

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Cultural and Political Dimensions of Crisis Management: The Chinese Government's Information Governance and Response to COVID-19 Rumors

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 infodemic posed unprecedented challenges to public governance and governmental crisis management. This study examines the Chinese government's response to social media rumors to test and extend the applicability of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) within a non-Western, centralized political context. Through a content analysis of 278 rumor-response posts from ten key governmental Weibo accounts and a textual analysis of over 22,000 public comments, this research investigates the government's approach and its reception. The analysis reveals a distinct crisis management model favoring denial and refutation. Significantly, legal punishment was identified as a primary tool for information control, a practice that represents a significant extension of the traditional SCCT framework. While this top-down, multi-modal response demonstrated effectiveness in controlling information, analysis of public comments revealed complex stakeholder reactions, including widespread skepticism that raises concerns about the erosion of long-term public trust. Ultimately, the findings reveal a unique crisis management paradigm shaped by China's political culture, which prioritizes social stability over dialogic communication. This study contributes to the crisis management literature by providing critical lessons for crisis managers on the strategic trade-offs of authoritative crisis response and highlighting the imperative to contextualize crisis theories within diverse political environments.

## 1 | Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic posed unprecedented challenges for rumor management worldwide, occurring in an environment of high social media saturation. This 'infodemic' created a significant challenge for governmental crisis management and public governance. Social media enables rumors to be generated and disseminated rapidly in a short period (Luo et al. 2021) and has become a significant source of rumors following the COVID-19 outbreak (Tasnim et al. 2020). Although social media provides a platform for the dissemination of widespread rumors, organizations and governments also utilize it as a channel for responding to rumors (Pal et al. 2019). The WHO Risk

Communication Team and governments monitored online rumors and disseminated health-related information through various social media platforms (Li et al. 2021). Governments play an irreplaceable role during a public health crisis, such as preserving people's lives and health and reestablishing social stability (Rosenthal and Kouzmin 1997). Thus, rumor response strategies are a critical component of effective state-level crisis management. Effective rumor management is crucial for maintaining public trust, ensuring the accurate dissemination of information, and mitigating the adverse effects of pandemics. Studies have shown that rumors in different countries exhibit distinct characteristics (Zeng and Chan 2021), and the rumor

response strategies employed by countries also vary, leading to differing rumor management outcomes (Zhu et al. 2022).

In the crisis management field, situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) is an influential framework that proposes primary and secondary crisis response strategies for different types of crises (Coombs 2007). According to the theory, organizations can recognize crises and then employ appropriate communication strategies (Schwarz 2012). However, scholars have long argued for the importance of contingent factors such as local political and media systems, economic development, and cultural values in adopting crisis management strategies (Verčič et al. 1996). Cultural assumptions, norms, and values significantly influence complex crisis practices within specific contexts. A comprehensive understanding of crisis management is unattainable without examining the associated cultural frameworks (Yu and Wen 2003). The generation and spread of rumors typically occur within specific cultural contexts, and understanding the response strategy to rumors should also consider these cultural factors. This study selected the Chinese government's response posts due to rumors surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic for research.

On the one hand, China was the first country to report the first confirmed case of COVID-19 officially, and the Chinese government's response to the crisis attracted worldwide attention as the epidemic spread globally. Massive rumors emerged and became widely discussed across Chinese social media (Deng and Yang 2021). The Chinese government initiated immediate crisis management efforts, including rumor management through online channels (Christensen and Ma 2021), and their timely response effectively curtailed public panic and the pursuit of unproven remedies for COVID-19 prevention and treatment (Hou et al. 2020). On the other hand, scholars advocate for exploring crisis management within specific cultural contexts (Huang and Bedford 2009; Verčič et al. 1996). The knowledge and scholarship of management, primarily derived from scholars, prompted them to explore the applicability of theories developed in Western governance in the East (Cheng 2020; Hou and Zhu 2012). China, as a representative Asian nation with a rich history and distinct cultural traits (Huang et al. 2016), embodies elements such as Confucianism, face-saving practices, and a collectivist orientation (Bond 1991), which have exerted varying degrees of influence on other Asian countries. Therefore, by examining the case of China, this study aims to contribute to the crisis management literature by analyzing how a non-Western state manages an online infodemic. Guided by SCCT, this research examines specific rumor response strategies employed by the Chinese government, offering political insights into the interplay between political culture, social stability, and public sector crisis management.

## 1.1 | Literature Review

### 1.1.1 | Rumors and Public Health Crises

Rumors often emerge in uncertain circumstances or when threats arise (Allport and Postman 1946; Rosnow 1991). Rumors have driven academic attention from different domains, including crisis communication, public relations, psychology, history, and other social science fields. Scholars have defined rumor, and generally, the common thread in the definitions

emphasized the uncertainty and non-verification of information about specific issues that carry personal relevance (Allport and Postman 1946; Katz and Shibutani 1969). DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) developed one of the most widely used definitions. They reviewed and summarized rumor as “unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger, or potential threat and that function to help people make sense and manage risk.”

Furthermore, rumors can engage individuals emotionally, and these emotional reactions can further influence individual attitudes and behaviors during a crisis (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007) and even cause another significant risk (Wang and Zhuang 2018). Compared to other types of crises, public health issues are particularly susceptible to the influence of rumors (Zeng et al. 2017; Zeng and Chan 2021). For specific health crises, such as protection measures and vaccination, rumors can mislead individual perceptions of health knowledge and undermine people's health decisions (Zeng and Chan 2021). Previous studies have documented that the pandemic triggered significant levels of anxiety and ‘COVID-19 phobia’ among various populations, particularly students and youth (Atılğan and Aksoy 2021; Wang, Yeerjiang, et al. 2022). In addition to being a health issue, online health rumors also hinder economic development by restricting people's economic activities and destabilizing social stability by provoking social conflicts (Yuan et al. 2022). Thus, rumor management is essential in public health crisis communication.

### 1.1.2 | Rumor Response Strategies

Studies have revealed different findings regarding effective rumor response strategies. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is one of the influential crisis management frameworks that offers insights into strategies for responding to rumors and misinformation. Coombs (2007) defined a crisis as any threat that causes negative consequences for an organization, identifying three primary types of threats: financial loss, public safety concerns, and damage to reputation. In the mid-1990s, Coombs pioneered attribution and image repair theories and then developed SCCT. Crisis response strategies aim to repair an organization's image or reputation and mitigate negative effects. SCCT suggests that the key to determining effective crisis management strategies is understanding the crisis and the level of reputational threat it poses. SCCT clustered crisis types into three categories: victim with low attribution of responsibility (e.g., rumor, natural disaster, terror, and workplace violence), accidental with modest attribution (e.g., technical error, accident/recall, and mega damage), and preventable with strong attribution (e.g., human breakdown accident, and product recall) (Coombs and Holladay 2002). Coombs (2007) categorized rumors as a minimal crisis responsibility and argued that denial and attack strategies are best used for rumor crises.

Rumor crises are complex, and the secondary crises triggered by rumors vary from one crisis to another. For example, rumors during a public health crisis can lead to financial losses (Ma and Luo 2020; Yuan et al. 2022), compromised public safety (Paek and Hove 2019a), and a crisis of trust in government (Yuan et al. 2022). Scholars have begun further exploring the application of SCCT in rumor research. Nekmat and Kong (2019)

connected the SCCT and the social psychological perspectives in rumor theory. They found that the influence of online rumors on crisis attribution is indirect and mediated by individual belief in rumors. Scholars have also developed new crisis communication theories for the new media environment based on SCCT, demonstrating the broad applicability of this framework (Roshan et al. 2016). However, SCCT was initially developed in the context of corporate crises, and SCCT-related research tends to focus on organizational crises and their responses. Few studies have examined SCCT in public sector crisis management or rumor response in the context of national-level risks (Li and Ma 2017). Additionally, public health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, are often difficult to attribute solely to a single cause.

Compared to corporate crises, public health crises are more likely to be national-level crises, which can affect a broader population rather than specific stakeholder groups and are not always directly attributed to mistakes by the involved organization or government (Paek and Hove 2019a). A study on health rumors in South Korea highlighted significant differences between public health-related and organizational reputation-related rumors (Paek and Hove 2019a), which challenges the applicability of SCCT to public health rumors and underscores the difficulty of establishing standard guidelines for addressing all types of rumors from SCCT. On this occasion, this study explored the applicability of SCCT within the context of COVID-19 and the Chinese cultural environment to gain further insights into its theoretical relevance.

In rumor response research, DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) provided a summary of rumor-quelling strategies drawn from a review of psychological and business literature. They summarized four ultimate aims of rumor response: 'dispel uncertainty,' 'reduce anxiety,' 'reduce transmission,' and 'reduce belief.' Based on the four aims, the most popular rumor response strategies are denials, refutation, rebuttal, and attacks (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007). According to other rumor-related research, the most commonly discussed rumor response strategies are attack, denial, refutation, sarcasm, guidance, and interrogation (Coombs & Holladay, 2004; Paek and Hove 2019a; Li et al. 2021; Xiao et al. 2018), indicating the influence of SCCT. Thus, this study examined the rumor response strategies employed by Chinese governmental Weibo accounts, focusing on the six strategies mentioned above.

**RQ1** *What are the rumor response strategies employed by the Chinese government during COVID-19 when responding to rumors?*

### 1.1.3 | Rumor Response Modes

Rumor response modes in this study refer to the ways in which the Chinese government expresses its strategies for responding to rumors. These modes can be understood as the operational tactics and implementation techniques through which broader crisis management strategies are executed. These responses can be categorized into three primary dimensions: fact-checking, narrative modes, and information presentation modes. Each dimension is crucial in addressing and debunking rumors, especially in public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fact-checking is a common strategy and the basis for debunking rumors (Jang et al. 2019). The generation and spread of rumors are always connected to ambiguity and uncertainty (Allport and Postman 1946). As mentioned above, one of the purposes of responding to rumors is to dispel uncertainty (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007). Releasing rumor response information can be seen as a result of fact-checking, but not every rumor response message would contain the fact-checking process. Thus, this study investigated whether the Chinese government shows the fact-checking process when responding to rumors.

Rumor response is a persuasion process, and persuasive narratives motivate health behaviors in health communication (Shen et al. 2015). Scholars have identified six rumor response modes based on the strategies employed by the Chinese government to refute rumors on social media: releasable, counter-attack, declarative, appealing, reverse, and joint response modes (Gao et al. 2022; Qiang and Sun 2020). Releasable response mode refers to posting reliable information in response to rumors. The counter-attack response mode involves highlighting the flaws in rumors. Declarative response mode refers to a declaration that traces the source of the rumor and holds the rumormonger accountable. Appealing response mode calls on the public to remain calm and refrain from spreading rumors. The reverse response mode involves debunking the conspiracy behind the rumor. Combining the abovementioned modes contributes to the joint response mode (Gao et al. 2022).

Another essential rumor response mode is the presentation of response information. Social media enables diverse forms of information presentation, including text, pictures, videos, memes, clickable links to websites, and mixed formats. According to the Information Richness Theory (IRT), images convey more information than text, while videos offer more extraordinary richness than images (Trevino et al. 1987). Posts featuring images are more likely to capture attention than links, videos, or text updates. (Strekalova and Krieger 2017). Studies also argued that the expression forms of information influenced the effect of rumor debunking (Qiang and Sun 2020; Li et al. 2021). Overall, this study examined the rumor response modes of Chinese government rumor response posts, including fact-checking, persuasive narratives, and presentation forms.

**RQ2** *What are the rumor response modes (fact-checking, narrative, and information presentation modes) reflected in the Chinese government rumor response posts during COVID-19?*

### 1.1.4 | Public Reactions to Rumor Response Strategies

The effectiveness of rumor response is an essential concern in research on rumor response strategies. Scholars have argued that the effective management of rumors depends on the strategies employed to address them and how individuals respond to these strategies (Paek and Hove 2019b). Research has also explored various aspects of measuring rumor response effectiveness, including emotional reactions (Lee et al. 2021), changes in belief about the rumor (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007), and intended behaviors in response to rumors (Ma and Liu 2020). Standard research methods for assessing the effectiveness of rumor debunking include surveys, experiments (Paek and Hove 2019a), and the analysis of extensive social media metrics data.

Users' commenting behaviors reflect their decisions after exposure to and processing the posts (Wang, Han, et al. 2022). In this context, the effectiveness of a rumor response in social media environments is often measured by user engagement, such as likes, retweets, and comments (Wang et al. 2021; Zhang et al. 2014). However, while the engagement metrics indicate visibility and reach, they do not fully capture the effectiveness of rumor debunking (Li et al. 2021). For example, a high volume of comments on a rumor-debunking post may reflect skepticism or negative opinions rather than genuine acceptance of the information. Thus, analyzing the content of comments provides a more nuanced approach to assessing the outcomes of rumor response strategies. This study conducted a qualitative analysis of comments on the rumor response posts to explore the public's reactions to the Chinese government's response to rumors and the potential interaction between the government and its audiences.

**RQ3** *How do the audiences respond to the Chinese government's rumor response posts during COVID-19?*

## 2 | Methods

### 2.1 | Research Design

This study focused on ten influential Chinese government accounts on Sina Weibo and collected posts released during the first year of the COVID-19 outbreak. The initial dataset, Weibo-1, was curated by cleaning and removing duplicate, unclear, or irrelevant posts. The next step involved using Python scripts to identify COVID-19-related posts by filtering specific keywords, which resulted in the second dataset, Weibo-2.

Based on Weibo-2, two native Chinese-speaking coders with experience in rumor-related research manually identified posts that addressed rumors, obtaining the final dataset, Weibo-3. Following data processing, the coders utilized DivoMiner for content analysis, including the identification of rumor response strategies and modes based on a predefined codebook. The study then conducted a text analysis of the comments on these posts to assess stakeholder reactions to and the perceived outcomes of the Chinese government's crisis management strategies.

### 2.2 | Data Collection

As one of the most popular commercial social media platforms in China, Sina Weibo has become a hub for rumors during the pandemic, and the Chinese government has also utilized Weibo for crisis response and management. Given its relevance in rumor studies (Cheng et al. 2021; Deng and Yang 2021; Gao et al. 2022), this study chose Weibo as the platform for data collection. The collected data included governments' IDs, post content, timestamps, and metrics such as the number of comments, likes, and retweets.

Regarding the data collection period, this study targeted data from January 20, 2020, to December 31, 2020, as there was considerable uncertainty about the virus and the development of the epidemic in the first year. China reported the first confirmed COVID-19 case in December 2019, and a large-scale

outbreak began in January 2020 (Wu and McGoogan 2020). On January 20, 2020, the National Health Commission of the P.R.C. (NHC) initiated a multi-ministerial, coordinated working mechanism at the central government level in response to the pandemic, known as the Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism of the State Council (JPCM). Thus, the researchers selected the day when China activated its national pandemic response system as the starting date for data collection.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, under the guidance of the JPCM, the NHC and the State Council Information Office of the P.R.C. (SCIO) were primarily responsible for releasing information on epidemic prevention, control, and response to rumors. Thus, this study selected the accounts of NHC (@健康中国/@Healthy China) and SCIO (@中国政府网/@The State Council of the P.R.C.) as research samples. Based on Sina Weibo's ranking list of the most influential Governmental Weibo accounts in 2020 (People's Daily Online, & Sina Weibo 2020), this study selected the other top eight Governmental accounts that are responsible for releasing pandemic-related information: @首都健康/@Healthy Capital (the official account of Beijing Health Commission), @健康成都官微/@Healthy Chengdu (the official account of Chengdu Health Commission), @健康八桂/@Healthy Bagui (the official account of Health Commission of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region), @深圳卫健委/@Health Commission of Shenzhen Municipality, @成都发布/@Chengdu Release (Chengdu Government Information Office), @武汉发布/@Wuhan Release (Wuhan Government Information Office), @南京发布/@Nanjing Release (Nanjing Government Information Office), and @北京发布/@Beijing Release (Beijing Government Information Office).

The selection of these ten accounts offers a representative cross-section of the Chinese government's emergency response hierarchy. The targeted accounts capture the vertical administrative structure, spanning from central command authorities (e.g., NHC, SCIO) to local implementation departments. Geographically, these accounts include the regions most severely impacted by the pandemic, such as the epicenter of the crisis (Wuhan) and key metropolitan hubs (e.g., Beijing and Chengdu). Thus, these accounts serve as a highly representative sample for examining the official information flow and rumor response efforts during the crisis.

### 2.3 | Data Processing

After data collection, this study used self-written Python programs to clean and delete duplicate and irrelevant posts, resulting in the first dataset (Weibo-1). Through pilot data observation, the researchers identified frequently used keywords related to COVID-19 on Weibo, including 新冠 (COVID), 疫情 (pandemic), and 肺炎 (pneumonia). Based on Weibo-1, Python scripts were then used to extract COVID-19-related posts containing these keywords, forming the second dataset (Weibo-2).

Manual coding was employed in this study to identify rumor response posts, thereby avoiding errors in machine identification. During the pilot data observation, the researchers reviewed the official websites of the Chinese government departments. They found that the rumor response in the

Chinese context can be understood as responding to false or fake information. Given the characteristics of rumor response in China and the standard definition of rumor mentioned in the Introduction, the coding rules are as follows: rumor response posts are those related to debunking false or correcting specific, unverified information. In contrast, those releasing COVID-19-related information without verification or correction are not rumor response posts. Before the formal coding session, 10% of the sample (Weibo-2) was randomly selected for training coders until the intercoder reliability score reached the desired level (Cohen's Kappa > 0.70). The final intercoder reliability was 0.84, and coding continued to obtain the final dataset, Weibo-3. Table 1 shows the essential information for the three datasets.

## 2.4 | Data Analysis: Content Analysis and Textual Analysis

This study used content and textual analysis to answer the three research questions. The content analysis classifies government rumor response strategies (answering RQ1) and rumor response modes (answering RQ2). Two coders used DivoMiner<sup>®</sup>, developed by Zhuhai (China) Hengqin Boyi Data Technology Co. Ltd., for online content analysis. The researchers coded independently and checked and corrected the codebook if the reliability was insufficient. The final codebooks are shown in

Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 presents the codebook of rumor response strategies, with the definition of each strategy derived from SCCT. Table 3 presents the coding rules for rumor response modes, which were derived from previous research on rumors in China (Gao et al. 2022).

Finally, the study examined the audience's reactions. The comment data showed a significant long-tail distribution, where user engagement was heavily concentrated on part of posts. Thus, this study adopted a staged sampling strategy to process comments. A stratified sample of 30 posts was drawn, selecting 10 each from high- (posts ranked in the top 10% in terms of comment volume), medium- (posts located in the middle 40%), and low-engagement (posts ranked in the bottom 50%) layers. To balance data richness with manageability, sampling caps of 250, 150, and 75 comments were applied to the respective layers, utilizing systematic sampling for posts exceeding these limits.

This process yielded 4,750 comments, which were subjected to inductive thematic analysis. Through an iterative process of open coding and refinement, the coding framework crystallized into four distinct categories: Affirmation (expressing gratitude or trust), Call for Action (demanding punishment for rumor-mongers), Skepticism (questioning the veracity of information), and Neutral/Other (non-opinionated engagement). Two researchers independently coded the full dataset based on these

TABLE 1 | Description of Collected Databases.

Database	Total number of accounts, <i>n</i>	Total number of posts, <i>n</i>	Total number of forwardings, <i>n</i>	Total number of comments, <i>n</i>	Total number of likes, <i>n</i>
Weibo-1	10	54,957	2,928,357	2,026,385	23,826,048
Weibo-2	10	22,229	1,090,629	1,249,389	14,643,687
Weibo-3	10	278	14,547	22,982	113,097

TABLE 2 | Codebook of rumor response strategies.

Rumor response strategy	Description	Sample example (Translated)
Denial	Declare distrust of rumor or deny information.	"The news circulating online about 'comprehensive lockdown' is purely false. Please do not believe it."
Attack	Warn/attack the originator who creates/spreads false claims or uses force to warn/punish.	"The police have administratively detained the suspect Liu for disrupting public order by fabricating rumors."
Sarcastic	Mock others' opinions or actions.	N/A (No instances observed)
Refutation	Cite evidence to indicate the fact.	"According to the Health Commission's investigation, the patient has been transferred to the designated hospital..."
Guide	Propose an action based on evidence or a guide on specific issues.	"For accurate epidemic information, please follow the official website of the Municipal Health Commission."
Interrogatory	Doubt information authenticity; Put forward queries or seek more evidence about the rumor.	N/A (No instances observed)
Undetermined	The posts respond to rumors, but without any strategies mentioned in this table.	N/A (No instances observed)

**TABLE 3** | Codebook of rumor response modes.

Items	Classification criteria	Description	Sample example (Translated)
Fact-checking	Reflecting content verification	Elements that contain show the background or progress of investigating rumors.	“A rumor circulated online claiming that ... However, verification conducted by the Jiangnan District Health Bureau and the local Center for Disease Control and Prevention has investigated and confirmed that this information is false and constitutes pure rumor.”
	Not reflecting content verification	Responding to rumors without any fact-checking elements.	“The alleged road closure is a rumor!”
Persuasive narratives	Releasable	Releasing information or news to the public to provide messages or facts.	“A case of COVID-19 infection was found at Caidian Postal Bank? Rumor!”
	Counter-attack	Refute specific questions or criticisms about rumors.	“The claim that ‘government is hiding data’ is baseless slander.”
	Declarative	An assertive, unidirectional form of communication that emphasizes the expression of positions and attitudes and the establishment of facts.	N/A (No instances observed)
	Appealing	Please call on the public to remain calm and refrain from spreading or believing false rumors.	“Please share this message, inform others, and help to clarify the rumor.”
	Reverse	Explain the conspiracy and motives of a rumor monger.	N/A (No instances observed)
	Joint	Use two or more persuasive narratives.	“We have verified that the information is a rumor. Please do not believe and spread rumors. Those who spread rumors maliciously will bear legal responsibility!”
Presentation form	Undetermined	The posts respond to rumors, but without any modes mentioned in this table.	N/A (No instances observed)
	With pictures, videos, or website	The text is attached to pictures, videos, or websites.	[Image showing an official blue announcement notice regarding the penalty]
	Without pictures, videos, or website	Text only or text with an emoticon.	[Pure text post without any attachments]

categories, with inter-coder reliability confirmed (Cohen’s Kappa > 0.75) on a 10% subsample. Table 4 shows the coding reliability of the whole coding work.

### 3 | Results

#### 3.1 | Rumor Response Strategies: Preferences for Denial and Refutation

Table 5 shows the coding results of rumor response strategies. The selected governmental accounts employed denial, attack, refutation, and guide strategies for rumor response, with denial and refutation accounting for the highest percentage. Posts with a refutation strategy typically presented an official investigation of unverified information, quoted messages from medical

experts, and other verified information sources. Posts with a denial strategy directly denied targeted rumors, and governmental accounts preferred denial over refutation when responding to grouped rumors. For example, “*Have you heard the following ten rumors about COVID-19? They are false, and do not believe it!*”

Compared to denial and refutation, guide and attack accounted for much less. The guide strategy was shown as forwarding links to other official accounts or websites that address rumors, such as “*Please check the original link for a detailed explanation about the news.*” The attack strategy in rumor response posts was related to administrative penalties for rumor mongers who caused more significant negative social influences. For example, “*Police Report: Man detained for 5 days for spreading rumors of Lockdown.*”

**TABLE 4** | Coding reliability.

Database	Coding categories	Intercoder reliability (Cohen's Kappa)	Composite reliability (Cohen's Kappa)
Weibo-2	Rumor response posts identification	0.84	0.84
Weibo-3	Rumor response strategies	0.83	0.83
	Fact-checking	0.70	
	Narrative modes	0.74	
	Presentation forms	1.00	
	Audience's reactions	0.82	0.82

**TABLE 5** | Rumor response strategies employed by the Chinese government.

Rumor response strategies	Quantity, <i>n</i>	Percentage, %
Denial	87	31.29
Attack	18	6.47
Refutation	151	54.32
Sarcastic	0	0
Guide	22	7.92
Interrogatory	0	0
Undetermined	0	0

### 3.2 | Rumor Response Modes: Joint Narratives With Fact-Checking and Visual Forms

Table 6 illustrates the rumor response modes employed by the Chinese government, demonstrating the specific expressions of how governmental accounts practice denial, attack, refutation, and guidance strategies.

Regarding fact-checking, the results completely echoed the above findings on rumor response strategies, stating that the rumor response posts demonstrated a fact-checking process, except for the denial strategy. The fact-checking elements reflected in rumor response posts include the introduction of rumors, the process of investigation of rumors, and the results of fact-checking. The respondents' accounts preferred providing detailed information when responding to rumors, especially refuting or correcting unverified messages.

The critical narrative modes in the rumor response posts are releasable and joint. The releasable narrative in the rumor response posts focuses on the rational release of information without emotional expression. Releasable posts are typically presented when there is widespread information about a particular issue, but it is later proven to be false. On the contrary, the joint narrative shows strong emotional expression and a clear stance about rumors. Appealing is the critical narrative of the joint mode that the posts tended to use tags or marks with "Do not believe rumors, and do not spread rumors!" when debunking rumors. Additionally, the governmental accounts combined an appealing narrative with a counter-attack and declarative statements, demonstrating a robust official stance against rumors. Furthermore, the posts incorporated

punctuation (e.g., exclamation marks) to stimulate the audience's vision and emphasize the message.

Regarding the presentation of information, most rumor response posts are visual-oriented, accounting for 97.48%. The pictures in the response posts convey three categories of information and signals. The first type of picture is about governmental announcements with white Chinese characters on a blue background, issued to punish rumor mongers. The second type is to display the original resources or screenshots of rumors, clearly marked as 'false' or 'not to believe it' in red. The third type presents the rumor-debunking information in the form of a picture. On the one hand, pictures can make information more visual and attractive. On the other hand, pictures can display more content than textual posts, and Weibo has a word limit for each post. The videos and websites linked to the rumor response posts aim to guide the audience to access verified information quickly.

### 3.3 | Audiences' Comments: Emotion Expression and Expectations on Government

As shown in Table 7, the sampled comments reveal distinct patterns in how the audience reacted to the debunking content and the government departments.

Affirmation emerged as the most prevalent theme, accounting for 42.2% of the selected comments. In this category, the audience mainly expressed gratitude for the government's efforts to respond to rumors, such as "Thanks for the timely rumor debunking" and "Your anti-rumor information is beneficial for us."

This positive reception was closely followed by the Call for Action category, accounting for 27.8%. Comments in this theme echoed the official appeal to stop creating and spreading rumors. For people who generate rumors, audiences strongly condemn and endorse the punishment. For example, audiences commented, "Stop creating and spreading such stupid and harmful information. The government has debunked these rumors many times," and "People who deliberately spread rumors should be arrested, and they are too bad!" A few audiences also showed their support by sharing or forwarding the government's response posts in their comments.

However, negative emotions were also expressed in the comments. Approximately 18.2% of the comments were categorized as Skepticism. These audiences questioned the truthfulness of the information presented, expressing doubts about the

**TABLE 6** | Rumor response modes used by Chinese governmental accounts.

Rumor response modes	Criteria	Quantity, <i>n</i>	Percentage, %
Fact-checking	With fact-checking elements	191	68.71
	Non-fact-checking elements	87	31.29
Persuasive narratives	Releasable	105	37.77
	Counter-attack	1	0.36
	Declarative	0	0
	Appealing	3	1.08
	Reserve	0	0
	Joint	169	60.79
	Undetermined	0	0
Presentation form	With pictures, videos, or websites	271	97.48
	Without pictures, videos, or websites	7	2.52

**TABLE 7** | Audience's reaction from comments and representative quotes (*n* = 4750).

Categories	Description	Count ( <i>n</i> )	Percentage (%)	Representative quote (translated)
Affirmation	Gratitude, support, praise	2,003	42.2	"Thanks for the timely rumor debunking. It helps us a lot."
Call for action	Demand for punishment	1,321	27.8	"Stop creating rumors! Those who spread them should be arrested."
Skepticism	Doubt, seeking details	864	18.2	"Are you sure about that? If the news is fake, tell us the real details."
Neutral/other	Tagging, ambiguous	562	11.8	[User tags a friend]/[Forwarding without comment]

accuracy or completeness of the government's claims. For example, "Are you sure about that? I do not believe it", and "If the news is fake and what the actual situation is, tell us more details." Others also raised concerns about different issues, seeking further information or clarification from the government. The comments indicated that a portion of the public continued to seek further information and clarification, expecting the government to provide more transparent evidence to satisfy their cognitive needs.

Finally, a Neutral/Other category accounted for the remaining 11.8% of the audience's reactions. These comments showed no specific emotional orientation, primarily consisting of users tagging friends to share information or posting ambiguous emojis.

## 4 | Discussion

This study examined the Chinese government's strategies for managing rumors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results reveal a distinct crisis management model characterized by a preference for denial and refutation strategies, the use of legal punishment as a key control tool, and a heavy reliance on authoritative, fact-centric response modes. The public, in turn, showed a complex mix of affirmation (42.2%), demands for state intervention (27.8%), and skepticism (18.2%). This section discusses the theoretical and practical implications of these findings for the field of crisis management.

### 4.1 | The Contingent Role of Political and Cultural Context

The divergence of China's crisis management model from Western theories can be further understood by examining the unique cultural and political context. This study found that the concept of *yaoyan* (谣言) in the Chinese government's response to rumors differs significantly from similar concepts in other cultural contexts, reflecting distinct Chinese characteristics. Traditionally, *yaoyan* was a neutral term for unverified information circulating among the public, often linked to social unrest and political instability (Wang 2017). However, *yaoyan* has evolved into a more negative term in modern Chinese, closely associated with false information. In the posts analyzed for this study, the Chinese government used "*yaoyan*" or simply "*yao*" (谣) to denote untrue information, and responding to rumors was equated with debunking falsehoods. It contrasts with the more neutral definitions of rumor in other contexts, such as those presented in DiFonzo and Bordia's (2007) work. In the Chinese context, however, *yaoyan* is inherently a negative term, seen not merely as false information but as potential threats to social and political order. As a result, the Chinese government's response to rumors goes beyond fact-checking and also considers maintaining social stability, including legal measures to control rumors (Wang 2017).

Political culture also influences crisis management styles. The political system in China characterizes a distinctive crisis communication between organizations and stakeholders and

may challenge the practice of Western-dominated crisis communication (Cheng et al. 2016). Centralized power did not mean complete control over the public (Xie et al. 2017), and social media users can express opinions directly and share positive or negative comments about governments during a crisis (Cairns and Carlson 2016; Cheng 2020). This study reveals that the public often expects official interventions to go beyond mere information debunking during the crisis. As evidenced by the comments, part of public anger was directed at rumor-mongers, with users explicitly urging authorities to “arrest them all” to curb the chaos. Legal punishment appears only marginally in the Chinese government’s rumor responses (6.47%), typically in combination with refutation. Within a paternalistic governance culture (Huang and Bedford 2009), legal measures against misinformation are framed not merely as penalties but as a signal of administrative accountability in response to public expectations for order. By demonstrating a commitment to protecting the collective information environment, legal measures in this context is perceived as a form of responsible governance rather than authoritative control, consistent with a state-oriented risk culture where citizens heavily rely on government intervention to ensure safety (Cornia et al. 2014).

However, while this authoritative approach effectively addresses the immediate need for stability, it requires careful calibration regarding long-term public trust. The presence of punitive mechanisms as a supplementary deterrent may potentially influence the public’s willingness to engage in open information exchange (Cheng 2020). If regulatory measures are perceived as overly rigid, they might inadvertently weaken the organic trust required for community resilience, potentially raising the communication costs for future social mobilization (Paek and Hove 2019b).

#### 4.2 | Theoretical Implications for Crisis Management Theory

The findings indicate a slight difference from SCCT suggestions, which argued that denial and attack are the primary response options for rumor crises (Coombs 2007), while the Chinese government preferred denial and refutation when debunking rumors. Both denial and refutation are essentially about disproving misinformation, and refutation emphasizes the evidence when denying. The denial strategy is usually applied for responding to a cluster of rumors, which directly and efficiently disseminates rumor-debunking information. For certain rumors, the Chinese government often used refutation to debunk, enhance persuasion, and enhance the audience’s acceptance through evidence. Using the two strategies is rational in the context of COVID-19, as addressing rumors directly can help mitigate the threat to individual health and public safety posed by them (Zeng et al. 2017).

Furthermore, this study identifies a key crisis management tool not prominent in the original SCCT framework: legal punishment. The attack strategy indicates the Chinese government’s intense attitude and uncompromising stance on rumors. The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) strengthened the control of online media by punishing rumor creators and releasing authoritative information in February 2020. Rumor management during COVID-19 reflected the specific needs of

the Chinese government for social control and stability. Crucially, legal punishment was not merely top-down but was echoed by the public. Under the Call for Action category, a significant portion of users actively endorsed these punitive measures.

Originating from Western corporate research, SCCT primarily focuses on reputation repair in business contexts. However, this study indicates the limitations of SCCT when transplanted to a state-centric governance framework and a public health crisis situation. Unlike corporate entities where crisis responsibility can be segmented, in a collectivist culture, the government assumes a holistic responsibility for public well-being. Consequently, SCCT’s central mechanism of ‘responsibility attribution’ becomes less relevant. The primary objective of the Chinese government’s pandemic-era rumor response shifts from image restoration to social mobilization and the maintenance of social stability. This shift in objectives necessitates a redefinition of the crisis object itself. In this context, rumors are not merely treated as information voids or reputational risks, but are conceptually framed as potential security threats that could disrupt social order (Atilgan and Aksoy 2021; Wang, Yeerjiang, et al. 2022), justifying a response model that prioritizes stability over dialogic negotiation.

Thus, this study suggests a stability-oriented crisis response model that adapts the traditional framework to these contextual nuances. This model proposes incorporating coercive measures (e.g., legal punishment) alongside traditional informational strategies (denial and refutation). This integration highlights that, for state actors, the legitimacy of crisis response derives not only from persuasive communication but also from the decisive use of state power to uphold order. This inclusion aligns with the understanding that effective crisis management inherently relies on rapid decision-making and administrators’ self-confidence to implement decisive strategies under pressure (Atilgan and Kaplan 2021).

#### 4.3 | Practical Implications for Crisis Managers and Policymakers

First, the government’s strategic use of fact-checking and multimodal content highlights the importance of authoritative and rich media communication. In this study, the Chinese government emphasized the reliability of information sources, and most posts with fact-checking elements contain quotes from official departments, official spokespeople, and medical experts. Fact-checking mode is a useful persuasive tactic for managing rumors during a pandemic.

Second, effective crisis communication requires aligning response strategies with public expectations for decisive state intervention. In this study, people tend to seek the government’s help in verifying information, providing details, and even punishing those who spread false rumors when facing massive uncertainty. On this occasion, responding to rumors is not only about the government’s responsibility to the public, but also a response to the public’s demands.

Third, while rapid information dissemination can address immediate uncertainty, sustaining long-term credibility requires a strategic focus on trust construction. On the one hand, the positive emotions expressed in the comments

demonstrated the audience's affirmation of the government's work. On the other hand, the presence of Skepticism (18.2%) indicates the dominant affirmation underscores that public trust is a complex, dynamic asset rather than a static outcome of information release. Qualitative observation reveals that such skepticism usually appeared under posts with a direct denial strategy that lacked sufficient details or evidentiary support. This suggests that the skepticism does not necessarily indicate a rejection of government legitimacy, but rather a specific demand for information transparency.

Both emotions reflected the concern about public trust in government. Research showed that people tend to believe the government's response to rumors when they trust the government more (Paek and Hove 2019b). Although the strategy with simple denials is efficient for immediate response, it may fail to satisfy the public's cognitive demand for evidence. This gap between the public's need for detail and the state's provision of binary risks fostering a sense of preventative skepticism, where audiences habitually question official narratives. Thus, sustaining long-term credibility requires moving beyond binary 'true/false' corrections to a model of evidence-based transparency. By addressing specific doubts and bridging the information gap with granular details and verifiable data, crisis managers can foster a resilient public trust that supports enduring social stability beyond the immediate crisis.

## 5 | Conclusions and Limitations

This study examined China's state-led response to rumors during the COVID-19 crisis, revealing a distinct crisis management paradigm. The findings show that the Chinese government favored denial and refutation strategies and employed legal punishment as a key governance tool for information control—a strategy not prominent in Western-based frameworks, such as SCCT. Although SCCT provides a practical framework for crisis management, this study suggests that it may not be fully applicable to countries with unique cultural and political contexts, such as China. The Chinese government's focus on information accuracy, social stability, and government trust results in a direct and assertive interventionist model.

From a theoretical perspective, this study suggests that traditional crisis management theories, such as SCCT, should consider cultural and political contexts. Specifically, this study extends SCCT by introducing legal punishment as a crisis response strategy and demonstrates how cultural concepts (e.g., *yaoyan*) and political systems act as critical contingent factors. From a practical perspective, this study proposes a stability-oriented crisis response model for public-sector crisis managers worldwide. Rather than viewing *control* and *trust* as a strategic trade-off, this model highlights the need to harmonize decisive state intervention with evidence-based transparency. It suggests that effective crisis governance must address the public's dual mandate: employing regulatory frameworks to ensure social order (satisfying the demand for stability) while simultaneously providing granular data to satisfy cognitive needs (sustaining public trust). Additionally, this study presents the Chinese experience of responding to rumors via social media as a playbook of operational tactics, including the use of multi-modal, fact-centric messaging.

This study has several limitations. First, this study only focused on the case of China. Future research should build on these findings by conducting cross-country comparative studies to provide deeper insights into the influence of cultural and political contexts on rumor response strategies. Second, this study selected Weibo as the research platform. While Weibo serves as a primary space for public discourse, it operates under specific content moderation policies and community governance norms. Radical or non-compliant content may be moderated according to platform regulations, meaning the analyzed data represents the public discourse as it is permitted to exist within this specific digital ecosystem. Furthermore, the potential presence of automated bot accounts, which are difficult to distinguish from organic users fully, may introduce noise into the sentiment distribution. Consequently, the findings regarding public sentiment may reflect a certain degree of survivorship bias. Future research should address these limitations by conducting cross-platform comparisons to validate how different regulatory environments and user ecosystems influence crisis discourse. Third, although this study analyzed audience comments on rumor response, it did not further examine the correlation between the effectiveness of rumor debunking and rumor response strategies. Therefore, future research could employ experimental designs to directly measure the causal effects of different response strategies (e.g., refutation vs. legal punishment) on public belief, trust, and compliance.

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### Author Contributions

Jing Wu and Dejan Verčič conceptualized the study; Hao Gao curated the data and managed the software; Jing Wu and Hao Gao conducted the formal analysis and developed the methodology; Jing Wu and Hao Gao validated the results; Jing Wu prepared the original draft; Dejan Verčič and Hao Gao reviewed and edited the writing; Dejan Verčič and Hao Gao supervised the study and administered the project.

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The authors have nothing to report.

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The authors have nothing to report.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

Data will be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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