anger contagion. Broadcasters act as both an information source and a legitimate source to elicit other users’ emotion through emotion-free information. Furthermore, emotion initiators like celebrities instigate and lead other users’ emotions, while emotion brokers like micro-celebrities build bridges between different subgroups to form a massive-scale network of emotion contagion. These actors complement each other for emotion contagion in China. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings on the understanding of emotion diffusion in online activism.

Key Takeaways

• Three types of key actors exert divergent influence on emotion contagion on Chinese social media platforms: broadcaster, emotion initiator, and emotion broker.
• Broadcasters are news organizations and news-aggregating platforms who facilitate emotion-free posts like news coverage.
• Celebrities play the role of ‘emotion initiator’ in the process of anger contagion.
• Micro-celebrities are ‘emotion brokers’ who are central in bridging different subgroups through emotional expressions in the contagion network.
• The key actors entail distinctive yet essential roles and complement each other in the process of emotion contagion.

Keywords: China, online activism, emotion contagion.
Emotion and social networks have a substantial effect on political activism and social movements (on emotions and social movements, see, e.g., Flam & King, 2007; Goodwin et al., 2009; Jasper, 2018; on social movements and social networks, see, e.g. Diani & McAdam, 2003; Klandermans, 2004; Snow et al., 1980). Less is known, however, about the relationship between emotion diffusion and social networks in online activism. How does emotional content go viral in online activism? Who are the key actors online in ‘channeling, transforming, legitimating and managing one’s and others’ emotions and expressions of emotions in order to cultivate and nurture the social networks that are the building blocks of social movements’ (Taylor & Rupp, 2002, p. 141)? In this article, we offer an exploratory study of emotion diffusion through social media in online activism in China. We identify angry posts on the Chinese social media Weibo with supervised machine learning techniques and examine the networked patterns of diffusion using social networks analysis (SNA) in the case of the Red-Yellow-Blue kindergarten child abuse scandal (RYB scandal). The scandal ignited nationwide activism with ‘a cacophony of fury’ (Buckley & Kan, 2017) for nation- and state-level regulatory intervention for child safety. We speculate that three types of key actors – broadcasters, emotion initiators, and emotion brokers – contribute different yet essential opportunities whereby anger proliferates on Weibo. In addressing the pattern of emotion diffusion and key actors in this diffusion, we contribute to the rather less explored but crucial issue of emotion contagion for online activism in China.

**Emotion and (online) activism**

The integration of the cultural–emotional dimension of social movements restores the necessity of recognizing and capturing emotional motivations for political action (Hoggett & Thompson, 2012; Jasper, 2008). As Goodwin and Pfaff (2001, p. 301) propose, ‘bringing emotions back in’ is important not so much for the experiential richness it uncovers but because it ‘promises . . . a better causal understanding of the “nuts and bolts” of popular mobilization, including a better grasp of factors like social networks, collective identities, and shared beliefs.’
The explanatory value of emotions in mass political behavior has been increasingly employed in the elaboration of online political movements (e.g., Kramer et al., 2014; Zollo et al., 2015). After comparing and reviewing studies on the communication of emotions in computer-mediated communication and face-to-face scenarios, Derks et al. (2008) suggest that emotional communications online and offline are similar. Terms like ‘affective online environment’ (Knudsen & Stage, 2012) and ‘online emotional appeals’ (Jones et al., 2013) denote the emotion-rich circumstance of the online environment and related emotion-driven political expression and activism. Exposure to emotional expressions online engenders digitally mediated emotional contagion, which could be ‘much more frequent and intense than nondigital emotion contagion’ (Goldenberg & Gross, 2020, p. 320) and subsequently could lead to the increase of both the number and size of social movements (et Ferrara al., 2015; Kramer et al., 2014), p. 320) and subsequently could lead to the increase of both the number and size of social movements (et Ferrara al., 2015; Kramer et al., 2014).

In contrast to the diverse scholarship on emotion and online activism, studies on online activism in China (surprisingly) rarely examine emotional dynamics and their influence on political behaviors, despite the long-term acknowledgement of the relevance of emotion in political mobilization (e.g., Perry, 2002; Yang, 2000). The term ‘online activism’ denotes contentious activities associated with the use of the Internet and other digital technologies, which involve ‘unorganized, autonomous online efforts to express . . . [people’s] sentiments and opinions, address collective needs, or influence public opinion and policy’ (Jiang, 2010, p. 211; also see Yang, 2009, 2017). Gan et al. (2017, p. 945) show that social media is effective in communicating emotions and feelings, but only regarding anxiety and fear instead of strong ‘anti-system sentiments’ like anger. Who, then, plays constituent roles like influentials, leaders, or brokers (Abul-Fottouh, 2018; Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Esteve Del Valle & Borge Bravo, 2018) in the process of emotion diffusion in China’s emerging emotion-discouraging Internet sphere (Yang, 2017)? These are indispensable issues to understanding emotion and online activism, when myriad emotional expressions unfold each day.

**NETWORK, DIFFUSION, ACTOR AND EMOTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

To answer our questions, we bring together research on social movements, social networks, (emotional) information diffusion, and social media. We focus on key actors and their (dissimilar) roles and influences in shaping the diffusion of emotional messages in online activism. Seeking to explain how an idea or product gains momentum and spreads through a specific population or social system, diffusion theory (Rogers, 1962) encompasses the interrogation of the spread of ideas and experience concerning regime change, protest tactics, repertoire of contention, and issue frames to foster behavioral organization and coordination in political movements (Givan et al., 2010a; Traugott, 1995). Strang and Soule (1998, p.
Actors with low social status imitate the actions of those with high social status in hierarchical models of diffusion, while actors engage with others with whom they share spatial proximity or cultural similarity in proximal models of diffusion.
followers), brokers derive their influence from betweenness centrality – that is, their bridging role and structural embeddedness in the networks (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014; Esteve Del Valle & Borge Bravo, 2018; Vasi, 2011).

With these specifications in mind, we address the first research questions (RQ) in our interrogation of emotion diffusion in online activism:

RQ1: Who are the key actors leading the diffusion of emotional messages based on degree and betweenness centralities?

An interrogation of the roles different actors play in this diffusion process gives new insight into the contestation of online activism. Given the role that emotions play in inspiring and energizing political movement (Jasper, 2018), China Internet governance strategies would further complicate and even hinder the diffusion of emotions – especially negative ones – which makes the following question imperative to gain an up-to-date picture of online activism in China.

RQ2: What roles do different actors play in the diffusion process in an emotion-discouraging context?

Given the relative lack of attention to the process of emotion diffusion in online activism, the central aim of our study is modest. By taking the diffusion of anger in online activism on Weibo as an example, we draw attention to a neglected yet crucial topic of study and report observations and plausible explanations that can guide future research.

The RYB Scandal

We take online activism in the RYB scandal as a paradigmatic case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 232) for emotion diffusion and network dynamics. The scandal erupted with multiple allegations of child abuse at an RYB kindergarten in Beijing, with photos of children with needle marks (reported by their parents) going viral on the Internet on 22 November 2017. Together with further allegations of military involvement in the abuse, the photos sparked an unprecedented public outcry and indignation (Buckley & Kan, 2017). China’s social media platforms were filled with parental tales of anger and repugnance at the stories of abuse, as well as their demand for explanations and punishments for the teachers. The hashtag ‘Beijing’s RYB Kindergarten Suspected of Child Abuse’ became one of the top ten topics on Weibo within 24 hours (What's on Weibo, 2017). Beijing police had detained one of the kindergarten teachers on suspicion of child abuse on November 26, who was later sentenced to 1.5 years in prison for the abuse. Following the police investigation, the RYB kindergarten issued a letter of apology for the incident. The online collective contention in the scandal thus entails the abovementioned characteristics of online activism (Jiang, 2010; Yang, 2009), including autonomous efforts – especially articulated on social media – not only to express public sentiments about and opinions towards this child-abuse scandal, but also to influence public opinion and government policy on the qualification of teachers and other aspects of childcare facilities. This online activism further exemplifies social
movement dynamics (Diani, 1992, p. 7) that encompass networks of interactions among social media users to address the lack of oversight and regulations governing China’s pre-school industry collectively outside the institutional sphere.

We scrutinized the anger articulated in Weibo posts and its diffusion on the platform for two reasons. First, Weibo maintains an influential platform in China, with functionalities akin to those of Twitter and Facebook like hashtags and multimedia embedding (Lin et al., 2016). Over 130 million daily active users with more than 100 million posts per day have established Weibo as a vibrant, emotionally laden, and high-visibility space in which people express themselves and share opinions on political issues, disclose government malfeasance, and mobilize political activism even ‘before authorities and censors [can] react’ (Chan et al., 2012, p. 348). The highly interactive and expressive environment encourages posts, especially those involving the expression of anger, to spread rapidly and topics to quickly peak or ‘trend,’ receiving large-scale attention for mobilization (Song et al., 2016). Most importantly, information diffusion on Weibo entails a user-centered rather than a content-centered pattern, as Weibo users are more inclined to follow celebrities, public figures, professionals, and ‘micro-celebrities’ (also known as self-made celebrities with a substantial number of followers and visibility on the Internet; see Baker & Rojek, 2019; Craig et al., 2021) – opinion leaders in short (H. Wang & Shi, 2018, p. 519). Second, as elaborated, among negative emotions, anger is considered the central one fueling movement both online and offline (e.g., Jasper, 2014; Rodgers, 2010). In reaction to the RYB scandal, the primary emotion was anger, exemplified by resentment and vengefulness (Lyu et al., 2020). An interrogation of anger diffusion in the RBY scandal thereby offers key understandings of how emotional messages spread among Weibo users.

DISCUSSION

This study identified the most prominent actors who led anger contagion on Weibo in the RYB scandal (November 22–2 December 2017).

The study takes the top 0.21% of the total population as key actors.

Emotional dynamics occupy a pivotal role in facilitating political activism, both online and offline. Our first question identifies the key actors who lead the diffusion of emotional messages. Our findings suggest that elite social media users like organizations, celebrities, and micro-celebrities dominate the central stage in the network of anger contagion. Although the unequal distribution of influence on social media resonates with other studies, our findings reveal significantly different phenomena in the Chinese social media context.

For the second question, we detected distinctive roles that these key actors play in the emotion contagion process. The characteristics of nodes (users)
determine their particular roles through their social media posts (emotional or not). News organizations and news-aggregating platforms, celebrities, and micro-celebrities all derive their key role in the process of anger contagion from their established resources online (i.e., a larger number of followers and connections and thereby subsequently higher visibility than common users). However, we recognize dramatic differences among these three types of prominent actors in anger contagion in two aspects.

First, given the difference between out-degree centrality and betweenness centrality, we discovered that news organizations, news-aggregating platforms, and celebrities play their key role through one-way, one-to-many, communication or forwarded relationships. In other words, with high out-degree centrality, these actors are more prominent in having posts forwarded by other users with anger-involving messages than in forwarding posts by others. For instance, news organizations like @People’s Daily and Celebrity_1 are, respectively, the top one and three sources of anger, considering the number of posts forwarded by other social media users with anger-related posts. Meanwhile, the interrogation of betweenness centrality discloses that a different group of elite social media users – that is, micro-celebrities – played the bridging role to facilitate a cross-subgroup or cross-community flow of anger. Without the brokerage of micro-celebrities, the widespread anger contagion network in the RYB scandal would have been difficult to establish.

Second, the perspective of emotion contagion allows us to separate the role of news organizations and news-aggregating platforms from those of celebrities and micro-celebrities in anger contagion. As our findings show, news organizations and news-aggregating platforms perform the role of ‘broadcasters’ or ‘spreaders of information’ (González-Bailón et al., 2011), as they circulate emotion-free posts like news coverage and commentaries. Both celebrities and micro-celebrities, however, facilitate the process of emotion contagion with emotion-laden posts.

There are three plausible explanations for the distinctive and essential roles of the different key actors in anger contagion observed in this study. First, the influential role of verified organizational actors – here, news organizations and news-aggregating platforms – as broadcasters derives not just from their established, large number of followers, but, more importantly, from their institutional authority as ‘an extension of state power’ (Shi & Cai, 2006, p. 329). Such role allows these organizational actors to establish influencial news frame (Zhao, 2017, p. 52) that directs – but would also constrain – the expression and diffusion of anger towards particular aspect of politically sensitive events, albeit perhaps not explicitly. In China’s Internet regulatory environment, unauthorized political activism may face certain political risks that impede further participation. The regime would, however, signal its responsiveness to citizens’ legitimate concerns over governance by providing a ‘safety valve’ for the public to vent their feelings, if mass media ‘have already set the agenda’ (Hassid, 2012, p. 223). In this case, the coverage and commentaries on the RYB scandal by news organizations like People’s Daily fundamentally set the tone for the discussion by indicating that authorities
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would permit some room for critical engagement with and emotional expression about poor childcare standards nationwide. The involvement of ‘broadcasters’ opens up significant political opportunities (Liu, 2016) for civil engagement. Against this backdrop, after news organizations and news-aggregating platforms began to cover and distribute news coverage, such coverage dramatically facilitated anger expression and contagion online. Although organizational actors like @People’s Daily and @Phoenix Weekly published emotion-free posts, these posts substantially triggered emotion-laden responses on the Weibo platform. In other words, the news coverage and commentary function as ‘a signal from the government’ (Zhang, 2007, p. 543) to persuade people that their outrage towards the RYB kindergarten would largely be tolerated and accepted with the connivance of the political system, thereby establishing opportunities for emotional expression and contagion. In short, as broadcasters, organizations like news agencies are both the information source and, more importantly, a legitimating source for unleashing emotional expression and contagion.

Second, given their popularity and visibility, celebrities play the role of ‘emotion initiator’ in the process of anger contagion. Our findings reveal that celebrities followed and forwarded posts from organizational actors rather than engaging in the exposure of the event in the first place. A plausible explanation, as said, is that the news coverage and commentaries denote the government’s consent and thus open a ‘safe’ (Gan et al., 2017, p. 945) outlet for opinion and emotion expression. For another, although their engagement comes after that of the organizational actors, the emotional posts from celebrities play a fundamental role in setting off an emotional cascade by motivating and encouraging emotional expression behaviors among their followers (Goldenberg & Gross, 2020). Schneider (2017) recognizes that celebrities have significantly more power to infuse large networks of Weibo users with ideas. A similar phenomenon unfolds when the anger posts by, for instance, one celebrity in this study, which were retweeted with thousands of burning reposts and enraged comments, condemning the kindergarten teachers, calling for severe punishment, and accusing the government of negligence in education. One comment on this celebrity’s post goes: ‘I am so angry that my hands are shaking.’ Another comment states that ‘to reiterate: [the scandal] was collective sexual assault!!! [It was] not just child abuse! After the exposure, there was no [angry emoticon] [angry emoticon] [angry emoticon] [angry emoticon] direct response, nor reasonable explanation.’ Calling celebrities an ‘emotion initiator’ thus recognizes their role as not just an information source as other studies have identified (e.g., Wang et al., 2020), but, most importantly, as seeds of anger cascades in online activism.

Third, not necessarily having a large number of followers, micro-celebrities are ‘emotion brokers’ who are central in bridging different subgroups through emotional expressions in the contagion network. While celebrities tend to have a more or less homogeneous follower
population (Hou, 2019, p. 549), micro-celebrities speak to heterogeneous social groups. The demographic backgrounds of the followers, fans, and subscribers of micro-celebrities are as diverse as possible, as long as they share a specific interest in the micro-celebrities’ expertise in certain niche topics. Given the diversity of their follower populations, micro-celebrities have considerable influence in establishing communication between different clusters and aggregating these previously disconnected clusters, which fundamentally leads to an emotional contagion process as wide as possible. In this sense, as ‘emotion brokers,’ micro-celebrities have the ability to control the flows of emotion in online activism.

To conclude, as Table 1 summarizes, three types of key actors exert divergent influence on emotion contagion on Chinese social media platforms. As a ‘broadcaster,’ organizational users act as both the information source and the legitimating source that signals the connivance of the authorities in eliciting emotional expression and contagion, although their posts are emotionally neutral.

Through forwarding posts from organizational users, individual celebrities vent their emotion, which establishes them as ‘emotion initiators’ that provoke emotion contagion. Then, without micro-celebrities’ role as ‘emotion brokers,’ emotion contagion is unable to develop into a large-scale network with a diverse range of subgroups and clusters. Unlike observation elsewhere (e.g., Isa & Himelboim, 2018), these actors rarely overlap but have unique roles in emotion contagion in China.

Our findings make two relevant contributions to current scholarship on emotional diffusion in online activism. First, high degree centrality, or more connections, provides one with the opportunity to influence many other social media users. Yet, actors with high degree centrality do not necessarily have high betweenness centrality, which allows

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Key actor</th>
<th>Broadcaster</th>
<th>Emotion initiator</th>
<th>Emotion broker</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition</strong></td>
<td>Organizational user who, through its role as an information source and a legitimate source, elicits other users’ emotions through emotion-free information</td>
<td>User who instigates and leads other users’ emotion through emotion contagion</td>
<td>User who builds bridges between people and subgroups through emotion contagion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example</strong></td>
<td>News organizations &amp; news-aggregating platforms, e.g., @People’s Daily</td>
<td>Celebrities, e.g., @Celebrity_2</td>
<td>Micro-celebrities, e.g., @Micro-celebrity_3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Network</strong></td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Broadcaster Network" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Emotion Initiator Network" /></td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Emotion Broker Network" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
one to control the flow of information or resources in the network. Especially, we add to the literature regarding the considerable influence from the brokerage role taken up by micro-celebrities to either facilitate or constrain the exchange of (emotional) messages among heterogeneous social media users. For another, we elucidate the differentiation between key actors and their disparate influences on the diffusion process. This differentiation goes beyond the actors’ positions in the networks, such as the number of followers, as already addressed by existing scholarship (e.g., González-Bailón et al., 2011, 2013; Isa & Himelboim, 2018, p. 3), but more importantly is underpinned by their contextual, institutional roles in society – as illustrated by the legitimate role of organizational users in the promotion of emotional expression and contagion in this study.

**Conclusion**

This study explored the network of emotion diffusion and profiled the networks’ key actors in online activism in China, with the case of anger contagion in the RYB scandal. Through supervised machine learning for emotion labeling and SNA, we conjectured three types of key actors that shape networked dynamics of emotion contagion in China: broadcaster, emotion initiator, and emotion broker. This study makes two contributions to the scholarship on online activism. First, it reveals that common social media users do not rise to their potential to become central to the emotion contagion, leaving the stage primarily to traditional influentials in the offline world and emerging online influential micro-celebrities. Second, it sheds new light on the diverse ways in which different key actors shape emotion diffusion in Chinese social media. As illustrated, broadcasters, emotion initiators, and emotion brokers entail distinctive yet essential roles and complement each other in the process of emotion contagion.

As a preliminary exploration of emotion diffusion in online activism, our study has a number of limitations. First, we focused on a relatively safe case of online activism that did not challenge the political system, which would arguably be selection bias limiting the expansion of our conclusion on a general scale. We suggest that further studies with multiple cases of different forms of online activism (Yang, 2009) would allow observation of possible similarities and differences in relation to our case and to generalize the understanding of key actors and their roles in emotion contagion across different contexts. We believe, however, that our conclusion is valid, especially given the fact that the scandal involved highly politically sensitive rumors of military involvement, which normally draws relentless censorship without any room for discussion. Future studies should involve the complete population, when possible, to portray an accurate picture of emotion contagion in online activism.
References


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