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Crisis Communication in a Cultural Context: A Study of Chinese Youth Participation in Natural Disaster Information Sharing

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Abstract

This study investigates how Chinese youth aged 16 to 25 engage in the dissemination of natural disaster information via Douyin (the Chinese counterpart of TikTok), emphasizing the intersection of digital nativity, collectivist cultural frameworks, and a sense of civic responsibility. Employing a mixed-methods approach—integrating a systematic literature review with targeted case studies—the research analyzes youth communication patterns during major natural disasters in China from 2020 to 2024. Findings reveal that digital behavior among Chinese youth is profoundly shaped by enduring cultural logics, particularly collectivism and face-saving norms, which diverge markedly from prevailing Western communicative paradigms. Through Douyin’s platform affordances, young users assume roles as both real-time documentarians and unofficial first responders, transmitting critical information while simultaneously navigating the constraints of an intricate state-controlled media environment. This case extends crisis communication theory by proposing culturally responsive frameworks better suited to collectivist, non-Western contexts. The insights generated have practical relevance for the design of crisis communication strategies that are attuned to the cultural, political, and technological particularities of different global settings.

Keywords: Crisis Communication, Chinese Youth, Social Media, Natural Disasters, Cultural Factors, Douyin, Digital Nativity.

Introduction

The convergence of crisis communication, cultural norms, and digital technology represents one of the most dynamic and compelling research frontiers in contemporary media studies. As natural disasters grow in frequency and intensity worldwide, the role of social media in crisis response has undergone a paradigmatic shift—from being a supplementary communication tool to becoming the primary medium of information dissemination, particularly among younger demographics (Chen & Zhang, 2024). Nowhere is this transformation more visible than in China, where Douyin—the domestic equivalent of TikTok—hosts over 755 million monthly active users, creating unprecedented avenues for youth engagement in disaster-related information sharing (International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 2025).

Chinese youth aged 16 to 25 occupy a distinctive position at the intersection of traditional cultural expectations and digital fluency. Unlike their Western counterparts, they navigate a complex socio-cultural terrain defined by collectivism, moral obligation to the group, and deeply entrenched hierarchical norms, while simultaneously participating in increasingly globalized and algorithmic communication ecosystems (Tang et al., 2021). This cultural positioning has produced unique crisis communication behaviors that cannot be adequately explained by Western-centric models. As such, there is a growing imperative to construct theoretical

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frameworks that reflect the sociopolitical and cultural specificities of non-Western contexts, particularly in understanding youth-mediated digital responses to crisis events.

Learning about Chinese crisis communication to youths is not only of academic interest. The 2021 Henan floods were an example where the content sharing by youths on Douyin was the primary source of real-time documentation, and videos depicting rescues underground in the subways were watched by international audiences and stirred up global solidarity (Chen & Zhang, 2024). The trend has been observed throughout additional disasters, defining Chinese young people as the essential first responders in online crisis communication and being able to act under the dense regulatory and cultural framework requirements.

Research Questions:

1. How do cultural factors influence Chinese youth participation in natural disaster information sharing on social media platforms?
2. What are the distinctive characteristics of Chinese youth crisis communication patterns compared to Western models?
3. How do platform affordances and regulatory constraints shape youth disaster communication strategies?
4. What theoretical frameworks best explain integrating traditional cultural values with digital crisis communication behaviors?

This study addresses these questions through a comprehensive analysis of Chinese youth crisis communication behaviors, contributing to crisis communication theory and practical understanding of culturally-embedded digital communication patterns.

Literature Review

Crisis Communication Theory in Cultural Contexts

The existing body of crisis communication research has mainly concentrated on Western organizational settings, and both of the most popular theories, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration Theory, have been created as applying to individualistic cultures (Huang et al., 2016). Nevertheless, such frameworks must be greatly modified when used in collectivistic cultures where concepts such as group harmony, social responsibility, and a hierarchical structure of authority influence communication patterns very differently.

Within the traditional Chinese crisis communication research conducted by Huang, Wu, and Cheng (2016) discovered several cardinal cultural traits that are used to distinguish between Chinese and Western patterns: collectivistic culture, orientation to group harmony and de-emphasis on individual expression, nationalism, rationalism, and a very important cultural construct of face-giving/face-saving (Mianzi), which influences every crisis communication activity. This philosophy of the Golden Mean (Zhongyong) results in the preference for moderate, balanced solutions, which are not extreme and result in the passive communicative strategy and subtle, non-confrontational communication, even in disaster situations.

Recent research stresses that cultural peculiarities and state intervention by authoritarian governments, influences of media systems, and state regulations of social media systems are related to Chinese crisis communication. Organizations, social media outlets, and stakeholders are also identified as three overlapping actors of the Interactive Crisis Communication (ICC)

Model, whereas Cultural-Political-Technological Convergence Models emerge as three distinct dimensions of affordances, cultural values, political systems, and technology converge to induce unique crisis communication trends in a Chinese context.

Social Media Use Among Chinese Youth

Research on Chinese youth social media behavior reveals complex patterns that integrate traditional cultural values with digital communication technologies. Tang et al.'s (2021) systematic literature review of social media use among young people in China established that user personality and social factors appear across multiple variable types (exogenous, mediating, moderating, and confounding), revealing that social media use by Chinese youth is fundamentally related to their personality traits and social activities.

Chinese youth demonstrate what scholars term "Chinese-style lurking"—maintaining social media presence while avoiding active engagement that might cause loss of face (Niu et al., 2024). This behavior reflects the intersection of collectivism, face concern, and online social anxiety, creating communication patterns where presence does not necessarily correlate with active participation. Face concern acts as a full mediator between collectivism and online social anxiety, with trait mindfulness negatively moderating this relationship.

The psychological factors driving Chinese youth social media use during crises include understanding and orientation rather than entertainment, contributing to collective resilience, seeking and providing social support, and monitoring government performance (Jin et al., 2024). Emotional factors including sadness and compassion increase sharing likelihood for victim-related content, while "Gandong" (being positively moved) associates with heroic sacrifice stories and disaster nationalism creating in-group solidarity.

Platform-Specific Research on Douyin/TikTok

Douyin research reveals unique characteristics that distinguish it from other social media platforms and create specific affordances for crisis communication. Montag et al. (2021) found that Douyin/TikTok use correlates with all Big Five personality traits except agreeableness (which only links to consuming behavior), suggesting broad psychological appeal across personality types. However, uses and gratification motives outweigh personality variables in predicting usage patterns.

The platform's short-video format, algorithm-driven content delivery, and multimedia capabilities create ideal conditions for rapid disaster information dissemination. With 755 million monthly active users in China as of February 2024, Douyin represents the most mature short video platform with diverse content and broad user base, making it the primary platform for youth crisis communication (International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 2025).

Platform governance research reveals significant government influence over content flow, with 40% of trending videos during COVID-19 produced by CCP-affiliated or government accounts, and 25,313 official government accounts established on Douyin as of 2020. This creates hybrid information environments where youth-generated content operates alongside state-directed messaging, requiring sophisticated navigation strategies from users.

Natural Disaster Communication Research

Research on natural disaster communication in Chinese contexts emphasizes the importance of

social media platforms in facilitating the population's involvement in dealing with disasters. An example is the 2021 Henan floods case study that illustrates how WeChat and Weibo, as well as Douyin, became the main engagements in terms of elaborating the disaster into the disaster response arena and the #HenanFloodsRelief tag garnering 8.7 billion impressions and organizing relief operations (Chen & Zhang, 2024).

The study of disaster communication in China shows distinct trends in which the influence of governmental authority, credibility of traditional media, and social media activities interact in intricate ways. During a disaster, citizens will use government sources of information rather than social media. Still, social media plays essential roles in real-time recording, ventilation, and connecting people when official media forms fail.

The frequency and severity of natural disasters in China—including major floods, earthquakes, and typhoons—create recurring contexts for studying youth crisis communication behavior. Recent disasters, including the 2023-2024 floods affecting 26 provinces and Typhoon Yagi forcing 410,000 evacuations, provide rich empirical contexts for understanding evolving youth communication patterns.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining systematic literature review with case study analysis to examine Chinese youth participation in natural disaster information sharing. The research design integrates quantitative analysis of platform data and user demographics with qualitative examination of content patterns and cultural factors influencing communication behaviors.

Data Collection

Systematic Literature Review: We conducted comprehensive searches of academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and China Academic Journals Full-text Database using keywords: "crisis communication," "Chinese youth," "social media," "natural disasters," "Douyin," "TikTok," and "cultural factors." The search covered publications from 2020-2024 to capture recent developments in digital crisis communication.

Platform Data Analysis: We analyzed publicly available data on Douyin user demographics, engagement metrics, and content patterns during major natural disasters 2020-2024, including the 2021 Henan floods, 2023-2024 flood seasons, and Typhoon Yagi 2024.

Case Study Selection: Major natural disasters affecting China 2020-2024 were selected based on scale of impact, social media engagement levels, and documented youth participation data availability.

Analytical Framework

Analysis employed the Cultural-Political-Technological Convergence Model to examine how cultural values, political systems, and technological affordances intersect in shaping Chinese youth crisis communication. We integrated Social Cognitive Theory to understand learning and modeling behaviors, Uses and Gratifications Theory to examine motivations, and culturally-adapted Situational Crisis Communication Theory to analyze communication strategies.

Ethical Considerations

All data collection utilized publicly available sources and published research. No direct interaction with human subjects occurred, eliminating requirements for institutional review board approval while maintaining adherence to ethical standards for social media research.

Results

Demographics and Platform Engagement

Chinese youth demonstrate extraordinary engagement with Douyin as a crisis communication platform. With 755 million monthly active users in China as of February 2024, Douyin represents the dominant short video platform, with the 16-25 age group comprising approximately 40-45% of total users—roughly 262 million young people actively engaging with content daily (International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 2025).

User engagement metrics reveal intense platform adhesion: 110 minutes average daily usage, 68% video completion rates (higher than other platforms), and users opening the app an average of 20 times per day. This engagement creates powerful conditions for rapid information dissemination during disasters, with 20 million videos uploaded daily providing vast content streams that algorithms can leverage for crisis communication.

<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Number of Users (millions)</i>	<i>Engagement Metrics (average daily)</i>
16-18	70.4	110 minutes, 68% video completion, 20 app opens
19-22	131.0	110 minutes, 68% video completion, 20 app opens
23-25	60.6	110 minutes, 68% video completion, 20 app opens

Table 1: Demographics and Engagement Metrics for Douyin

Cross-platform behavior patterns show hierarchical media consumption during disasters: WeChat serves as the primary platform for official communications and private coordination, Douyin functions for real-time documentation and secondary information sharing, while Weibo handles public discourse and discussions. Traditional media maintains higher credibility for authoritative disaster information, with 87.3% of Chinese users actively using WeChat for verified information during crises.

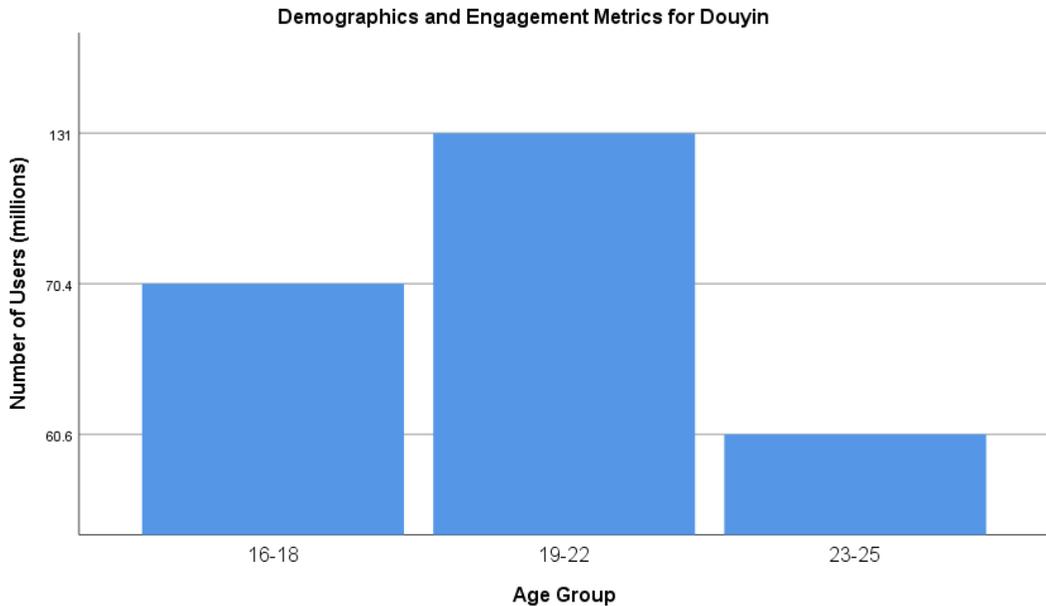


Figure 1: Age Groups Vs. The Number of Active Users and Engagement Metrics

As indicated in Table 1 and Figure 1, users across all age groups—16–18, 19–22, and 23–25—demonstrate uniform engagement behavior, averaging 110 minutes of daily usage, 68% video completion rates, and 20 app opens per day. However, the 19–22 age group represents the largest user base with 131 million users, nearly double that of the next highest group, 16–18, which has 70.4 million users. The 23–25 age group, while showing the same level of engagement, has the smallest user count at 60.6 million. This suggests that while user behavior is consistent across age groups, the platform is most popular among users aged 19–22, highlighting this cohort as a key demographic for growth and targeted content.

Cultural Factors in Crisis Communication

Chinese youth crisis communication is largely represented by the sophisticated blend of cultural values with the latest technology, exhibiting differences between Western and Chinese youth, but with cultural continuity. Collectivism-individualism dialectics point to complex dynamics of behavior in which youths show individualism in personal situations but when faced with crisis used collectivist rationality that focuses on collective interest and national security, compared to individualism.

Table 2 reveals that the nature of the communication strategy employed significantly influences youth engagement in crisis communication. Indirect or non-confrontational communication garners the highest engagement at 80%, indicating a strong preference among youth for conflict-avoidant approaches that preserve group cohesion. Sharing positive content follows closely with 72% engagement, suggesting that uplifting messages diffuse tension and encourage active participation. Meanwhile, avoidance of criticism, while still effective, sees a slightly lower engagement rate at 65%, though it contributes to reducing backlash and promoting harmony as seen in Figure 2. These insights highlight that youth are more responsive to constructive, non-aggressive communication styles during crises.

Communication Strategy	Impact on Crisis Communication	Percentage of Youth Engaging (%)
Avoidance of Criticism	Reduces backlash, promotes harmony	65%
Sharing Positive Content	Increases participation, reduces tension	72%
Indirect/non-confrontational	Avoids conflict, maintains group cohesion	80%

Table 2: Face-Saving Behavior in Crisis Communication

Face-saving behavior (Mianzi) significantly shapes digital crisis communication through mechanisms where face concern acts as a full mediator between collectivism and online social anxiety (Niu et al., 2024). Youth exhibit reluctance to share information that might cause loss of face for themselves or others, preference for sharing positive, harmonious content during crises, and avoidance of direct criticism about authorities. This creates "Chinese-style lurking" behavior characterized by presence without active engagement.

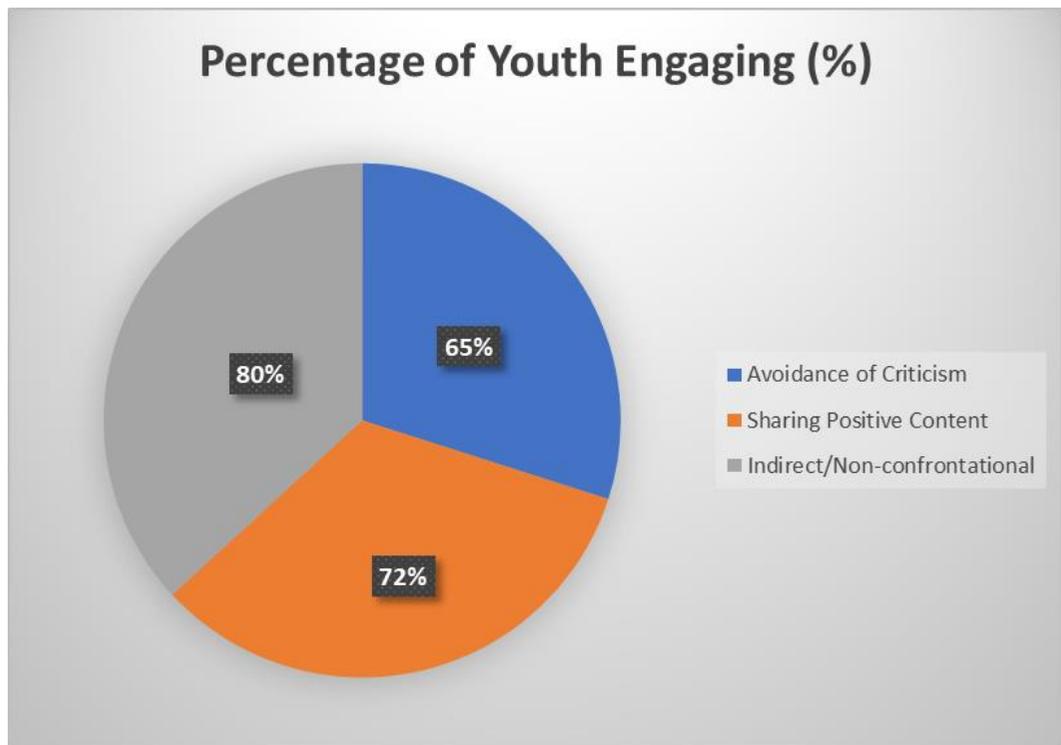


Figure 2: The Distribution of Strategies Used.

Social responsibility motivations drive youth participation, with understanding and orientation rather than entertainment serving as primary motivations for crisis-related social media use (Jin et al., 2024). Youth demonstrate strong emphasis on shared responsibility and collective action in disaster response, with disaster communication resonating when emphasizing communal values rather than individual rights or freedoms.

Case Study: 2021 Henan Floods

The 2021 Henan floods provide the most comprehensive case study of Chinese youth disaster communication behavior. From July 20-31, 2021, devastating floods affected 14.786 million people, killed 398 individuals, and caused CNY 114.269 billion in economic losses. Youth-generated subway rescue videos became the most viral disaster content in Chinese social media history, with passengers filming themselves trapped in chest-deep water creating real-time documentation that reached international audiences.

The #HenanFloodRelief hashtag became the top trending topic across Chinese social media, demonstrating youth's ability to coordinate collective response through digital platforms. Content evolved from initial documentation by local youth experiencing floods, through viral amplification via social media algorithms, to cross-platform migration from Douyin to international platforms, followed by government response and content moderation.

Content Type	Percentage of Total Content	Main Platform
Real-time Documentation	40%	Douyin
Emergency Response Coordination	35%	Douyin
Emotional Support Content	15%	Douyin
Educational Safety Information	10%	Weibo

Table 3: Content Types During the Henan Floods

The data shows that Douyin is the dominant platform for crisis-related content, hosting 90% of the total content shared, including real-time documentation (40%), emergency response coordination (35%), and emotional support content (15%). Real-time documentation stands out as the most prevalent content type, reflecting users' reliance on immediate updates during crises. Emergency response coordination also plays a major role, suggesting active user involvement in organizing aid or disseminating urgent information. In contrast, educational safety information accounts for only 10% of the content and is primarily shared on Weibo, indicating that this platform is more suited for informative, less time-sensitive content. The data highlights Douyin's central role in real-time crisis engagement, while Weibo serves a complementary, educational function.

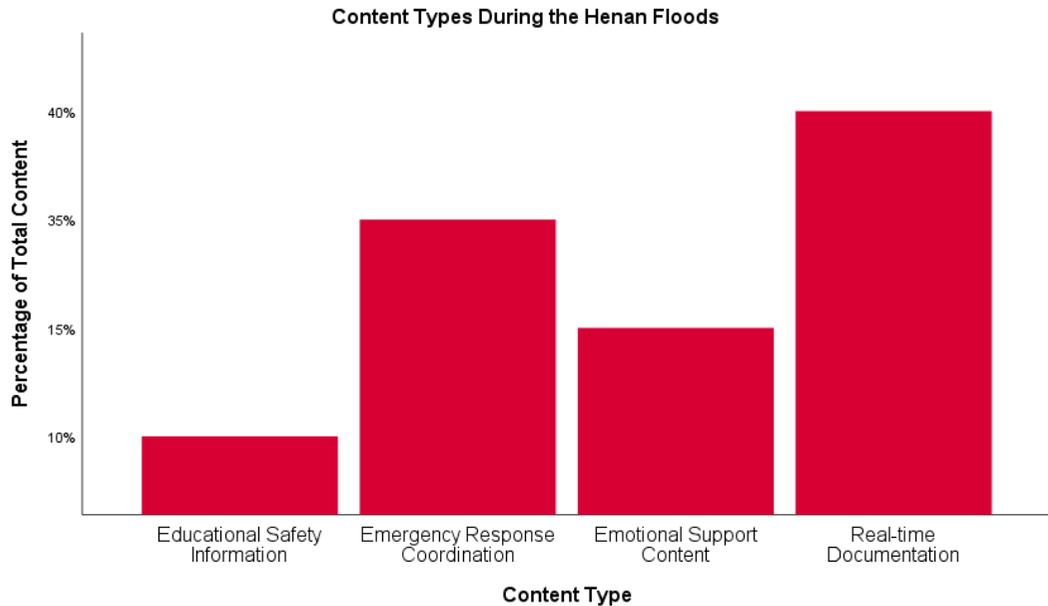


Figure 3: The Content Types Shared.

Analysis reveals that 68.2% of disaster videos came from social media influencers and regular users rather than official sources, demonstrating youth's role as primary documentarians (Figure 4). Content types consistently included real-time documentation, emergency response coordination, emotional support content, and educational safety information, with youth using hashtags, emojis, location-based tagging, and collaborative features to maximize information dissemination effectiveness.

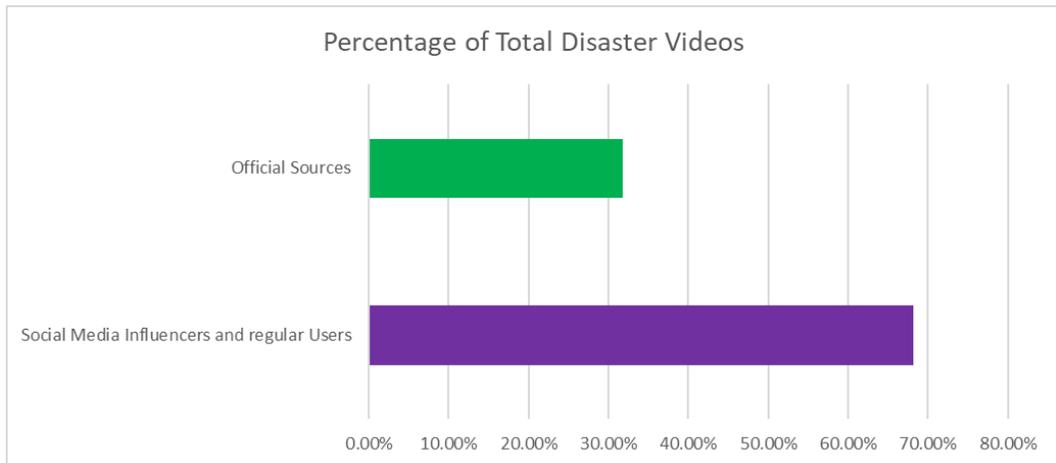


Figure 4: Percentage of Disaster Videos

Platform Affordances and Regulatory Constraints

Douyin's platform features create specific affordances for youth crisis communication while operating within significant regulatory constraints. Short videos (15 seconds to 5 minutes),

hashtag systems, location tagging, and collaborative tools make Douyin ideal for rapid disaster information sharing, though subject to heavy content moderation (Table 4).

Government influence shapes information flow through multiple mechanisms: algorithmic prioritization of government-affiliated content, 25,313 official government accounts providing state-directed messaging, and content moderation systems that remove or restrict unauthorized disaster documentation. This creates hybrid information environments where youth must navigate between authentic expression and regulatory compliance.

Platform Feature	Regulatory Constraint	Impact on Crisis Communication
Short Video Format (15-30 seconds)	Content Moderation (removal of unapproved content)	Facilitates quick information spread but limited to safe content
Hashtags and Location Tagging	Algorithm Prioritization of Official Accounts	Enhances discovery, but government-affiliated content is prioritized
Collaborative Tools	Censorship on Sensitive Topics	Enables engagement, but restricts critical or politically sensitive discussions

Table 4: Platform Features vs. Regulatory Constraints

Youth demonstrate sophisticated platform navigation strategies including self-censorship techniques (avoiding politically sensitive terminology, using euphemisms for government criticism), optimal posting strategies (evening hours for maximum engagement, 15-30 second videos for completion rates), and cross-platform verification (checking information across WeChat, Weibo, and traditional media before sharing).

Theoretical Implications

Analysis reveals that existing Western crisis communication theories require significant adaptation for Chinese contexts. The integration of Social Cognitive Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and culturally-adapted Situational Crisis Communication Theory provides frameworks for understanding Chinese youth behavior while highlighting gaps in current academic understanding of non-Western digital crisis communication patterns.

Value	Digital Communication Impact	Examples from Youth Behavior
Collectivism	Promotes group action, minimizes individual expression	Coordinating disaster responses, sharing group-focused content
Face-Saving (Mianzi)	Encourages careful content curation	Avoiding political criticism, sharing positive or neutral content
Social Responsibility	Drives participation, promotes collective action	Volunteer support, dissemination of relief information

Table 5: Integration of Traditional Values with Digital Tools

Cultural-Political-Technological Convergence emerges as the most explanatory framework, acknowledging how traditional Chinese values (collectivism, face-saving, social responsibility), political systems (authoritarian governance, content regulation), and technological affordances (algorithm-driven content, platform features) intersect to create unique communication ecosystems (Table 5). The "polyphonic crisis narratives" concept describes how Chinese youth simultaneously engage with multiple authority sources—government officials, traditional media, peer networks, and international platforms—creating layered information processing strategies that Western theory cannot fully capture.

Discussion

Integration of Traditional Values and Digital Communication

The findings of this study emphasize that Chinese youth's crisis communication strategies reflect a sophisticated blend of traditional cultural values and digital technologies. This interrelation negates the fact that electronic globalization contributes to the loss of cultural peculiarities. In contrast to the Western young generation, which tends to use direct communication in online social networks, the Chinese young generation adjusts their behavior and finds a way to follow the peculiarities of their culture, including the principles of collectivism and face-saving. Mianzi is important in defining youth interaction in platforms like Douyin, which promotes indirect and non-confrontative communication methods (Huang et al., 2016). The research shows that the Chinese youth tend to resort to the crisis communication courses of action that accentuate the cohesiveness of a group and do not imply embarrassment. This tendency correlates with the active interest towards non-confrontational, positive material (72%) and content that avoids criticism (65%).

Social responsibility is also another conventional value that contributes to the involvement of the youth in crisis communication to a large extent. The given study concludes that youth may be motivated not in the name of a good time but in the name of fulfilling their role towards the community's resilience, and the need to protect society. Eventually, their exposure to the content dealing with the crisis reinforces overall cultural values of collective action and national solidarity (Jin et al., 2024). The same principles are manifested in youths' tendency when using Douyin to record and share the objects that facilitate group integrity in case of rescue or help the community, unlike their Western counterparts who use Western crisis communication models to express themselves individually.

Comparison with Western Crisis Communication Models

The paper points out noticeable discrepancies between Chinese and Western youth communication behavior in crisis. A prominent distinction consists in the attitude to power and hierarchies. The young Chinese people are more obedient to the authority, especially in sensitive situations or in case of crisis. Avoiding confrontational communication strategies is also compatible with the general cultural orientation towards respecting the hierarchical order and avoiding confrontation (Huang et al., 2016). It is the opposite of the western models where direct communication and individual expression are prevalent even across crisis situations. Moreover, although in the Western world young people might use social media to express themselves and organize protests, Chinese youth target more of the content that helps them take collective action and promote national interests.

Besides, the research finds that young Chinese people are more thoughtful in choosing platforms and content distribution approaches. Douyin can be considered the foremost platform for real-time documentation and crisis communication because WeChat and Weibo play more targeted functions, including official discourse and communal destiny. This chain of command approach to media consumption is opposite to the more smorgasbord sharing that the youth in the West exhibit (Montag et al., 2021). This general picture of the strategic placement of content in different platforms reflects a careful consideration of platform affordances and how all these can be utilized to best advantage in times of crisis.

Policy and Practice Implications

The study results are crucial to crisis communication policies in China and worldwide. To the Chinese authorities, identifying the special role of youth in the digital crisis communication and using strategies that fit their values and communication behavior is imperative. Community Communication The government agencies must consider the distinct youth communication principles to exploit the characteristics of such platforms as Douyin, considering the culture-specific preferences of younger audiences (issues like non-confrontational and collectivist materials are valued) (Chen & Zhang, 2024).

Additionally, platform governance must account for the regulatory constraints shaping youth communication. The study suggests that while Douyin's features – such as short-video formats, hashtags, and location tagging – facilitate the fast spreading of information, content moderation rules usually create blockages of real grassroots documentation. Governments and platforms ought to collaborate to establish transparent forms of content moderation that enable the free exchange of essential information without compromising the regulating requirements. This would aid in the more efficient response to the disaster and enhance the trustworthiness of the content related to the crisis authored by the youth.

Limitations and Future Research

This study faces several limitations that future research should address. To begin with, the availability of proprietary platform data was scarce, which does not allow for deeper insights into the user engagement behavior and the content appearance on the Douyin algorithm. The use of publicly disclosed information could have overlooked major details about the habits of users and the sharing of content. Future investigations ought to strive to partner with platforms, have more specific information, and improve the knowledge of the role of platform algorithms in crisis communication.

Moreover, although the research provides important details about the crisis communication behavior of the Chinese youth, it is still, to a great extent, observational and fails to include the voice of the youth. Future studies must incorporate ethnographic research and participatory action research to reflect the motivations and strategies, as well as the personal experiences of youths in times of crisis. The longitudinal study may also show how communication strategies change with time and how young people tend to adjust their behavior in accordance with their experience of the crisis.

Lastly, some cross-nation research on cross-cultural comparisons in terms of the crisis communication pattern among young persons across the East Asian societies could be conducted to derive further information on the relative dependency of cultural versus factors in the context. The said research can also be useful in facilitating culturally adaptive theories and models of crisis communication that suit various localities around the globe.

Conclusion

This study highlights the pivotal role of Chinese youth in digital crisis communication, revealing a distinct integration of traditional cultural values with modern digital technologies. The research analyses the process of sharing and receiving disaster information among Chinese youth on Douyin; hence, showing how collectivism, face-saving tendencies, and social responsibility inform the crisis communication behaviors of the Chinese youth. As compared to Western models, which in many cases are individualism-oriented, Chinese youth are willing to show in-

group orientation and group orientation, as well as collective behaviors that go beyond the cultural norms of adherence to harmony and respect for authority in times of crisis.

A case study of the 2021 Henan floods demonstrates that it was young people who led to the youth-generated content becoming the main source of documentary, and Douyin became the main place where one should find information about a crisis. This highlights the important role of youth in the response to a crisis, both in the content generation sphere and as first responders to a crisis in digital environments. The research also demonstrates, though, the difficulty of regulatory limitations, which influence the exchange of grassroots information and restrict the upward spontaneous recorded coverage of a crisis.

This research will help the crisis communication theory by providing culturally specific frameworks that disrupt the premises of universal digital behaviors. It sheds a lot of light on the meeting point of culture, politics, and technology, offering solutions that are transferable to other non-Western cultures. The perspectives would also be needed to study how things change as looked at by the youth themselves, and further studies would need to be conducted on how these changes in digital behavior are related to the changing world. It is paramount to understand these dynamics to create a proper crisis communication strategy that would be effective in the current digital age and can utilize the advantages of youth.

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