

How Moral Outrage Spreads in the Digital Age: An Empirical Study of College Students in Shanghai

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Abstract

Outrage is an ancient and universal emotion. On social media, information that triggers outrage becomes particularly visible due to the influence of group psychology (moral-emotion expression receive increased amount of positive social feedback) and content algorithms (Crockett, 2017; Brady, McLoughlin, Torres, & Luo, 2023). Outrage in the digital era not only undergoes quantitative changes in intensity, frequency, and scale but also a qualitative transformation in its generation and expression logic, manifesting as altruistic and more justifiable moral outrage (Spring, Cameron, & Cikara, 2019). Whether digital moral outrage can catalyze collective action or limit participation in the public sphere is controversial (Spring, Cameron, & Cikara, 2018; Brady & Crockett, 2019).

This research aims to offer a new perspective into the debate by integrating micro-level personal characteristics (news consumption habits, online expression habits, sense of justice, self-efficacy) and macro-level social contexts into the spreading process of moral outrage online. We focused on a specific regional group, college students in Shanghai, China (N=266). Data were gathered from a questionnaire survey and depth interviews. As “digital natives” with relatively high education and living standards, our respondents are accustomed to staying informed about hot news on social media (Milkman, 2017).

It is found that individuals who actively follow the news and have a strong sense of efficacy, believing that personal attention and involvement can impact event progress, tend to experience moral outrage more frequently. They are more inclined to express their opinions publicly and engage in offline actions, such as mobilization and donation. However, respondents generally exhibit a lower level of efficacy ($M=2.96/5$), suggesting that the translation of online outrage into actions on the ground is challenging.

The paper proposes the need to distinguish between two sources of digital moral outrage: violation of a moral norm by the event itself (Salerno & Peter-Hagene, 2013) and dissatisfaction with the social contexts, especially the media environment (e.g., polarized public opinion, strict censorship). Given the unique public opinion environment in China, the latter source should be taken into account. It is found that the former remains the main cause of moral outrage, while the latter often serves as an emotional accelerant that reinforces and prolongs the efficacy of this emotion online.

Moreover, a potential long-term repercussion of polarized public opinion and mainstream media distrust is the onset of “outrage fatigue”, which prompts individuals to socially disengage by deliberately avoiding relevant information.

The findings emphasize the need to consider both the personal characteristics and social contexts when analyzing the impact of online moral outrage on specific individual. Thus, this study provides ideas on how to harness the positive effects of this strong group-based emotion in the digital age.

Keywords

digital moral outrage, public opinion, digital natives, group polarization