A Study on the Impact of Online Public Opinion on City Image from the Perspective of Crisis Communication

Tangshan BBQ Restaurant Violence Incident as an Example

Jiajun Yin[1]([envelope]), Haoying Wang[2], and Wenying Bi[3]

[1] Business English, School of Foreign Languages, Guangzhou Maritime University,
P.O. Box 510725, Guangzhou, China
`445194291@qq.com`

[2] Political Science and Administrative Science, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, P.O. Box 451200, Gongyi, China

[3] Network and NewMedia, College of Liberal Arts, Hunan Women's University,
P.O. Box 410004, Shijiazhuang, China

Abstract. When a sudden public crisis breaks out, negative online public opinion can have an impact on the construction of the local city's image, resulting in damage to the city's image. Under the combined effect of crisis communication and the new media environment, the fermentation of public opinion on the incident is expanding from a single aspect to multiple aspects, and the phenomenon of "public opinion out of focus" and "public opinion hitchhiking" is intensifying, making the guidance of online public opinion by official government media particularly important. Taking the Tangshan BBQ restaurant violence incident incident as an example, the article analyses and studies the relevant online public opinion from the perspective of crisis communication, and explores the impact of online public opinion on the city's image.

Keywords: crisis communication · online public opinion · city image · Tangshan incident

1 Introduction

In recent years, the development of social media has increased the public's right to speak and provided a variety of ways to achieve this, with the public showing their great power and energy in crisis communication in the form of public opinion and other forms [1]. Internet public opinion, as a form of expression of social opinion, can, to a certain extent, reflect public opinion more objectively. However, there is no shortage of

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deliberate guides who shift the focus of attention from the incident itself to other topics in order to pursue "eye candy", attracting the attention of the public in a short period and inciting public sentiment, intensifying conflicts, exposing the city concerned to the attack of mass negative online public opinion and affecting the construction of the city's image.

The media environment is changing rapidly, and city image communication is gradually relying on new media to achieve a new communication shift, taking advantage of the development of new media to promote the shaping and communication of city image, and at the same time following the trend of new media development to spread city image [2]. When a sudden public crisis breaks out, the image of the local city is often affected by the negative public opinion in the process of crisis communication and faces the risk of being stigmatized. Therefore, the maintenance and reconstruction of the city image after a crisis event is particularly important in the context of mass media.

Based on this, this paper will combine qualitative and quantitative research methods, comb through the case study method to find out the context of the Tangshan barbecue restaurant violent incident, screen the mainstream views of the group, and observe the hotness of public opinion and the direction of public opinion through data collection and analysis. At the same time, we combine literature reading and analysis, study and read relevant academic papers and works to grasp relevant theories. From the perspective of crisis communication, analyze the Tangshan BBQ restaurant violence incident, understand the impact mechanism of public opinion on the city's image, and explore the strategy of defending the city's image.

2   Case Study - The Development of Online Public Opinion on the Tangshan BBQ Restaurant Violence Incident

In this part, based on the data collected from online platforms and the public opinion report on the incident by the Research Centre for Computational Communication of JNU, the author divides the development process of public opinion in the incident into four stages based on the theory of crisis communication stage analysis, according to the line graph of the change in the hotness of online public opinion, studies the characteristics of online public opinion in each stage, and explores what impact online public opinion has on the image of the city.

2.1   Overview of Public Opinion Events

Time	Event
On June 10, 2022, at 2:40 a.m.	a surveillance screen showed a man Chen*zhi harassing a woman in a BBQ restaurant in Tangshan, beating her after she refused, and subsequently participating in a violent beating with Chen *zhi's fellow diners, dragging the victim outside the shop to continue the beating, and the suspect fled the scene after the crime.

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Time	Event
On the afternoon of June 10	the relevant surveillance video on the Internet widely spread, news media reported this incident on various platforms. The topics of #*Tangshan beating*# and #*Tangshan a barbecue shop where many men beat up girls*# quickly became the focus of public attention and sparked public outrage.
The evening of the 10th to the afternoon of the 11th	The arrest operation continued
At 11:02 on the 12th	the Guangyang Branch arrested Chen *zhi and nine other suspects.
On the 12th	Tangshan held a meeting to decide to carry out a half-month summer social security improvement "Thunderstorm" special activities.
On June 21	police in Hebei informed the progress of the investigation of the Tangshan BBQ restaurant violence incident and the latest situation of the beaten girl, Tangshan Public Security Bureau Lubei Branch Director, etc. were investigated.

2.2 Trends in Public Opinion Across the Internet

The data is obtained from the Qingbo Public Opinion Monitoring Platform. The time cut-off point is from June 10, 2022, to June 15, 2022. As of 9 am on June 15, the total number of information disseminated on the whole internet about Tangshan BBQ restaurant violence incident was about 3684389, with 27599 positive messages, 273091 neutral messages, and 3383630 negative messages. The Weibo hashtag #*Tangshan grill-woman-beaten-here*# has been discussed 12.111 million times (Fig. 1).
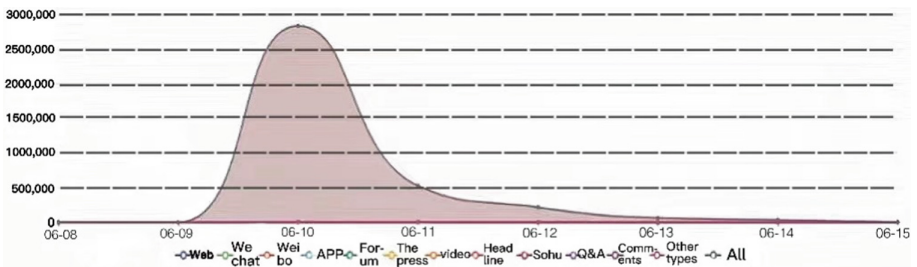

Fig. 1. Graph of the change in the hotness of internet opinion (From Qingbo Public Opinion Monitoring Platform)

According to Fig. 2, the graph of public opinion trends across the internet, the public opinion of the incident can be roughly divided into four stages:

Stage 1	the period of online public opinion outbreak	(14:00 on June 10–17:00 on June 10)
Stage 2	the period of online public opinion peak	(17:00 on June 10–18:00 on June 10)
Stage 3	the period of online public opinion fluctuation	(late on June 10–14 June)
Stage 4	the period of online public opinion continuation	(14 June–16 June).

2.3 Specific Analysis of the Four Stages of Online Public Opinion Development

The outbreak of online public opinion: the exposure of the surveillance video and its wide dissemination caused public outrage

The incident took place at around 2:40 a.m. on June 10. On the afternoon of June 10, @Dao's Diary and @1024 Commissioner released a nearly two-minute video of the scene on the Internet, which triggered a large number of reprints and comments. 17:00, #Tangshan beaten# became the No.1 on the Weibo hot list. The incident was also reported on short video platforms such as TikTok and Kuaishou, and self-publishers set up issues on WeChat official account and Q&A platforms like Zhihu.

From this stage, Weibo is the public's preferred channel for voicing hot events, with a 99.93% share of public opinion voices. The news media drove the formation of public opinion on Weibo, and with their influence on Weibo and sensitivity to news events, they kept releasing information on events on the Weibo, and the topics discussed by netizens focused on violent events, with public opinion rapidly converging on Weibo. The gory violence of its video images is strongly communicative and leads directly to the fermentation of public opinion.

The peak of online public opinion: Police briefing on the case triggered strong public concern

At 5 p.m. on June 10, the secretary of the Political and Legal Committee of the Tangshan Municipal Party Committee responded that the suspects had been locked and were being arrested. At 17:50, the Lubei Public Security Bureau of Tangshan characterized the incident as a case of picking quarrels and provoking trouble, violently beating others. The government's stance sparked strong public concern, and public discussion of the incident reached its peak, the Weibo hashtag #Tangshan beating# still occupying the top spot in hot searches during that period, with 4.62 billion reads and 4.079 million discussions. The public opinion arena was flooded with negative sentiments, some are denouncing the assailant and demanding severe punishment or hoping that the police would deal with it quickly, others expressed their surprise at the public safety in Tangshan and started discussing issues such as women's safety.

At this stage, with the media dominating online opinion, Weibo was still the main platform carrying public opinion, while other platforms were also reporting and discussing topics about the incident.

The fluctuation of online public opinion and secondary public opinion: opinion leaders speak out, public opinion is out of focus and public opinion hitchhiking emerges

Since June 11, the incident has seen a long-tail effect on public opinion. Public opinion about the assailants spread to the authorities, netizens began to question the speed of arrests. At the same time, netizens began to uncover the criminal record of the assailant because voices about "black and evil forces" emerged.

From the evening of June 10 to June 14, mainstream media have published commentaries, such as the Global Times Commentary: The more timely justice comes, the more it can be proved that it can be trusted. Celebrity experts and other opinion leaders also spoke out for the incident, such as Luo Xiang, who published an article "Without anger, there is no justice" on his WeChat official account, which received over 100,000 + reads and likes.

As the heat of public discussion on the incident was consistently high, there were also out of focus and hitchhiking on public opinion. Some public opinion was swept up in emotion, migrating anger to other people of the incident and the victimized woman, netting violence against them and turning the discussion of the incident into an emotional scolding war; some local people, made real name reports on Tangshan city's black-related forces through online platforms, and these reports even involved Tangshan in the whirlpool of public opinion on the unfavourable work of eliminating blackness and evil. The out of focus in public opinion has exacerbated the phenomenon of grouping, and public opinion hitchhiking recreate the group memory of the core incident, triggering the long-tail phenomenon of public opinion on the incident, both of which have had a definite impact on Tangshan's city image.

The matter was fermented all over the network at this stage. According to Qingbo data, the topic had the most negative sentiment in the overall sentiment from the incident to 13 June 2022, accounting for 96.88%. The buzzwords in the word cloud such as Tangshan Municipal Committee, secretary and political and legal committee are highly controversial, reflecting the public's dissatisfaction with the functionaries.

The continuation period of online public opinion: multiple issues lead to discussions across the internet

As details of the incident continued to be disclosed, the issues covered by public opinion involved various aspects, among which showing a high degree of polarization of gender-opposed public opinion and the intensification of regional public opinion violence, and Tangshan was even flirted with by netizens for a time as a synonym for violence and blackness.

At this stage, the volume of public opinion on the whole network gradually dropped. With the police making arrests and executing arrests and other timely interventions to deal with the incident, while responding to social concerns, the trend of public sentiment at a later stage showed a clear downward trend and tended to be stable.
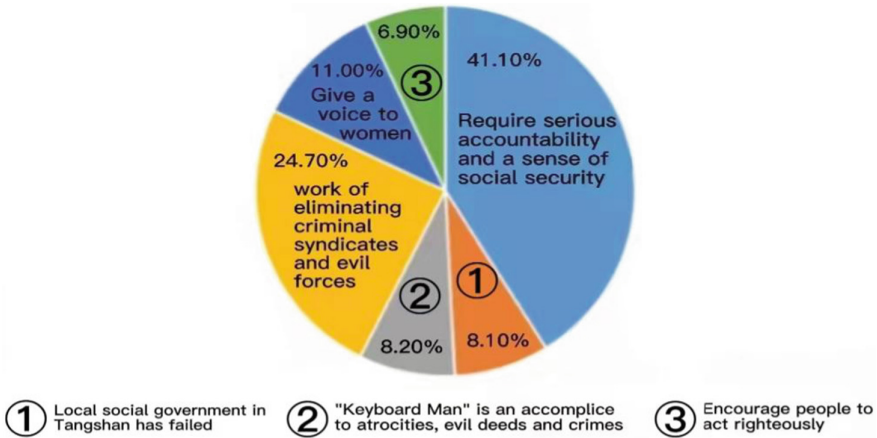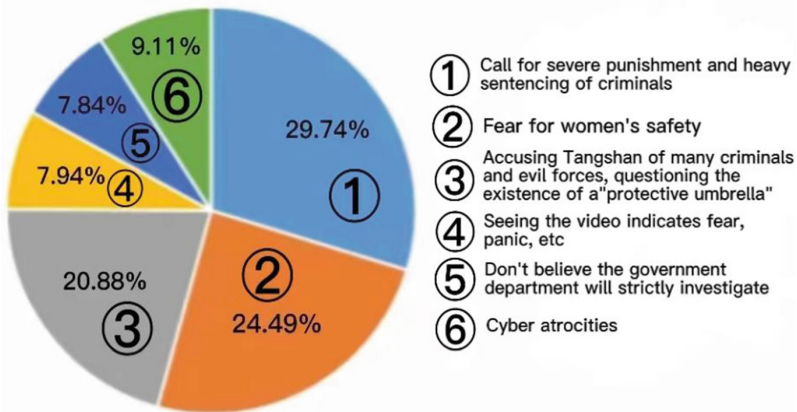
Fig. 2. Media Viewpoint Landscape

Fig. 3. Patterns of Internet users' views (From Qingbo Public Opinion Monitoring Platform)

There is a convergence of views between the media and the public (Fig. 2 & Fig. 3), with aspects such as "local social governance in Tangshan has failed" and "accusations that there are many black forces in Tangshan and questions about the existence of an umbrella" reflecting the negative impact of online opinion on the city's image.

2.4   Impact of Internet Public Opinion on Tangshan's City Image

According to the four stages mentioned above, the impact of online public opinion on Tangshan's city image can be divided into three aspects.

First, the city's image. The damage to Tangshan's city image caused by online public opinion can be reflected in the following incidents.

(1) The enrollment work of Tangshan University was more seriously affected by the public opinion. For example, the enrollment of NCUST in Henan suffered a "Waterloo", dropping nearly 50,000 places.
(2) Tangshan City was stripped of its "National Civilized City" status, with the labels "law and order chaos" and "government incompetence" tied to the city, bringing a series of negative effects to the city's development.
(3) The media reported that many Tangshan real estate investors were cashing out after the beating, with nearly 30,000 s-hand houses for sale on the market, which are not called for a price.

Second, the government image. It can be reflected in the following incidents.

(1) the netizens' public opinion field focused on "real-name reports". The proliferation of internet rumors and the excessive interpretation of information by some of the self-published media, had tilted public opinion in favour of the Tangshan government and the existence of corruption and blackness within public security.
(2) The fact that the case in Tangshan was handed over to the public security authorities in Langfang shows the provincial government's distrust of the local authorities, and public opinion has already lost much credibility in the Tangshan government and the public security authorities.

Third, the citizens' image. When the online public opinion of an unexpected public crisis event develops to a certain extent, if it is not properly handled, it will also lead to an increasing number of negative public opinions related to the citizens' image.

With the opening of comment sections on various online platforms to display information on IP affiliation, geographical discrimination and rhetorical attacks to Tangshan residents has become even more common. Voices such as "poor mountains and bad water are the source of unruly people" and "it seems that it will take a few more earthquakes to wake up Tangshan" have gained a foothold in online public opinion. The stigmatized image of the citizens is then labeled as negative and may also affect local people's communication with the outside world.

3 The Impact Mechanism of Online Public Opinion on the Construction of City Image

Based on the case study of the Tangshan BBQ restaurant violence incident, the author believes that the impact of online public opinion on the city's image can be explored from the following aspects.

3.1 The Media - the Medium and Source of Public Opinion

In the normal construction of a city's image, the government often seeks to cooperate with the media, using its timeliness, interactivity, symbolic shaping, visualization and influence to shape the city's image and promote its development. However, the mass media can also cause public opinion events to ferment rapidly and overturn the image of the city that has been constructed regularly.

The new media communication mode breaks the traditional "point-plane" pyramidal one-way communication structure, using the network as the node of the medium, forming a net-like communication structure with interactive links between individuals and the media, realizing the process of information dissemination containing one-way, two-way and multi-way [3], breaking through the isolation of information, the closure of space and the hysteresis of time. Especially for controversial social issues, under the amplification of new media communication, it will trigger an unprecedented amount of discussion and fall into a crisis of public opinion. For example, after the Tangshan BBQ restaurant violence video was exposed on the internet on June 10, as of 15:00 on the 13th, there were a total of 5,404,173 pieces of relevant information on the whole network (excluding follow-up comments and repetitions), with a total cumulative reading volume of 30 billion + and over 10 million comments, and the negative information accounted for 73.73%.

The times have driven the mass media into the market, and the media have forced themselves to adapt to the rules in order to survive. In the post-truth era, the mass media tend to prefer emotive issues, programmatic narrative structures and storytelling constructs, seeking eyeballs and buzz in the competition. At the same time, the media's discursive expressions subconsciously shape public perceptions and construct hyper-real "symbols". In the case of the Tangshan BBQ restaurant violence incident, media coverage of Tangshan was limited to the Tangshan BBQ restaurant violence incident and its derivatives, so that netizens' perception of Tangshan was limited to this negative incident, and the repetitive coverage continued to reinforce people's negative impression of the city. Meanwhile, the media, through data monitoring, used netizens' emotions to track, cater to and repeatedly provoke topics such as gender antagonism, online violence, regional blackness and slandering national security, causing public opinion to gradually deviate from the direction of the facts. In addition, many self-media broke through the boundaries of morality, deliberately creating gimmicks and fabricating rumors, using hot events as well as popular sentiment to chase after traffic for cash. After the Tangshan BBQ restaurant violence incident, a large number of short video platforms appeared posing as participants in the beating case to chase clout, even fabricating rumors that the victim had passed away.

3.2   The Public - the Communicators and the Person Affected by Public Opinion

The development of new media has made it impossible for hot spots to be hidden and public opinion to be restricted, and the media has even become a "weapon for the weak". If an incident touches the social defence of justice, it will, to a large extent, trigger the emotional resonance of the community, prompting the public to speak out in favour of justice and accelerating the spread of public opinion. In addition, the social issues embedded in public opinion events stimulate realistic pain points, create fear and dissipate the sense of security of the group. In the increasingly widespread new media practices of the lower and middle classes, their subjective demands stem more from the tension between institutional deficiencies and survival needs [4], and are more motivated by individual interests than political firsts, in the expectation of the resolution of social problems, the maintenance of the rights and the protection of individual dignity. The fact that the Tangshan BBQ restaurant violence incident quickly became a socially

focused public opinion event lies in the fact that it touched on social public sentiment and disregarded the legal bottom line. Also, it reflected people's sympathy for the weak, implicated the defense of their own interests, urged the solution of social problems and stimulated institutional enrichment.

In the absence of official responses and guidance, there is a strong element of irrationality in internet sentiment and it is easy to polarize views and even make the opinions fall into the Tacitus trap. The virtual nature of the internet amplifies people's courage to express themselves. Individuals are generous in expressing their opinions on the internet, corroborating each other in public discussions, reinforcing the so-called "consensus" and causing an "echo chamber effect". The public discussion of the event is swallowed up by emotional expressions and gradually deviates from the event itself. Le Bon in "The Crowd" points out that "only when a group of people gather and turn their thoughts and feelings all in the same direction, forming a collective mentality, can it be called a real group" [5]. The quality and purpose of the opinion leaders in a group, their adhesion to fragmented information, and their guidance of group emotions greatly influence the expression of group opinion and even lead to systematic cognitive bias. The spatial dimension, as one of the elements that construct the narrative framework of public opinion events, is also the symbol that is most easily remembered, used and rapidly disseminated [4]. Using emotional, storytelling and exaggerated descriptions, internet pushers especially like simplifying various materials to geographical symbols and repeat them again and again, leading group sentiment to negative polarization and causing remote participants in the event to form a negative perception of the city.

After this incident, there were a number of cases reported by the public in quick succession, causing a lively discussion among netizens. Many internet pushers took advantage of netizens' discontent and elevated this public opinion incident to a regional blackness, leading netizens to roughly characterize Tangshan as poor social security, the criminal underworld and even believe that people in Tangshan encounter danger as soon as they go out. People are only willing to believe what they think is the "truth", and the real opinions of the local people are only a spiral of silence when overwhelmed by the emotions of other netizens across the country. As Le Bon said, instinctive emotions are more likely to infect others in a group than sensible and calm ones [5].

3.3 Public Trust - Gatekeeper of Public Opinion and Defender of the City's Image

In sudden public crisis events, public trust plays an important role in avoiding the polarization of public opinion. The problem of public trust is the accumulation of 'public skepticism' of the public towards social organizations with public responsibilities [6]. Avoiding the problem of public trust is the key to the orderly and normal development of public opinion, and is an important cornerstone in preventing extreme emotionality of public opinion, establishing and maintaining the image of the city. In the new media era, information spreads at a exponential speed. After the Tangshan BBQ restaurant violence incident was exposed, the government's initial crisis communication was passive and of low quality and inefficiency, missing the golden period to control public opinion and gradually dissipating public trust. This was reflected in the following ways.

The government response has a contradiction between timeliness and truthfulness. Only after the violent incident had came to light had the Tangshan government a response. As representatives of authoritative sources, Tangshan government need to conduct rigorous and thorough investigations. But the absence of government's response during investigation coincides with the development of public opinion and the solidification of opinions, making subsequent government statements more passive and less trustworthy.

The government response suffers from contradictory information and evasion of controversy. (1) The initial response from the Tangshan official media contradicted the actual arrival time of police officers, with a 28-min difference. (2) There was a tendency for the government response to deliberately avoid specific topics, such as the protection of women's rights. Such topics were precisely the focus of some netizens' claims in this public opinion incident, and the misstep in grasping the focus of emotions and intentionally avoiding it became an igniter of public opinion, stimulating people's rebellious emotions. In the post-truth era, only by grasping people's emotions, can government accurately grasp the sensitive source of public opinion and calm down netizens' emotions.

The government has been slow to act and the openness and transparency of the process has been questioned. The government lacks an open and transparent investigation process into the victim's injuries. After the official media released the victim's injuries, there was widespread distrust and suspicion of transfer of benefits or threats. At the same time, the government attempted to reduce the heat by using a blackout and concealment tactic. After the incident, a number of cases of people reporting local black and evil forces in Tangshan were set off online, and some of those who exposed them were asked to remove the videos.

From the perspective of crisis communication, the Tangshan government's low quality response to public opinion events dismantled its accumulated image assets and eroded public trust. On the one hand, the inefficiency and low quality of the crisis response did not reduce the heat of public opinion in a timely manner, and the evasive response strategy plunged the government into a deeper whirlpool of public opinion, with the public more willing to believe gossip and even rumors. Emotional and unofficial expressions solidified the public's perception of the incident and permeated the regional stereotypes of Tangshan. On the other hand, distrust of the government had deepened the negative image of Tangshan, especially with the succession of incidents reported by the public and the increasing questioning of the collusion between the black forces and the protective umbrella. The certainty of speculation about potential corruption within the government reinforces the stereotype of the government as the representative of the city, which in turn affects the image of Tangshan.

4   Strategies for Coping with Online Public Opinion Crises

Based on the above case study of the Tangshan BBQ restaurant violence incident, the author proposes general strategies for responding to online public opinion crises from the perspective of maintaining and repairing the city's image in the following two aspects.

4.1 Establishing a Perfect Crisis Response Mechanism for Network Public Opinion

The government is the leading force in the construction of city image, and municipal image is an important part of city image [7]. The performance of government official media greatly influences the direction of online public opinion in sudden public events. As an important link in the construction of city image in the new media environment, the public opinion crisis caused by local public emergencies will have a continuous and far-reaching impact on the city's image. Therefore, city managers should establish a response mechanism for urban online public opinion crises as early as possible and take concrete measures to repair the city's image according to the response mechanism.

In terms of establishing a public opinion crisis response mechanism, firstly, it is necessary to pay more attention to city-related online public opinion, link it closely with the construction and daily maintenance of the city's image, and set up a public opinion team to conduct long-term dynamic monitoring of city online public opinion, so as to detect the first signs of public opinion crisis in time and control the public opinion situation as early as possible. Secondly, government media operation departments should not simply avoid the hot issues in the public spotlight and regard public opinion crises as floods, but should turn passivity into initiative, treating public opinion crises as opportunities to communicate with the public, actively come forward to understand public opinion and public sentiment, respond to issues of public concern, channel the emotions of netizens, and at the same time pay attention to information disclosure, control sources of information and guide agenda setting; clearly accountability will enhance the public's trust in the government and ultimately promote the resolution of problems.

In restoring a city's image, the first step is to restore the city's internal image, and then reinvent the regional symbols from the inside out. The restoration of a city's image depends not only on the local government but also on the joint efforts of local citizens and the media. The significance of restoring a city's image is to avoid the 'broken window effect' after a sudden public crisis, which can lead to the stigmatization of the city and a continuous negative impact on the city's image, thus causing damage to the common interests of the local government, citizens and the media. It is important to take the government as an example to build internal consensus so that the three parties realize that they are a symbiotic community of interests and participate in the restoration of the city's image together, and repair the internal symbiotic structure with a positive attitude [8].

After the climax of the public opinion crisis, the government should continue to follow up on the progress of the crisis and, according to the "3Ts" principle of crisis communication, make public the case in a timely, comprehensive and proactive manner to restore public trust. On the one hand, it is important to address the deep-rooted social problems that emerged from the incident, and on the other hand, it is important to strengthen the publicity of the government's subsequent social governance actions to break stereotypes and weaken the negative impact on the city's image.

4.2 Focus on the Permanent Management of the City's Image in Non-crisis Situations

According to Zhang Weiguo and He Wanxia, the essence of city image is "people's comprehensive impression and perception of the city, a subjective feeling" [8]; a city's online public opinion is closely related to its city image, and the local city image, as one of the ultimate bearers of negative online public opinion, should pay attention to dealing with it from the level of maintaining the city image. Negative public opinion brought about by local emergencies. The serious failure of Tangshan officials to handle public opinion in the "Tangshan BBQ restaurant violence incident", reveals Tangshan's neglect of online public opinion building and the inadequacy of Tangshan's city image building strategy from the side.

Therefore, Tangshan should pay more attention to the construction of the city's image, take timely measures to repair the city's image, and carry out regular construction of the city's image: at the level of internal "autobiography", it should raise the awareness of the city's brand, invest more in the construction of online media, enhance the content of communication by digging deeper into the local cultural connotation. It should also build a strong local media cluster, strengthen the construction of a press spokesperson system, enhance the external communication capacity and strive for an advantage in the discourse of public opinion. At the level of external "other communications", it is important to emphasize interactive communications, enhance communication with audiences, fully mobilize citizens and tourists as self-promotional media, while improving media public relations capabilities, promoting friendly relations with various media, and actively linking up to expand the social influence of the city's image.

The "internal and external communication" should be paid attention to in the process of city image construction, the bridge between the construction of Tangshan city image and the management of city public opinion should be opened. In addition, to build a new media matrix that integrates urban image construction and urban public opinion monitoring, and improve the emergency handling capacity for sudden public crises in the city, so as to cure them before they happen.

5   Conclusion

In a new media environment, the government adopting repressive measures and passively responding to negative public opinion will only further deepen the public's negative impression of the local city's image. The government should actively respond to online public opinion, insist on openness and transparency, and reach a good communication and collaboration relationship with citizens and the media to jointly maintain a good image of the city.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a perspective of crisis communication for government public relations management in the future. We have observed and analyzed this event, and put forward relevant opinions in a broad sense. We hope that academic colleagues can carry out more in-depth research and exploration in this field in the future.

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