Government, citizen, and social media: understanding police-citizen interaction on Weibo in China

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Abstract

This dissertation systematically examined the Beijing Police Department (BPD) daily use of social media and citizens’ comments it received. Previous studies in the field of e-government and political communication in the Chinese context focused only on the measurement of quantitative indicators of government use of social media or a single event. This dissertation incorporates theoretical frameworks of e-government, public relations, and the public sphere to provide a detailed picture of citizen and government interaction in the Chinese context. Using the BPD as my case study, I not only explored government’s daily activities and engagement strategies but also examined the nuances and contextual information of citizens’ comments and their criticisms of the government through thematic analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The findings of this research showed that besides dealing with crime and enforcing law, the Weibo administrators of the BPD also act as educators, especially for the city’s newcomers. This study also uncovers the dilemma faced by the BPD in trying to juggle the responsibilities of promoting national ideological propaganda, experimenting with engagement strategies, and building trusting relationships with citizens. The qualitative analysis of citizens’ comments and criticisms indicates that citizens seem to be passionate about sharing, discussing social issues, initiating their own discussion topics, and connecting with each other in the space of the comment section, which forms a special public sphere. This dissertation has theoretical and methodological implications for the study of government use of social media and research on citizen interactions. It also offers empirical evidence for the police department to improve citizen engagement strategies and build trust with citizens on social media.

Keywords: E-government, social media, democracy, citizen engagement, police
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Chapter 1 Introduction

Governments of many countries, including China, have adopted social media to engage with the public. Given its widespread diffusion and its lack of geographic or temporal boundaries, social media offers significant benefits for government agencies to disseminate information, solicit public feedback, and call for citizen participation. Government could potentially utilize social media to increase citizens’ engagement, to foster policy development discussions, get public feedback to improve service quality, and cooperate with citizens to solve social issues (L. Zheng, 2013). Social media, which Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen (2012) have referred to as “a set of online tools that are designed for and centered around social interaction” (p.30), plays a significant role in making interactive dialogue between government and citizens possible, creating the possibility for grassroots voices to be heard in those platforms.

This new tool has been changing the landscape of government relations with citizens. Citizens not only access information from government agencies’ social media accounts but could potentially directly interact with the government agencies or may speak to each other through government social media platforms.

Interaction between government and citizens and efforts to increase citizen engagement using social media have received scholarly attention from several different research fields. Most prominently, the e-government literature explores how government agencies employ new technologies in their efforts to improve their transparency, accountability, and collaboration as well as their attempts to engage citizens (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003; C. S. King et al., 1998; Reddick et al., 2017). Furthermore, some scholars have introduced public relations concepts and stakeholder theory to explain government activities and users’ behaviors related to the government-citizen interaction on social media (DePaula et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2017).
While most prior studies examined social media activities from government perspectives such as types of content posted and platforms used (Brainard & McNutt, 2010; DePaula & Dincelli, 2016; Hemphill et al., 2013), a limited amount of research also focused on citizens’ engagement on government social media sites by counting the frequency of citizens’ comments, shares, and likes (Bonsón et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2016). However, frequency counting does not provide a detailed picture of the ways in which citizens engage with government agencies. Many studies have ignored the texts produced in users’ interaction and very few studies have investigated what topics citizens talk about and what forms of discourse citizens use when interacting on government social media accounts. Little research has looked at citizen-government interactions on social media on a day-to-day basis. This study addresses these gaps. This study examines the growing interest of government agencies in the use of social media as a basis for engagement with the public and how citizens interact with government on social media in the Chinese context.

To be specific, I use the Weibo account of the Chinese Beijing police department (the BPD) as a case study to fill these gaps. Since 2009, the Chinese central government has encouraged all levels of government agencies to adopt social media especially Weibo, the largest and most popular microblogging platform in China. The Xi administration issued social media platform usage guidelines in 2016 to instruct every government department to actively use social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat to engage with citizens (Xi, 2016). In addition, the social movement of Black Lives Matter (BLM) that advocates justice for African-Americans and addresses police violence has become prominent on social media in the United States. Police departments might face more challenges than other government departments on social media
regarding image management and trust from citizens as they usually have contact with citizens in unpleasant or stressful situations (Lev-on & Yavetz, 2021).

In this dissertation, I used content analysis to explore the topics of the BPD’s daily posts, media types, and target audiences from January to June 2018. The content analysis provides a systematic and detailed examination of government daily uses of social media and the engagement strategies they employed in the Chinese context. I also examined the media engagement rate and discussed why rich media does not always generate higher engagement rate. In terms of citizens’ responses to the content posted by the BPD and how citizens express criticism in the commentary section, I investigated why certain posts elicited more comments and applied thematic analysis to study and explain the themes of the comments. I also used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze the criticisms I found among the comments. CDA, an approach to examine language usages in unequal social relations, enabled me to explore insights into how citizens voice criticisms towards the government and how language was used to counter the government’s power and influence from a bottom-up direction. This project provides both theoretical and practical contributions. In particular, this study reveals both the BPD’s efforts and dilemma to increase engagement and build trusting relationships with citizens while promoting national ideological propaganda. This work also extends our knowledge about grassroots’ comments on government social media accounts and how citizens strategically criticize the government’s work. This will consequently enable government organizations to gain a better understanding of how to customize their social media content and engagement strategies for different groups of stakeholders. It also highlights a need to systematically examine government and citizens’ activities on social media.
**Background Information of the BPD and Weibo**

Beijing, as the capital city of China, is one of the largest cities in China. There are five tiers of administrative agencies in China which include central, provincial, municipal, county and township governments (L. Ma, 2013). Beijing is one of four municipalities (Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing) directly governed by the central government. The BPD can be considered to be one of the central government agencies since it is operated by the Ministry of Public Security, which administers all police departments ranging from municipal police agencies to neighborhood mini-stations in China. According to Chu et al. (2016), Chinese citizens trust central government institutions more than local governments. Besides, the BPD ranks second in network size, service quality, interaction, and trust among all of the verified police department-owned social media accounts on Sina.com (*People’s Daily*, 2019).

Larger cities have greater needs to disseminate their news and services or engage with citizens and are thus more likely to adopt new technologies (Bonsón et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2016). Government agencies which take charge of public security have greater need to listen and respond to citizens in a timely manner (Huang et al., 2017). In China, three of the top ten most active and largest government microblogs are operated by municipal police departments. Indeed, as of 2019, more than one-third of government microblogs are maintained by offices and agencies related to public security (China Internet Network Information Center, 2019). Although government agencies from different regions might have different preferences on the selection of content posted on their social media accounts, the same type of government agencies shares the similar topics of posts and posting behaviors on social media. For example, Gu et al., (2020) examined the content of daily posts and users’ interaction rate on the Weibo accounts of three big Chinese cities: Shanghai, Nanjing, and Chengdu. They found those three cities post similar
topics such as transportation, art, employment, tourism on a daily basis. All of three cities’ Weibo accounts have attracted large numbers of likes, shares, and comments. Likewise, the Weibo account of the police departments in other large cities in China also have large numbers of followers, attempt to post various types of messages on a daily basis. For example, the Weibo account of the police department in Shanghai has 4,817,072 followers and 47,842 posts by January 2020. Thus, the analysis of the Beijing police department social media practices may be seen as likely to reflect patterns of behavior practiced by other large cities’ police departments in China as well, which will need further study to prove it. In addition, Beijing, as the capital of China, could be seen as a performance model which other municipal police departments strive to emulate since all Chinese government agencies, including the police department, share the same legal system and follow central government disciplines.

Weibo, one of the most popular social media websites in China, is a microblog website, with similar functions as Twitter. Weibo allows registered users to publish 2,000 Chinese characters maximum in their original posts and 140-character limitations in the comments and reposts. In the post section, users can publish texts, pictures, videos, URL links from external source, and articles from linked blogs. In the comment area, users can save the post for later, repost, comment, and like the post. Regarding comment functions, users can use text, picture, emoji, gif, text with emoji, text with picture, or text with gif. Different from Twitter, the comments to the original post and replies to each comment are threaded under them respectively (similar to Facebook), so that it can provide a designated space for users to engage in discussions and public discussion or dialogue is easily identified around a certain issue (Bolsover & Howard, 2019).
The BPD follows 1230 other Weibo accounts, has over 12,530,442 followers, and had published 60,746 posts by the end of March 2019. It has been active nearly 11 years; the first post was published on July 29th, 2010. The BPD also provides links on its account to direct users to its online services websites such as Residence Registration, Motor Vehicles Administration, Bureau of Exit and Entry Administration, Phone Directories for Public Services, and Terrorism Report, other than functions as a regular social media account. Figure 1 presented a screen shot of the Weibo page of the BPD.
Figure 1

*Screen Shot of the Weibo Page of the BPD.*
Overview

Chapter two reviews the theoretical framework that guides this project. First, I reviewed the literature on the history of e-government, four models of public relations, government social media use in Western countries, as well as Chinese government uses of social media. Second, I drew literature from stakeholder theory to enrich current perspectives in examining the posts of government social media. Following the prior research, I also added the literature of multimedia content in studying government social media. Third, although there is growing literature on the Internet censorship and online public sphere in China, citizens’ online public opinions on government social media remains unknown. Applying the theory of public sphere to examine citizens’ discourse in this highly restricted condition provided an alternative vision on the evaluation of Habermas’ public sphere theory. Overall, chapter two provides a comprehensive theoretical framework to examine government uses of social media and citizens’ comments accordingly.

Chapter three explains the methods I used to answer my research questions. I describe the process of data collection and the rationale for each method I chose for data analysis. To examine social media posts on the Weibo account of the BPD, I collected the first six months of posts in 2018 and used content analysis to examine all the collected posts. I computed the percentages of coding categories and use Mann-Whitney U tests or Kruskal-Wallis tests to determine if there are significant differences between the categories. To investigate citizens’ responses on the Weibo account of the BPD, I systematically sampled citizens’ comments under the most popular posts of each week over six months and conducted a thematic analysis to identify major themes from collected narrative data. I also used critical discourse analysis to discuss comments consisting of criticism. Chapter four is devoted to describing the results and
related discussions. Chapter 5 summarizes and reflects on what I found, discuss my contributions, limitations, and future implications.

**Chapter 2 Literature Review**

In the study of the government uses of social media, a common framework to investigate the information and interactions of the government is the model of push, pull, and networking, which has been drawn from open government goals of transparency, participation, and collaboration (Mergel, 2013; Obama, 2009). Scholars have also applied literature from public relations, stakeholder theory, or the public sphere to examine government uses of social media (Brainard & Edlins, 2015; DePaula et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2017; M. J. Lee & Cho, 2018; Medaglia & Zheng, 2017; Shao & Wang, 2017; Waters & Williams, 2011).

Drawing from previous literature, my study seeks to establish a systematic theoretical framework to examine the interactions and information characteristics of the Chinese government’s social media usage and, in particular, the BPD’s social media usage.

**From E-government to Social Media Government**

Public service and administration have shifted from the former bureaucratic paradigm to an e-government paradigm. In the e-government era, the organizational structure should shift from a vertical hierarchy of control to information-sharing and network orientation. The leadership style should become focused on collaboration rather than based on command (Ho, 2002; Ndou, 2004). Moving from e-government to social media government, the government’s use of social media was initially motivated by citizen expectations that the government can respond to their concerns through more interactive channels (Wukich & Mergel, 2015). Ideally, government social media adoption should transition from internal digital communication and digital service delivery to online engagement with citizens (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013).
The Development of E-government

In the mid-1990s, governments around the world started to use technology and the Internet to improve their public administration, make information transparent, and engage with the public, which is known as “e-government.” E-government practices use technology and the Internet to improve public services for citizens, business partners as well as internal government communication and management (Siau & Long, 2005; Silcock, 2001). While the old public administration emphasized an authoritative, hierarchical, and regulatory relationship with citizens (Brainard & McNutt, 2010; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003), scholars have suggested that E-government practices should focus on sharing information and encouraging citizen participation and collaboration (Chun et al., 2012; Carlo Bertot et al., 2012; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003; Ho, 2002).

However, regarding the communication between the government and citizens, the literature on e-government practices has found that governments primarily focus on using technology to deliver information to citizens and mostly emphasize the benefits from the government’s perspective. Although governments can share information and deliver messages more conveniently and directly to citizens through advanced technology and the Internet, which may enhance government accountability, transparency, and openness, the technology has mostly been used as a tool to help governments perform their traditional functions instead of encouraging collaboration with citizens (Abramson & Morin, 2003; Brown & Brudney, 2004). For instance, Coursey and Norris (2008) have analyzed surveys collected from local governments in the U.S. and found that they primarily use technology-based platforms to provide information to citizens rather than gathering information from citizens.
**Global Trends of Government Use of Social Media**

With the advent of social media, citizens have been increasingly relying on social media to interact with other people, organizations, and share their opinions on social issues. The emergence of social media has also brought opportunities for the government to connect with, and potentially collaborate with citizens and quickly become one of the major trends in e-government practices. It has made informal communication and interaction possible between the government and citizens. Compared to previous e-government technology platforms, social media is provided by third parties that are usually commercial companies. Social media platforms have made it more convenient for citizens to post comments, access updated information, and forward content to other people (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008; Mergel, 2013a). On these platforms, citizens’ voices can be heard, and grassroots powers can be strengthened. In this way, at least in theory, the government can share information, engage the public to participate in the policymaking processes, and seek advice for problems through social media, which can enhance the government’s transparency, public participation, and collaboration (Mergel, 2013a).

Social media provides opportunities for the government to interact with citizens directly, while previous e-government technology is more focused on the delivery of services and program (Mergel, 2015). Mergel (2013b) interviewed government social media directors from 15 federal government department branches and found that social media has changed the hierarchy of the technology adoption procedure. Traditionally, the government decided whether to adopt a new technology based on a top-down approach driven by organizational needs. In contrast, the adoption of social media is mainly motivated by citizens, and as more of them use social media to share information and access news, the government has started to incorporate social media
into the practice of administration. Government departments are also pressured and motivated by each other to open social media accounts. Different government departments follow each other’s accounts to learn from each other and improve their own department’s social media. Social media directors have found that they have new informal ways to communicate with each other, which provides them with yet another good reason to adopt social media. Most importantly, social media is a way to show that the government organizations are making efforts to achieve the goal of an open government.

Based on the Open Government Memorandum issued by the Obama administration in 2009 which aims to instruct executive departments and agencies to make government information available online to the public and “ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration” (Obama, 2009). Mergel (2013a) proposed a framework to measure the open government missions of transparency, participation, and collaboration by classifying government social media posts into a three-category model: pull, push, network. She suggested that a one-way push tactic can be used to measure the mission of transparency. In order to achieve transparency, government agencies use a one-way push to release government information to citizens through social media. A two-way pull tactic is used to measure the level of participation. Finally, networking refers to the collaboration between the government and citizens through social media. The typology of push, pull, and networking has also been widely used by other researchers to measure government agencies’ social media activities (DePaula & Dincelli, 2016; Huang et al., 2016; Mossberger et al., 2013).

**Building Trust and Long-term Relationships through Social Media**

Besides the typology of pull, push, and networking that proposed by Mergel (2013a), Scholars have also applied the theory of four models of public relations to examine social media
use in the government (DePaula & Dincelli, 2016; Graham et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2017; M. J. Lee & Cho, 2018; Waters & Williams, 2011). Recent years have witnessed increasing use of social media by the government for various public relations purposes. Successful public relationships not only promote government transparency and enhance citizen engagement but also help manage the government’s image and build trust among citizens. For instance, municipal governments in the U.S. use Facebook to manage their images and promote themselves (DePaula & Dincelli, 2016). It is especially crucial for the police to maintain a positive image among citizens so that the citizens trust the police and look to them for help. Municipal level police departments in the U.S. or the U.K. have used social media such as Twitter to improve public relations and cultivate long-term relationships with citizens (Crump, 2011; Huang et al., 2017).

Four models of public relations which refer to press agentry, public information, the two-way asymmetrical model, and the two-way symmetrical model were originally proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984). In particular, press agentry means “creating favorable publicity or propaganda in order to pacify and manipulate public opinion.” The public information model refers to a one-way communication medium that distributes organizational information to the public. The two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical models are both two-way communication systems. The former model uses persuasion to influence the audience as well as elicit feedback to benefit the organization, whereas the latter model relies on open two-way communication and a mutual give-and-take rather than one-way persuasion (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

A few studies have explicitly applied the four models of public relations to examine government uses of social media. Waters and Williams (2011) employed these four models to
develop the coding scheme of content analysis and categorized 60 government agencies’ Twitter accounts at the state and federal levels. They found that the four models were used in conjunction with each other. For instance, public information and two-way asymmetry would be used in a single Tweet to distribute one-way messages as well as seek indirect interaction with citizens using the @ function. Lee and Cho (2018) compared the government uses of social media between the U.S. and South Korea within the framework of four models of public relations and found that government agencies from both countries mainly use the public information model to deliver information and the two-way asymmetrical model to persuade citizens to act a certain way.

Along this vein, DePaula and Dincelli (2016) suggested incorporating the four models of public relations into Mergel’s (2013a) typology of push, pull, and networking to study the government usage of social media. They argued that social media has also been used as a self-promotion and marketing tool in addition to improving transparency and citizen participation. They contended that Mergel’s (2013a) typology of “push” equals the one-way symmetrical model of public relations. Likewise, “pull” functions similarly to the two-way asymmetrical model, while “networking” is similar to the two-way symmetrical model in public relations. They analyzed sample posts from 16 municipal-level governments’ Facebook pages and found that 37.5% of posts were created to promote a positive image and the interests of the agency. Thus, they proposed adding “impression management” to Mergel’s (2013a) three categories’ typology. “Impression management” is similar to the press agentry model but has more positive implications that help a government promote a favorable image. In the Chinese context, Gu, Harrison, and Zhu’s (2020) study also found that three big Chinese municipal cities created a
large quantity of posts on Weibo to promote favorable impressions of the city. This brings up the point of how government organizations could use social media to manage their image.

**Image Construction and Management in Government Social Media**

Regarding image management on social media, there is a relatively rich body of literature that emphasizes the importance of image construction and the impact of social media on image management in the private sector (Gilpin, 2010). Few studies have examined how government organizations use social media for the purposes of impression management, self-presentation, and marketing (DePaula & Dincelli, 2016; L. Zhou & Wang, 2014). Private organizations tailor their self-presentation and self-expression on social media to express their identity, promote a particular image, and satisfy their stakeholders’ expectations (Gilpin, 2010). Image construction and management can be regarded as a self-presentation process and “a function of public relations, marketing and other organizational processes that attempt to shape the impression people have of the firm” (Barnett et al., 2005, p. 34). An organization can build up its image with key stakeholders through consistent communication efforts (B. G. King & Whetten, 2008).

Previous studies have shown that governments actively use social media for promoting self-favorable image. Hand and Ching (2014) studied local governments’ Facebook pages in the Phoenix metropolitan area and found that they use Facebook to promote positive images to improve their relationships with citizens. According to Moss et al. (2015), social media can help government agencies identify complaints from citizens and solve problems before they become public risks. Likewise, the government can also elicit positive feedback and publicize positive outcomes to promote its image and reputation.

In China, city- and county-level governments have been using government websites and social media to highlight government officers’ achievements, boost their city’s tourism, and
promote a favorable government image. Zhou and Wang (2014) argued that many Chinese municipal government Weibo accounts focus on promoting the image of both the government and the city. Similar results have emerged from analyses of how county-level governments in China primarily use their official websites to construct their desired public image. (Pan, 2017).

Law enforcement agencies use social media to enhance their image and gain trust while reducing crime and providing public safety (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015; O’Connor, 2017). For example, O’Connor (2017) examined the content of 27 Canadian police departments’ Twitter accounts and found that they partially used Twitter to shape the public image of the police. To date, no study has gathered any information on the daily Weibo posts of Chinese police departments. The current study investigated whether the BPD also uses social media to build a favorable image.

I argued that promoting positive image and networking should be considered as part of building trusting and satisfying relationship with citizens especially for the police departments. I proposed to use “relationship building” to incorporate the modes of “network” (Mergel, 2013a) and “impression management” (DePaula & Dincelli, 2016) to study the police uses of social media. It is more important for police departments to have a positive image, listening to citizens on social media and eventually build a long-term trusting and satisfying relationship with citizens than other government organizations (Lev-on & Yavetz, 2021; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). This is because the police usually have contact with citizens directly and their activities can significantly influence people’s daily life.

**Government, Police, and Social Media in the Chinese Context**

In China, the government follows the global trend of e-government practices and has integrated technology into its public administration system. Other than providing online services,
promoting a more efficient government, and publishing policy documents, the Chinese
government also believes technology can help transform its negative image among citizens as
well as strengthen the power of the central government (Seifert & Chung, 2009; X. Zhou, 2004).
Since 2009, a social media boom occurred in China, which has encouraged government agencies
to embrace social media to provide public services, disclose government information, and
encourage communication between the government and citizens. Along with the trend of social
media boom, Chinese government officials and agencies have been encouraged by central
government to use social media to communicate with the public, in order to open “a door for
democratic dialogue,” (p.699) and provide public services online (Shao & Wang, 2017).

In April 2016, the Chinese president, Jinping Xi, stated that government organizations
and officials should adopt social media platforms as part of their administration duties and listen
to people’s voices on social media (Xi, 2016). In the same year, the Office of the State Council
issued guidelines that every government department should adopt social media platforms such as
Weibo and WeChat; the government should post updated content on social media; and
government officials should increase both engagement with citizens and response rates to posts
(Office of the State Council, 2016). Thus, government organizations in China actively use social
media to accomplish a wide range of purposes that have yet to be completely understood, but
which may include increasing citizens’ trust, monitoring public opinions, and managing their
images.

By the end of 2018, there were 138,253 verified government agency social media
accounts on Weibo (China Internet Network Information Center, 2019). Research on the Chinese
government’s usage of social media has been more focused on censorship, a general description
of the usage and its challenges, the usage during emergency events, or the adoption rate of social
media (G. King et al., 2017; L. Ma, 2013; Xie et al., 2017; L. Zheng, 2013; L. Zheng & Zheng, 2014). For instance, Zheng and Zheng (2014) analyzed 10 multilevel government agencies’ Weibo accounts by examining the frequency of the posts, the topics of the posts, the government social media adoption rate, and the networking relationship with other organizations or individuals. They found that the majority of information on government social media accounts were posted for self-promotion. Ma (2013) focused on determining the police department’s social media adoption rate by examining the government size, Internet penetration rate, and influence from other government agencies in 282 municipal cities in China. His study found that the municipal police departments located in larger cities that receive more pressure from the central government were more likely to adopt social media.

Police departments in China are prioritized in the government system as they are in charge of combating crime, traffic issues, ensure public security, and migrant workers registration (L. Ma, 2013). The activities and social media usage of police departments can affect citizens’ everyday life directly. Police officers in China not only perform law enforcement duties but also act as educators since they are regarded as moral authorities, which is quite different from American police officers who are viewed only as law enforcement authorities (Jiao, 2001). The collective culture makes it possible for the Chinese police officers to use widely accepted moral principles to maintain public order; sometimes they overly use moral principles when law should be enforced instead (Jiao, 2001). In addition, the philosophy of community policing requires the Chinese police to intervene in people’s daily lives for activities such as “providing legal education, counseling in mediation committees, and doing census registration” (Cao & Hou, 2001, p. 9). Besides dealing with crime and enforcing law, the police officers are required to take on the role of social service workers which “includes specifically dispute resolution,
information provision, lost and found, human assistance for the dependent persons and emergency aid” (X. Wang & Wong, 2012, p. 36). The most recent Chinese police law passed in 1995 requires Chinese police to serve the people wholeheartedly and place citizens’ safety and well-being before their own self-interest; assisting citizens is as important as crime control (Z. Chen, 2016; Y. Ma, 1997; X. Wang & Wong, 2012).

Thus, in some important respects, the police department may be an ideal government site for observing Chinese citizens engagement on government social media accounts. Moreover, the police department in China also shares similar functions such as crime prevention with other democratic countries, which might offer useful insights for comparison with other countries’ police departments.

Drawing on the existing literature on social media use in the government as well as empirical evidence from the daily posts of the BPD’s Weibo account, this study closely examines the daily routine and specific themes and patterns of posts of the BPD’ Weibo account which brings out the first research question:

RQ1a: What topics characterize the Weibo posts of the BPD on a daily basis, and how are the posts distributed throughout the day?

Government Social Media Engagement Strategies

Stakeholder Theory and Target Audiences

Stakeholder theory originates from a business setting and addresses how the private sector manages and satisfies the interests of different groups of stakeholders (Freeman, 2010). A stakeholder refers to any individual or any group of individuals who share an interest together and can affect or are affected by the activities of an organization’s objective (Freeman, 2010).
Later on, stakeholder theory has been extended from private sector to the e-government and social media contexts (Graham et al., 2015; Scholl, 2001; Tan et al., 2005). Social media offers a convenient and efficient platform for organizations that deliver information or cultivate interactions with stakeholders. The government could use social media to build relationships with stakeholders. In this case, different groups of citizens are stakeholders of government organizations since they are affected by actions of the government and can also affect the government’s actions.

In order to design social media messages and cultivate relationships with stakeholder groups, it is important for organizations to identify their stakeholder groups and customize content for them (Sedereviciute & Valentini, 2011). As citizens are the primary stakeholders of the government, it is essential to examine how governments implement strategies to target and engage with them (Flak & Rose, 2005). However, the majority of previous studies have focused on categorizing government social media posts based on content without identifying stakeholder groups. Few researchers have measured how the content type and mention function influence stakeholders’ engagement with governments’ social media (Bonsón et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2017). Huang et al. (2017) examined what stakeholders municipal police departments mention most in their Twitter accounts and found that they like to mention police-affiliated accounts such as police officers as well as users who have more followers. They concluded that law enforcement agencies use the mention function on Twitter to build relationships with their main stakeholders.

Lee and Cho (2018) compared the content of social media posts from the U.S. and South Korean governments and found that government agencies in South Korea use significantly more tailored and personal messages than the U.S. government organizations while the U.S.
government organizations deliver significantly more formal messages on social media. They suggested that the tailored content could help the South Korean government increase citizen participation and build strong partnerships with citizens on social media. They suspected that the collective culture of South Korea contributed to this difference and suggested further research for the future. Sharing the similar collective culture as South Korea, perhaps government agencies in Chinese context have considered customizing their social media posts based on a number of different types of existing online stakeholders as well as other potential citizens. Thus, it is important to examine whether Chinese government agencies have customized content to target different groups of stakeholders.

Little research has been conducted on whether the content of government social media posts targets different groups of citizens. I argue that the target demographics and engagement strategies should be re-examined more closely on a daily basis as well as in the Chinese context. The existing literature has revealed that the majority of government agencies use social media to deliver information instead of engaging with citizens (Crump, 2011; Medaglia & Zheng, 2017). Fewer studies have focused on the motivations and engagement strategies that government agencies use to connect with users, although social media allows organizations and government public relations practitioners to engage with users with different types of interactions (Hand & Ching, 2014; Huang et al., 2017). According to Scott (2006), citizens expect to contribute direct input to public issues and want more accountable and transparent governments. As citizens are the primary stakeholders of the government, it is essential to examine how governments implement strategies to target and engage with them.

RQ1b: Do the posts target different groups of stakeholders? If so, who are the target stakeholders?
Using Multimedia Content to Increase Citizen Engagement

Social media allows users to post multimedia content such as pictures and videos, which may increase engagement with followers. Regarding the engagement strategies used by governments on social media, some scholars have found that posts containing pictures or videos can attract more citizen engagement (Bonsón et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2016) while others have argued that rich media like pictures or video do not always attract more engagement (Q. Chen et al., 2020). Bonsón et al. (2015) identified five media types (video, link, photo, text, other) on Western European local governments’ Facebook pages and found that photos attracted the highest engagement rate per 1,000 followers. Huang et al. (2016) investigated the interaction rate based on media type of U.S. municipal police departments’ Facebook pages and also found that posts with photos attracted more interaction than other media types. However, Rahim et al. (2019) analyzed the engagement rate of media types on the Facebook page of Malaysia Health Department and found posts containing photos had no significant effect on engagement rate. Only posts of videos attracted significant more numbers of engagement. Lee and Xu (2018) examined the tweets from the official Twitter accounts of Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton during the 2016 presidential election for three months. They have found that plain texts had attracted more engagement compared to other types of posts. Very limited research exists on the impact of media types on citizen engagement in the Chinese context. In the current study, I examined the media types used by the BPD on Weibo and the respective engagement rate.

RQ1c: What media types does the BPD use to engage the public? Which media type elicit the highest engagement rate?
Public Sphere under Chinese Government Surveillance

Although international literature has studied the government uses of social media extensively, most studies in the field have only focused on collecting and analyzing the topics of government interests and neglected to address the details of citizens’ comments or reactions. A few studies have examined citizens’ engagement in the government social media, but they mostly concentrate on the quantitative indicators such as the number of likes, comments and shares or the type of content (e.g. text, picture, video) instead of exploring the actual content generated by citizens or finding out what topics can attract citizens’ interests. Furthermore, these findings may not be generalizable to China, given its specific political, social, and cultural contexts. Besides, few scholars have applied systematic and empirical theory and methods to study citizens’ engagement in the Chinese context. In this chapter, I applied public sphere theory to improve our understanding of citizens’ reactions to government social media posts.

Public Sphere in China

Social media provide citizens a platform to practice democracy in the form of public discourse. Discourse refers to interactive communication between people that is either in verbal or written form. For example, people use language to communicate opinions, beliefs, or express emotions in different situations such as discussing a topic in a classroom or writing a letter to a newspaper editor (Van Dijk, 1997). In this study, discourse is the publicly available posts published by the BPD and the public comments left on the BPD’s commentary section.

Habermas’s (1991) public sphere theory suggested that individuals discuss public issues independently from the state. Ideally, citizens keep themselves informed of current affairs and actively engage in public discourse. In reverse, the government makes or changes their policies based on the public sphere. Habermas (1991) argued that it is crucial for different social actors to
reach consensus through communication in public space. The Internet has changed citizens from passive readers to active speakers and participants (Benkler, 2006). Papacharissi (2009) stated that the Internet or social media enable citizens express their dissents or political opinions on blogs or YouTube or by posting comments in an online discussion group.

Public sphere and public space have not been limited in the western countries. In China, the teahouse has been a public space for Chinese citizens to talk about the issues they are interested in. Wang (2008) found that tea houses in Chengdu were not only a cultural space but also served as political meeting rooms where political debates took place which attract not only citizens but also government spies. In the digital age, the Internet or social media are still not a safe space for citizens to conduct public discussions. The Chinese government has used social media as a new public management tool to monitor public opinions and anticipate social tensions (Noesselt, 2014). Furthermore, social media also allows government agencies or government officials to participate in conversation which has blurred the boundaries of public sphere between the public and the government (Shao & Wang, 2017). Therefore, the public sphere in China has been involved with many other parties such as the government authorities, social organizations, and commercial companies other than citizens. Regarding political discussions in Chinese social media, they are not as obvious as in western social media. Often political discussions are embedded in jokes, catchphrases, images, videos, and other entertainment events (M. Guo, 2018; Shao & Wang, 2017; Wu, 2011; Yu et al., 2011).

When we are discussing the public sphere in China, the government should be included in the concept of public sphere in China (Shao & Wang, 2017). This is because the Chinese central government not only encourages government agencies to open their social media accounts but also encourages government officials to participate in online discussions, explain
government policies, and share their opinions on current affairs by using their real names. Shao and Wang (2017) also indicated that the word “public” has different meanings in the Chinese context. “Public” can refer to the state and the government in China while private can be used to describe individual citizens. Chinese citizens perceive the government as provider and protector. On the other hand, Chinese citizens tend to rely on social group or organizations to express their voices. The Chinese public sphere can be seen as “a space constructed by the interaction between the government and social groups” (p. 698). Zheng and Wu (2005) found that Chinese citizens tended to go to government administered websites to discuss politically related issues collectively.

However, no study has explored whether citizens discussing social issues on government social media accounts might create a special public space for citizens to discuss issues of common concern especially in non-democratic countries. Many scholars have showed that social media strengthens public sphere especially around environment related issues in China and in other democratic countries (Shirky, 2011; D. Wang, 2018; Zhu, 2018). The question of how citizens’ discussions on government social media accounts can contribute to the theory of public sphere in the Chinese context remains unaddressed.

RQ2a: What topics are discussed in the most commented posts generated by the BPD in each of 26 weeks throughout the six-month? Why do those posts attract more comments?

**Interaction between Government and Citizens on Social Media**

Another serious weakness with the existing literature is what topics of government generated social media posts citizens are interested in engaging with. Some scholars found that leisure related content or pictures from local government attracted more comments from citizens (Gu et al., 2020; Hofmann et al., 2013). For example, in three major Chinese municipal cities’
social media accounts (Nanjing, Shanghai, Chengdu), leisure related posts such as history, art, and funny story and emergency news attracted more numbers of likes, shares, and comments than government affairs (Gu et al., 2020).

However, scholars have failed to fully explore the actual discourse of user-generated content and the relationship between citizens’ comments and social practices on government social media. Studies on citizens’ input have often focused on the quantitative aspects like frequency of likes, comments, and shares, while neglecting that the essential affordances of social media are interactivity and networking (Medaglia & Zheng, 2017). For instance, Bonsón and Ratkai (2013) proposed Facebook metrics to measure stakeholder engagement on social media. They argued that engagement is the sum of popularity (measured by percentage of likes and followers), commitment (percentage of comments), and virality (percentage of reposts). Huang and her colleagues (2016) followed the same technique to use the mean number of likes, shares, comments to measure interaction rate in the U.S. municipal police department on Facebook. Mergel (2013a) proposed a framework to measure social media interactions by counting the frequency of likes and retweets. Gu and her colleagues (2020) used the combined numbers of likes, shares, and comments to measure response in the Chinese municipal cities on Weibo.

Little focus is given to the discussion of citizens’ discourse and how citizens express themselves or interact on government social media platforms. This research filled this gap and investigated the discourse generated by citizens on government social media platforms in a qualitative approach by posing the following research questions:

RQ2b: What are the themes that characterize citizens’ comments on the Weibo account of the BPD?
Negotiation between Chinese Government Surveillance and Citizens’ Criticism on Social Media

Any serious discussion of social media discourse or public sphere in the Chinese context must consider the scope and effects of Chinese censorship policies. While understanding the social media behavior of government actors bears on government policy and communication strategy, a fundamental concern is assessing the extent to which citizens’ social media discourse in response takes place under conditions of constraint.

Dating back to 1987, when the Internet was first introduced into China, the government established strategies to monitor and control online activities and information (Xiao, 2011). The Communist Party’s Central Propaganda Department (CPD), General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP), and State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) collaborated together to ensure that any published content would be consistent with the Party’s ideology. The CPD distributed censorship guidelines as well as examples of highly political sensitive topics, to editors of all media outlets. Each website employs up to 1,000 censors since 2010; approximately 20,000-50,000 Internet police and Internet monitors are working at the same time. All Internet service companies, including foreign organizations, need to follow the Chinese law and regulations (G. King et al., 2013). Given these censorship requirements, the globally popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter cannot be used in China. Domestic social media sites, such as (Microblog) Weibo and WeChat, have been established and have become quite popular among Chinese citizens. These domestic social media sites have all implemented filters within their systems.

Beyond filters and guidelines, a complex multi-layered censorship has been built over time. Jiang (2010) has argued that censorship has been transitioned to “regulation of Internet
service providers, promotion of self-censorship among users, and employment of cyber
commentators to shape public opinion” (p.75). Self-censorship is a conscious or subconscious act
preventing oneself from speaking. On social media, users exercise self-censorship to maintain
their image, protect their privacy, or restrict political expression which might cause conflict or
isolate themselves (Das & Kramer, 2013; Kwon et al., 2015). In China, the real name registration
policy has been launched on social media since 2012 to force citizens to self-censor their online
activities. This policy requires social media users to provide real name and identification
information to social media providers (Fu et al., 2013).

Given these censorship activities, some may view studies of social media interaction in
China to be incapable of capturing genuine citizen behavior. Yang (2009), however, stated that
Chinese netizens create entire repertoires of software to evade the filtering system. According to
Qiu (2004), most determined and knowledgeable Internet users in China can access outlawed
information via encrypted messages, or by using software such as VPN that can help them
escape the Great Firewall. It is difficult for the government to control all Internet users, not least
because people can also access the Internet at a public Internet bar without disclosing any
personal information. The government cannot confirm that each of internet users is registered, or
that the registration information they do have is verified. Besides, social media providers as
commercially driven third parties have been negotiating censorship boundaries to satisfy users in
order to increase profit (Jiang, 2016). Jiang (2016) found sometimes social media providers do
not enforce real name registration policy very strictly. Some users on Weibo use fake names or
have not uploaded their national identification information to the administration, even though the
Chinese government has required Weibo to obtain the real name and identification information
from all of users. Chinese citizens also like to discuss politically sensitive topics or communicate
with the government collectively to reduce risks of being targeted individually by the
government (Luo & Harrison, 2019). In addition, overtime there have been many changes or
different versions of rules made by either the central government or local government on the
censorship guideline. There are no consistent rules established for online activities which leaves
gray space for citizens to express themselves (Chao et al., 2017; Chase & Mulvenon, 2002).

Chinese citizens have been constantly exploring censorship tolerance lines and
experimenting with linguistic tricks to engage with social issues or political conversation.
Chinese Internet users have developed an extensive system of Internet “languages” to escape
filters and censors (Xu, 2014). For example, Internet users can use images, slang, meme, pinyin
mixed with English, or metaphors and puns to imply political issues or sensitive topics. Coded
communication has also become popular on the Internet. For example, one of the government
propaganda themes is to create a harmonious society. Online users refer to censorship and filters
as “being harmonized” (Xiao, 2011, p. 216) by government. The word “hexie” (harmony) in
Chinese, which is a homonym of the word for “river crab,” has been used to refer to government
censorship. Crab also has an explicit meaning - to bully - which means that Chinese Internet
users are bullied by government censorship and live in a river crab society.

Recent studies have found that linguistic violence, political satire, and semantic bleaching
are the main trends in online political communications in China (M. Guo, 2018; L. Wang, 2018;
G. Yang & Jiang, 2015). Guo (2018) investigated the most popular online catchphrases on the
Chinese Internet from 2003 to 2015 and demonstrated that linguistic violence and semantic
bleaching have become new trends from 2006 to 2015. Semantic bleaching means the original
meaning and context of language has been completely stripped away and turned into a meme to
be used for social or political implications (M. Guo, 2018). Guo illustrated this phenomenon by
using the example of “Magic horse is floating cloud.” Magic horse or god horse is not related to horse at all. It is a homophone of “what” in Chinese and “floating cloud” means “being vain” (p.13). The whole meme means everything I do is meaningless, and all the hard work flows away just like floating cloud. Young people use this meme to express their frustration toward economic deterioration and a highly controlled political and social environment which make them feel hopeless for the future.

Online linguistic violence is another trend regarding political communication. “Grass Mud Horse” as a homophone which means “fuck your mother” was used to criticize a new added Internet regulation policy in 2009 as well as to help netizens to release their anger to the government (Meng, 2011). Wang (2018) used “the fart of a chicken” as an example to demonstrate how Chinese netizens criticize the government in pursuit of high GDP without considering environmental pollution. “The fart of a chicken” has the similar pronunciation as English “GDP” in Chinese. Those indirect violent, abusive, and humiliating homophones have been constantly used by Chinese netizens to express their frustration, anger, and unspoken criticism toward political and social issues or government control. Online political satire is also a popular approach for Chinese netizens to discuss political issues. Yang and Jiang (2015) indicated that political satire on Chinese Internet is not only for political purposes but also serves for social interaction and self-expression. Chinese netizens have been creative in generating jokes, making implied sentences, mixing multimedia, and performing online art to express themselves while escaping from censorship.

In terms of criticism of the government, researchers have surprisingly found that the government does not censor any and all public criticism. The Chinese government has adapted to incorporate online public opinions into its political decision-making process. For instance, the
government has launched “government chats” or “I have a question to ask Prime minister” on online platforms or social media to allow citizens to discuss social issues or offer advice directly to the government (Noesselt, 2014). Chen (2017) explained that central government and local governments in China use criticism to achieve their different political goals. The central government uses criticism to monitor local government’s activities, especially corruption. Local government leaders use it to establish authority over their subordinates and impress higher tier leaders to get promotion. According to Ji (2017), public deliberation on Chinese social media especially about government is full of negative emotional expression instead of rational discussions. Although these emotional criticism toward government cannot foster open argumentation which might lead to further political actions, Ji argued that this emotional pressure in the Chinese cultural context can press government to make changes on policy or management.

King and his colleagues (2013) used computer-assisted text analysis to collect and analyze social media posts from 1,382 Chinese websites. They found that 13% of all posts were censored by the government. Given this, it is surprising to find that the Chinese government allows “the full range of expression of negative and positive comments about the state, its policies, and its leaders” (p. 339). However, any posts associated with potential collective action or that involve a large number of citizens will be deleted soon regardless of whether or not they praise or criticize the government. King and colleagues have concluded that censorship in China is more used to reduce the actuality or possibility of large social gatherings and collective actions rather than eliminating citizens’ criticism of the Party or government officials.

Beyond censorship, another issue in determining the authenticity of discourse on social media platforms is the suspicion that the Chinese government hires approximately 2,000,000 supporters to write positive words about the government. These government-hired social media
users are grouped under the nickname “50 cents” or “50 cents party” since it is suspected that they are paid 50 cents for each post. King and his colleagues (2017) analyzed a leaked government document from a local Chinese Internet propaganda office. The most surprising result was that almost all of the so called “50 cents” group are already government employees. Their major job is to distract people from potential collective action and post cheerleading words about government, rather than becoming involved in any arguments or debates.

King and his colleagues (2017) have also determined the characteristics of accounts used by those within the “50 cents” group. A user account that engages with government sponsored websites and has no more than a handful of followers is likely to be owned and used by a “50 cents” member. They also found that “the 50c party writes approximately 448 million social media posts nationwide. About 52.7% of these posts appear on government sites. The remaining 212 million posts are inserted into the stream of approximately 80 billion total posts on commercial social media sites, all in real time” (G. King et al., 2017, p. 26).

The present study explored how Chinese citizens interact with the Weibo account of the BPD. I assumed citizen’s conversation and responses in government social media account might be different than their usual online communication behaviors. In this controlled condition where self-censorship, state power, and social media service providers’ mediation take place, can citizens express criticism when they interact with Beijing police department? Based on the above literature review, criticism in the present study refers to any disagreement, emotional or hateful response, popular online negative meme, or linguistic violence toward government in general, government officials, or the BPD.

RQ2c: Is there any criticism expressed toward the BPD and, if so, how is it expressed?
Chapter 3 Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this study regarding the two sets of research questions: **RQ1**: **RQ1a**: What topics characterize the Weibo posts of the BPD on a daily basis, and how are the posts distributed throughout the day? **RQ1b**: Do the posts target different groups of stakeholders? If so, who are the target stakeholders? **RQ1c**: What media types does the BPD use to engage the public? Which media types elicit the highest engagement rate? **RQ2**: **RQ2a**: What topics are discussed in the most commented posts generated by the BPD in each of 26 weeks throughout the six-month? Why do those posts attract more comments? **RQ2b**: What are the themes that characterize citizens’ comments on the Weibo account of the BPD? **RQ2c**: Is there any criticism expressed toward the BPD and, if so, how is it expressed? I used content analysis to answer my first set of research questions and thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis to answer my second set of research questions.

**Methodological Rationale**

The first set of research questions explored the daily activities on the Weibo account of the BPD. Based on the literature review, research questions, and the nature of collected data, content analysis is the most appropriate method to answer my first sets of research questions. Content analysis is a research method used to quantify parts of texts through a systematic coding scheme (Neuendorf, 2017). Researchers use it to determine the frequency of certain words, themes, or concepts within the qualitative data such as articles or images (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). By quantifying and analyzing the texts, researchers can make inferences about the messages within the text and the context surrounding the collected text (Neuendorf, 2017). It is possible for other researchers to replicate the study and good for analyzing large amounts of data (Rose et al., 2014).
Followed by content analysis, the Mann-Whitney U test was used to examine the post time frequency and distribution between holiday season and non-holiday season. The Mann-Whitney U test is a nonparametric test that is used to compare two independent samples and the distribution of samples are uncertain (Hazra & Gogtay, 2016). One-Sample Chi Square tests were used respectively to examine if any of the coding categories varied significantly across different post types, targeted audiences, and media types. One-Sample Chi Square test were chosen because it assumed the observed frequency would be the same for each variable and variables are independent and categorical.

The second set of research questions addresses citizens’ responses to and engagement on the posts made by the BPD. As mentioned in the literature review section, existing studies tend to use quantitative approaches to examine citizens’ engagement on government social media. The linguistic features and associated contexts embedded in government social media especially citizens’ comments are understudied. This study filled this gap and used a qualitative approach to rigorously examine the content of most popular social media posts and citizen discussions embedded on the Weibo account of the BPD. A qualitative approach allows researchers to examine individual messages, describe the text and interpret the underlying meaning of texts and contextual or cultural information of the text (Hsiu & Shannon, 2005; Sparkes, 2005). In particular, thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) are used in this research.

The Research Question 2b aims to find the themes that characterize citizens’ comments. In this study, thematic analysis can help to analyze citizens’ generated content and reveal the themes underlying citizens’ discussions on the Weibo account of the BPD. Thematic analysis not only identifies themes but also interprets the more nuanced underlying and recurrent themes across the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six
steps framework to conduct my thematic analysis. The first step requires the researchers to immerse themselves into the data and actively search for meanings or patterns. During this step, the researcher could take notes and figure out what is interesting in the data. In the second step, the researcher should find meaningful patterns and organize them into groups. Those patterns should be more detailed than broad themes. In the third step, the researcher searches and creates a list of potential themes. The researcher reviews the list and refines themes in the fourth step. All of the final themes should have “clear and identifiable distinctions” (p.20) between each other. In the fifth step, the researcher needs to define each theme. The researcher reports the analysis in the final step.

In terms of how criticism is expressed by citizens, I chose CDA to analyze any criticism found in the collected comments. CDA aims to examine how dominance, ideology, power, and control are expressed by language (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Richardson (2017) argued that CDA examines language’s implications in social relations, especially unequal relations. It is interested in understanding how the meaning in the language are committed to drive to social change. CDA not only studies the language used in the text but also considers the context in which the text was produced and consumed (Witschge, 2008). CDA also looks beyond the context to its implications for wider social practice (Fairclough, 2013; Witschge, 2008). CDA has been mostly applied to analyze the language and texts used by elites, mainstream media, and powerful institutions. It aims to show how people in power control discourse and use language to manipulate and influence people from a top-down perspective (Van Dijk, 1993).

Recently, some scholars have argued that citizens do not passively receive political propaganda and solely rely on major institutions such as mainstream media to receive information anymore. Social media has changed and challenged the channels through which
elites disseminate discourses and ideology. It is important for scholars to examine how social media provides opportunities for people to negotiate with or counter the discourses created by elites from a bottom-up direction (Bouvier & Way, 2021; KhosraviNik, 2017). For example, Chiluwa (2012) applied CDA to examine how Biafra groups used language to resist the authority’s power in Nigeria. In the Chinese social media context, citizens’ expressions especially criticism towards the government are restrained by censorship and influenced by government online and offline ideology promotion. In this context, CDA is an appropriate approach that will help us understand how Chinese netizens carefully use language to reflect, negotiate, or resist the imbalanced power relations. I followed Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimension model to conduct the analysis of criticism found among the collected comments. According to Fairclough (1995), CDA includes three steps which are description, interpretation, and explanations. Description refers to the linguistic description of the text. Interpretation is concerned with the situational context and how the text is produced and received by people. Explanation aims to identify the social effects of the text. 

**Research Questions**

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1**: What kinds of discourse practices characterize the BPD use of Weibo account?

**RQ1a**: What topics characterize the Weibo posts of the BPD on a daily basis, and how are the posts distributed throughout the day?

**RQ1b**: Do the posts target different groups of stakeholders? If so, who are the target stakeholders?

**RQ1c**: What media types does the BPD use to engage the public? Which media types elicit the highest engagement rate?
RQ2: What characterizes citizens’ responses to the content on the Weibo account of the BPD?

RQ2a: What topics are discussed in the most commented posts generated by the BPD in each of 26 weeks throughout the six-month? Why do those posts attract more comments?

RQ2b: What are the themes that characterize citizens’ comments on the Weibo account of the BPD?

RQ2c: Is there any criticism expressed toward the BPD and, if so, how is it expressed?

Data Collection

To answer my research questions, I collected six months of posts that were created from January 1st to June 30th, 2018 and distributed by the BPD via its Weibo account together with replies made to every week’s most popular posts by Chinese citizens. The total of 2,883 posts and 780 users’ comments were collected over six months from the Weibo account of the BPD.

In terms of time range selection, scholars have shown that time period selection is crucial for social media studies as public opinion is highly sensitive to big events such as crises and presidential elections. There are two reasons why I elected to choose a six-month time scope. First, previous research has shown that police departments or other government departments not only discuss work related topics but also address holiday related topics. Schneider (2016) found that Toronto police officers like to engage with the public during their off time. DePaula and Dincelli (2016) indicated holiday celebrations are one of the popular topics on U.S. municipal governments’ Facebook pages. There are many national holidays in China throughout the year and almost every month has either a traditional Chinese holiday or regular holiday. January and February have holidays like the New Year (January 1st) and the biggest Chinese holiday-Chinese New Year. The Chinese New Year happened on February 16th in 2018. Chinese citizens usually spend 7-15 days to celebrate the New Year. There are annual political conferences happening in
March which might affect police officers working routines. From January to March, I examined whether the BPD’s working routines are different during the holiday months. The months of April, May, and June have less holiday events or political events happening. Thus, I explored the BPD’s working routines during non-holiday season during those three months. A six-month data sample can provide a more representative view of the social media activities of the BPD.

In regard to the sample collection of citizens’ comments, first, I collected the top thirty most popular citizens’ comments from each week’s most popular post during this six-month period to explore citizens’ activities on the BPD’s Weibo account. The “most popular posts” refer to the posts which received the greatest numbers of comments from citizens. The “most popular comments” means comments from citizens that remain at the top of the comment section, and they are ordered based on a combination of the number of likes and comments received from other people and the status of the commenter. The commenter’s status refers to whether the commenter is one of the account’s followers, a verified user, a Weibo VIP member, or a user who is actively using Weibo; according to Weibo’s comment ranking policy, such users’ comments are treated as more important than other comments from inactive users and remain on the first page in the comment section. The reason for selecting 30 most popular comments was that if someone wants to see the comments under a post, the comment section normally displays 30 comments on the first page once people have selected to see more comments. In addition, the popular comments that are displayed on the first page usually consist of more elaborated and better-written opinions compared to unpopular comments. Those popular comments indicate that many other readers also feel related to agree with the comment because people are more likely to hit likes or leave comments on the content they agree with (Masullo Chen et al., 2020). There are 26 weeks from January 1st to June 30th, 2018. The total number of
collected comments was 780 (26*30). The data was collected by using the Fireshot screen shot application to capture the picture of each individual post and the top 30 most popular comments under each post.

Regarding the studies of social media posts and comments in the Chinese context, the effect of censorship and Internet regulations should not be neglected. In order to minimize the effects of censorship, in particular, the deletion of citizens comments, I collected the social media posts and comments every day as they were posted over six months. In addition, the comments from verified government departments or government officials were excluded in the sample. Although there is no evidence found from prior studies (Bolsover & Howard, 2019; Luo & Harrison, 2021) that government organizations in China utilize bots or fake accounts to artificially boost interaction on their social media pages, each collected comment was double checked to make sure that it is not from a fake account based on the four criteria of detecting a fake account. The four criteria are: (1) that user name does not have multiple random numbers, (2) the account has more than 10 followers, (3) the account generates its own content rather than only retweeting from commercial or government accounts repeatedly, and (4) the account has interaction on its posts (Luo & Harrison, 2021). In terms of the well-known “50 cents” users mobilized by the Chinese government to disrupt social media discussions (G. King et al., 2017), Lu and Pan’s (2021) recent field research on three local Chinese social media propaganda offices indicated the government agencies do not use this strategy on their social media accounts and the manipulation of engagement and online information are forbidden by the government social media management guidelines.
**Content Analysis**

The first set of research questions examined the daily working routines of the BPD, the characteristics of the BPD’s Weibo posts, the potential target audiences, and the media engagement strategies used by the BPD. The coding schemes of content analysis were created from the literature review (Crump, 2011; DePaula et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2016; Mergel, 2013a) and refined for the sample data to categorize the content of posts on the Weibo account of the BPD. I then used One-Sample Chi Square tests to discover if there is a significant difference in posting frequency among coding categories.

There are different coding schemes used by previous research regarding coding government social media posts or police departments social media posts (Crump, 2011; DePaula et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2016; Mergel, 2013a). The majority of studies have implemented two levels of coding categories for their coding schemes. The first level of coding categories aligns with the framework originally initiated by Mergel (2013a). She has indicated that government social media interactions can be measured by one-way push, two-way pull, and networking which can fulfill the open government goals of transparency, participation, and collaboration.

The second level of coding categories was created as subcategories to analyze the specific data in this case study. For example, Huang and her colleagues (2016) have analyzed the Facebook posts from four municipal police agencies in the U.S. They have created crime, traffic, and announcement as the subcategories of push; tip, information, personnel, and appreciation as the subcategories of network; request as the subcategory of pull. Another study by DePaula et al. (2018) examined the Facebook posts of local governments in the U.S. and added impression management from the theory of public relation into the original three category model. Because
they have found that the U.S. local government devoted 45% posts to promote public relations or advance self-presentation especially favorable presentation.

Besides the main categories of push, pull and network from Mergel’s (2013a) typology, there are very few typologies that can be directly applied to the Chinese context. I identify any category which appeared prominent within my sample data set, whilst drawing upon some of the typologies from the existing literature.

**Coding Process**

In order to create a coding scheme, I did a pilot study and reviewed the total number of 965 posts from February and April to create the coding scheme. February is representative of a holiday month and April is regarded as a non-holiday month. I created three levels of coding schemes based on the pilot study. In this study, I applied two categories from Mergel’s (2013a) typology: pull and push for the first level coding scheme as well as created a new category called relationship building for this research. Different from other government organizations, it is more important for police department to build long-term trusting relationships with citizens (Nix et al., 2015; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). The second and third levels of coding schemes were created based upon topics found in the sample data. Later, another researcher and I used this coding scheme from the pilot study to code the whole data set. Some of the coding categories were merged or changed to fit the whole data sample based on our discussion and agreement.

Each post was only coded into one category for two reasons. First, the majority of the posts published by the BPD only focused on talking about one topic. For example, weather announcements normally include the highest and lowest temperature and wind information. In rare case, if a post happened to mention about another topic. That post will be coded based on the main focus of the content. Second, most posts of the BPD contain less than 140 Chinese
characters even though as a verified VIP account, it can extend 140 words limit to 2,000 words.

The short posts also limit the number of topics they want to talk about in one post.

**Table 1**

*Descriptions of the First Level Coding Schemes*

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Push</td>
<td>Any post related to information broadcasting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pull</td>
<td>Actively requesting information or interact with citizens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build</td>
<td>Any post related to network with other government department, have direct connection with citizens, or promote positive image to the public.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2**

*Descriptions of the Second Level Coding Schemes*

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Push</td>
<td><strong>Announcement:</strong> department related announcements; news related to weather, policy, holiday, traffic, crimes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Education:</strong> Educational related information (e.g., how to prevent financial scams, what to do when you encounter a financial scam, how to prevent fire at home, how to use a fire extinguisher, guidelines to do car maintenances).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Crisis management:</strong> instant update about crisis (e.g., knife slaughter in a shopping mall).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pull</td>
<td><strong>Asynchronous interaction:</strong> ask the public to provide information or opinions or participate online/offline events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Synchronous interaction:</strong> use live streaming technology to interact with citizens online and offline during holiday/events (e.g., ask citizens’ opinions about the Chinese New Year travel plan at the train station).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build</td>
<td><strong>Connecting with citizens:</strong> help citizens deal with daily life issues (e.g., visit senior citizens living alone frequently).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Networking with other agencies:</strong> repost other government agencies content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Positive image:</strong> content mainly focus on promoting positive image of police officers or police department.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Push | Announcement | Weather: information related to weather conditions, such as everyday weather forecast.  
**Crime/Patrol report:** information related to a crime incident, frontline policing activities, or follow-up.  
**Real-time traffic condition:** information related to road conditions, road construction alerts.  
**Holiday/event/conference:** celebration of holidays, events or conferences.  
**Policy/law/service:** any policy, public service, or law related information.  

**Education** | **Fire/safety education:** fire or safety prevention related guidelines or education (e.g., police officers went to elementary school to teach students to prevent fire; Nine tips for self-defense).  
**Offline/ online crime prevention:** scam prevention knowledge (e.g., When you get a phone call talking about your bank information, you would better go to your bank in person to get a confirmation).  
**Traffic rules/ car related education:** guidelines to walk, drive, or travel safely (e.g., Nine things you should keep in mind before you cross an intersection; you should use parking handbrake if you park on a slope, otherwise, your car will slip away just like this car in the video).  
**Children safety:** information related to children safety such as children lost prevention or traffic accident prevention (e.g., a police self-made video demonstrates how parents can teach children to find a police officer nearby if they are lost).  
**Positive energy:** information not related to police department but mainly related to positive emotions and finding joy in daily life (e.g., a happy MV; an inspirational quote; a happy dinner with family members).  

| Pull | Asynchronous interaction | **Request:** ask the public to provide information such as reporting crimes, voting for the best police officer, recruiting offline event participation, seeking for input for new policies.  

| Synchronous interaction | **Live streaming:** interacting with the offline and online public simultaneously. |
### Relationship Building

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Building relationship with citizens</th>
<th>Help citizens: help citizens deal with their daily life or emergency issues (e.g. a police officer drives a student who is late for his college entrance exam to the test site).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Networking with other agencies</td>
<td>Network with other government agencies: mainly talk about other police departments, government agencies, or news outlets (e.g. Congrats Shanghai police department crack down on crime).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive image</td>
<td>Favorable self-presentation: promote positive images among the public (e.g. death numbers of police officer; work hard during snowstorm; Honoring police; receiving thank you notes from individual citizens).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the process of coding the content of posts, I also found some posts appear to have specific target audiences instead of applying to the general public. For example, police officers collaborated with the Beijing fire department and filmed an educational video about how to prevent car fire, what you should do when your car is on fire, and how to do car maintenance by yourself. It is obvious that the targeted audience is car owners. There is limited research that has examined whether government social media posts are customized for different stakeholder groups. Analyzing the posts from the perspective of targeted audiences might offer us more insight on how government social media can attract more citizens engagement. Different from posts categorized by different topics, posts targeted to a particular group of audience consist of many different topics that they are all potentially of interest to this group. For example, there are educational topics and traffic related topics all talking about cars that would be of interest to car owners. In addition, the BPD specifically indicates their targeted audience by saying caution! Parents, new car owner, or senior citizens or using hashtags in many posts. The coding scheme of targeted audiences’ groups is showed in Table 4.
Table 4
Descriptions of Targeted Audiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targeted audiences</th>
<th>Everyone in general: not directly mention any specific audience group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New urban migrants: the main theme of the post specifically related to new migrants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Car owner/Drivers: the main theme of the post specifically related to car owners or drivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Single/Female: the main theme of the post specifically related to single citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents: the main theme of the post specifically related to parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elder citizens or elder citizens’ children: the main theme of the post specifically related to elder citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Criminal or potential criminal: warning messages related to crim prevention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 1c examines what media type the BPD uses to engage with citizens and citizens’ interaction rate. The existing literature listed video, photo, text, and link as coding categories. If there is text with photos, it is coded as photo (Bonsón et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2016). However, some posts from the BPD include multiple media types. I added more coding categories to my study. Following the prior research, I measured an interaction rate in terms of number of likes, shares, and comments with media types. As Bonsón and Ratkai (2013) and Huang et al. (2016) suggested, an interaction rate equals the mean of likes per post per 1000 fans plus the mean of comments per post per 1000 fans, and plus the mean of shares per post per 1000 fans.

\[
\text{Mean of likes} = \frac{\text{total number of likes}}{\text{total number of posts}}
\]

\[
\text{Mean of comments} = \frac{\text{total number of comments}}{\text{total number of posts}}
\]

\[
\text{Mean of shares} = \frac{\text{total number of shares}}{\text{total number of posts}}
\]
Interaction Rate of Likes (Mean of likes per post per 1000 fans) = (1000*Mean of likes)/the total number of fans

Interaction Rate of comments (Mean of comments per post per 1000 fans) = (1000*Mean of comments)/the total number of fans

Interaction Rate of shares (Mean of shares per post per 1000 fans) = (1000*Mean of shares)/the total number of fans

Total Interaction Rate = Interaction Rate of likes + Interaction Rate of comments + Interaction Rate of shares

A Kruskal-Wallis test is used to test for possible rank differences between interaction rates of each media type. Because the data in this study is not normally distributed and different media type might have different distribution. According to McDonald (2009), the Kruskal-Wallis test is a non-parametric test that is suitable to perform on ranked data.

Table 5

Descriptions of Media Strategies

| Media strategies | Video: self-made videos/ media outlet videos/ cctv videos | Link: web link | Photo: text in photo/self-made photo/ photo from other sources | Text: the post only has plain text | Emoji+text: the post contains emoji and text |

Inter-coder Reliability

To establish intercoder reliability, two coders who can speak fluent Chinese and English were trained to understand the coding rules. They worked independently and coded a 10% random selection of post content, targeted audiences and media types of the total sample. Intercoder reliability is calculated using Krippendorff’s alpha. Krippendorff’s alpha, which
measures observed and expected disagreement, is more reliable compared with Scott’s, Cohen’s, and Fleiss’ statistics which measure observed and expected agreement. It can be used in varying conditions such as any numbers of coders, different types of variables, or incomplete data sample (Joyce, 2013; Krippendorff, 2007). Once the coding scheme was finalized, two coders labeled the sample posts into the first level of coding scheme. In terms of the disagreement, I asked a third coder to code the posts which the first two coders had disagreed and used the “majority rule” to solve the disagreement. Then, two coders code the posts into the second level using the same strategy. In the second level coding scheme, only the categories of announcement and education have third level coding scheme. All reliability coefficients were deemed sufficiently strong to be acceptable. The Tables of results of intercoder reliability for each level are as follows.

**Table 6**  
*The Intercoder Reliability Result of the First-level Coding Categories.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st level coding scheme</th>
<th>Krippendorff’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Push</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pull</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Building</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7**  
*The Intercoder Reliability Result of the Second-level Coding Categories.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2nd level coding scheme</th>
<th>Krippendorff’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Announcement</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis management</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asynchronous interaction</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synchronous interaction</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivating relationships with citizens</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking with other agencies</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive image</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8

*The Intercoder Reliability Result of the Third-level Coding Categories*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Krippendorff’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime/patrol report</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiday/event/conference</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy/law/service</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive energy</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire/safety education</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offline/online crime prevention</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic rules/car related education</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children safety</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9

*The Intercoder Reliability Result of Target Audiences*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Audiences</th>
<th>Krippendorff’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercoder reliability</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10

*The Intercoder Reliability Result of Media Types*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Types</th>
<th>Krippendorff’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercoder reliability</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Thematic Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis**

The second set of research questions (RQ2) mainly focused on investigating citizens’ response characteristics and behaviors on the Weibo account of the BPD. Beyond counting the number of likes and shares, comments are a better way to indicate that Weibo users (you do not need to be a follower to comment) are making efforts to express their thoughts to engage with the BPD or with other Weibo users. More comments generated by users indicates a higher level of citizens’ willingness to contribute to the original content posted by government agencies.
(Halpern & Katz, 2012). For every post and citizens’ comments discussed in the results and discussion section, the Chinese characters were translated into English with extended explanation if it is necessary by one researcher and proofread by another researcher who are fluent in Chinese and English to avoid misinterpretation.

In order to answer my Research Question 2a, which asked what topics that citizens are interested in engaging with, I collected the twenty-six most popular posts from each week during a six-month time period. First, I checked which topic categories those posts originally belong to based on the results of the first research question as all of posts were organized into different categories. In the second step, I examined specific content and visual features in each topic in order to interpret why those topics attract more comments, taking into account the context of cultural background, political system, and technological opportunities or restrictions.

Research Question 2b explored the themes that characterize citizens’ comments on the Weibo account of the BPD. Thematic analysis was used to answer RQ2b. Unlike the previous research which mostly used quantitative content analysis to examine citizens’ comments, this study looks at more nuanced characteristics of comments by analyzing both the content and contextual information of the text. As mentioned on page 35, Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed a six-step guide to conduct thematic analysis.

Another researcher and I followed those steps. In the first step, we read the sample comments several times to familiarize ourselves with the data and jotted down initial impressions and ideas for meaningful extracts. For example, in the first step, we noticed that lots of people expressed their personal emotions and stories on the posted content and usually those comments attracted lots of discussion. This initial finding aligns with Yang and Jiang’s (2015) research that Chinese citizens’ online political expression is not always restricted to opposition or political
related topic. This type of comment can be seen as connective actions. Another researcher and I discussed our initial ideas of codes at the end of the first step. In the second step, we started to organize our data in a systematic way. In this step, we used an inductive approach to develop the initial codes and worked on the sample data separately. Based on our initial discussions of codes, each of us developed codes for the whole data sample respectively. Then, we compared, discussed, and modified our codes of the data together. In the third step, we started to search for themes that were meaningful or interesting for our research question and data. A theme is not about quantifying the numbers of codes but is mainly determined by its significance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, we found codes that are relevant to the findings in previous literature or criticisms that we were looking for to answer research questions. At the end of this step, all of the codes were organized into broader themes that were relevant to this study. If we found that one comment can fit into more than one theme, we put this comment into the primary theme that it reflected. In the fourth step, we reviewed the themes we developed and the associated comments under each theme. In this step, we needed to make sure that there were no overlap themes, and that the data supported the themes. For example, we created two themes for the expression and interaction related comments at first. One theme was about commentors seeking interaction with other users and the other one was about commentors trying to get responses from the BPD. But we felt that there was an overlap between two themes because both types of comments were looking for interaction from others and sometimes, commentors received replies from both sides. Therefore, we merged these two themes into one theme that is “Commenting for Personal Expression and Interaction.” In the fifth step, we discussed what each theme was about and how they related to this study. In the last step, I wrote down the results, discussions of the thematic analysis for this dissertation.
The critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to analyze how criticism was expressed on the Weibo account of the BPD for research question 2c. According to Guo (2019), social media research through the CDA approach tends to be context specific rather than universal. This CDA study was inspired by previous CDA research of online discourse in the Chinese context (Guo, 2019), as well as in other social contexts such as Nigeria (Chiluwa, 2012) and the Middle East (Shirazi, 2013), and then followed Fairclough’s (1995) three steps of CDA approach to examine citizens’ criticism in the Chinese context. As mentioned earlier on page 35, in Fairclough’s (1995) three-step approach of CDA, the first step is to describe the text, followed by the interpretation of the text which focuses on explaining the context of the text and how the text is produced and received by people. At the last step, researchers need to identify and explain the social impact of the text.

In my study, I provided the descriptions of the sampled criticism and examined what phrases and rhetorical techniques were used in these examples first. For example, the construction of identity is a main area of interest for CDA (KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2017). In the sample data, I noticed that Chinese citizens like to use “uncle police” to address the BPD and many of them position themselves in a junior/child position when they voiced criticisms. I also found that rhetorical questions were used a lot in these collected criticisms. In the second step, I interpreted the social or historical context of the text. As CDA is primarily concerned with the relationship between language and the hegemonic power, ideology, and identity, I focused on presenting the past and present imposed government ideology and the online public sphere involvement of the government. For example, the title of “uncle police” was not originally invented and used by citizens. This title was historically promoted by the government and many mainstream media. It is an imposed ideology to indicate that police officers are like elder uncles
in the family who have right to guide and protect children. Finally, I discussed the implication and impact that the criticism expressed by citizens might have for the Chinese society and democratic process.

Chapter 4 Results and Discussions

The Results of Content Analysis

The content analysis in this section presents an overview of the use of Weibo by the BPD on a daily basis, which answers RQ1a, RQ1b, RQ1c. RQ1a asked what topics were posted by BPD on a daily basis and how the posts were distributed throughout the day. RQ1b explored whether the posts appear to target different groups of stakeholders and who are the target audiences. RQ1c examined what media types that the BPD used to engage with the public and which media type elicited the highest engagement level.

Post Frequencies and Time Distributions

Table 1 provides a summary of the number of followers, the total number of posts, the average number of posts per day, the number of shares, comments, and likes in the data sample. The BPD, which has 12,530,443 followers, posted a total of 2,883 messages with 250,011 shares, 225,473 comments, and 892,337 likes over the first six months in 2018. Regarding the frequency of posts per day, the BPD posted an average 16 times per day ($SD = 3.34$). In terms of holiday season and non-holiday season, Table 1 shows that the BPD posted more frequently in months that have more holidays or political events than regular months. The Mann-Whitney U test indicated that the post frequency in holiday season and non-holiday season differed significantly ($U = 2331.50, p = .00$).

Figure 2 shows the time distribution of posts throughout the day over the six months. The Weibo account administrators of the BPD posted more frequently every hour from 8:00 am to
9:00 pm than other hours. The posts were fewer around 1:00 pm and 2:00 pm. There were much fewer posts between 9:00 pm and 7:00 am. Figure 3 and Figure 4 demonstrate the time distributions of posts on holiday months and non-holiday months respectively. During holiday months, the BPD posted more frequently at times between 7:00 am to 9:00 pm and even at midnight around 12:00 am. There were very few posts made at midnight during non-holiday months. There is no significant difference in posting time between holiday months and non-holiday months.

Table 1

An overview of the Beijing police department Weibo account from January to June in 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># Followers</th>
<th># Posts</th>
<th># Average post/day</th>
<th># Shares</th>
<th># Comments</th>
<th># Likes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12,530,443</td>
<td>2,883</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>250,011</td>
<td>225,473</td>
<td>892,337</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12

Daily post frequencies on holiday season of Jan, February, March and non-holiday season of April, May, June

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Months</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Sum</th>
<th>Mean/Day</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan, Feb, Mar</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1,558</td>
<td>17.12</td>
<td>3.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr, May, Jun</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1,325</td>
<td>14.72</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Mann-Whitney U test is significant ($U = 2331.50, p = .00$).
Figure 2

*Post Time Distributions Over Six-months*

![Graph showing post time distributions from January to June.](image)

Figure 3

*Post Time Distributions Over January, February, and March*

![Graph showing post time distributions over January, February, and March.](image)
Post Frequencies of Topics on the BPD

As illustrated in Table 13, regarding the post frequency of the first level of post types, the majority were “push”, with 62.2% of the total posts about pushing out information to followers, followed by “relationship building” (24.8%) and “pull” messages (13%). This result confirms the finding of previous studies that the government agencies mostly use social media to push out information to citizens. A one-sample chi-square test indicates that the frequencies of three coding categories in level 1 varied significantly ($X^2(2) = 1143.57, p = .00$).

Table 13

Post Frequencies of Topics in Level 1 over the Six-month

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Push</td>
<td>1794</td>
<td>62.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship building</td>
<td>715</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pull</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. One-sample chi-square test is significant ($X^2(2) = 1143.57, p = .00$)*

Table 14 presents the post frequencies of topics in level 2. The messages that contain “announcements” (36.3%) and that focus on “education” (25.6%) have the highest and second
highest post frequency than other topics. Messages that contain “Positive image” have the third highest post frequency (13.5%). Under the first level of pull, “asynchronous interaction” (12.7%) posts are about twice more frequent than “synchronous interaction” posts (0.6%). The number of posts about “cultivating relationship” (5.6%) with citizens is similar to the number of posts about “networking with other agencies” (5.4%). The “Crisis management” topic has the lowest post frequency (0.3%). A one-sample chi-square test suggests that there are significant differences across the distributions of topics in level 2 ($X^2(7) = 2598.37$, $p = .00$).

**Table 14**

*Post Frequencies of Topics in Level 2 over the Six-month*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Push</td>
<td>Announcement</td>
<td>1047</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Push</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>737</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship building</td>
<td>Positive image</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pull</td>
<td>Asynchronous interaction</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship building</td>
<td>Cultivating relationship with citizens</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship building</td>
<td>Networking with other agencies</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pull</td>
<td>Synchronous interaction</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Push</td>
<td>Crisis management</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* One-sample chi-square test is significant ($X^2(7) = 2598.37$, $p = .00$)

The level 3 is the subcategories of “announcement” and “education” from the level 2. As demonstrated in the Table 15, “crime/patrol report” is the most frequently posted content type (29.7%) in level 3 under the category of announcement of level 2, followed by “offline/online crime prevention” (15.2%); “traffic rules/car related education” (12.2%); and “fire/safety education” (9.3%) which are all under the category of education of level 2. The topic of “weather” has similar post frequency with “holiday/event/conference” (8.2%). The least frequent post content types are “real-time traffic condition” (3.9%); “policy/law/service” (4.0%);
“positive energy” (4.4%); and “children safety” (4.5%). A one-sample chi-square test shows that the frequencies of content types in level 3 are significantly different ($X^2(9) = 1001.55, p=.00$).

Table 15

Post Frequencies of Topics in Level 3 over the Six-month

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Announcement</td>
<td>Crime/patrol report</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Offline/online crime prevention</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Traffic rules/car related education</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Fire/safety education</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announcement</td>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announcement</td>
<td>Holiday/event/conference</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Children safety</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Positive energy</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announcement</td>
<td>Policy/law/service</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announcement</td>
<td>Real-time traffic condition</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. One-sample chi-square test is significant ($X^2(9) = 1001.55, p=.00$)

Post Frequencies of Target Audiences

Table 16 presents an overview of customized posts for different target audiences by the BPD over the 6-month period. The majority of posts target “everyone in general” (59.7%). It is followed by “criminal/potential criminal” (16.4%); “car owner/driver” (11.8%); “parent” (5.5%); and migrant (4.0%). The “senior citizen/their children” (1.7%) and “apartment owner” (0.9%) are the least, the latter was only mentioned 25 times among 2883 posts. A one-sample chi-square test indicates there are significant differences between target audiences ($X^2(6) =8698.47, p=.00$).
Table 16

The Frequencies of Target Audiences over the Six-month

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target audiences</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everyone in general</td>
<td>1722</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal/potential criminal</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car owner/driver</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior citizen/their children</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apartment owner</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. One-sample chi-square test is significant \(X^2(6) = 8698.47, p = .00\)

The Engagement Strategies and Rate

Research question 1c asks what media type the BPD used and which type of media received more interactions than others. As regards media types used by the BPD, the most used media type was video, with nearly 50% of the total posts containing video, followed by photo (22.6%), link (18.7%), emoji and text (10.3%). Only 0.7% of the posts are pure text. This result is different from prior research that government agencies mostly post with links or photos. A one-sample chi-square test showed that the five media types have significantly different distributions \(X^2(4) = 1804.59, p = .00\).

Table 17

The Frequencies of Media Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Types</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>1379</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo</td>
<td>651</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emoji and text</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. One-sample chi-square test is significant \(X^2(4) = 1804.59, p = .00\)

In terms of the interaction rate, previous studies have measured an interaction rate based on the sum of the mean of likes, the mean of comments, and the mean of shares per post by every
1,000 followers (Bonsón et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2016). I used the same technique to analyze the average number of likes, shares, comments for different media types and the corresponding interaction rates.

The results shown in Table 18 demonstrate that photo posts had an average of more likes, shares, and comments across all media types. The Kruskal-Wallis test was significant ($\chi^2(4) = 326.382, p=.00$). Post-hoc pairwise comparisons indicate that the numbers of shares, likes, and comments of photo posts are significantly different ($p=.00$) than video posts, text posts, emoji and text posts, and link posts. It means that photo posts attracted more overall engagements than these posts (Statistics are in the Appendix 2, Table 1 and Table 2).

Taking the number of followers into consideration of interaction rate, Table 19 shown that photos also attracted more user interactions per 1000 followers. I performed a Kruskal-Wallis test and post-hoc pairwise comparison to examine if specific media types received more interactions than others. The results of Kruskal-Wallis test and post-hoc pairwise comparison suggest that the five different media types received user interactions significantly different than one another ($p=.00$) and the photo type attracted significantly more user interactions that other media types.

Photo > Video > Link > Emoji and Text > Text
Table 18

The Means of Likes, Shares, Comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media types</th>
<th>Likes</th>
<th>Shares</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>Sum of frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo</td>
<td>881</td>
<td>10750.96</td>
<td>573,666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>1585.67</td>
<td>216,349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>835.22</td>
<td>62,099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emoji and text</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>846.46</td>
<td>38,636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>217.34</td>
<td>1,587</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 19

The Total Interaction Rates by Media Types per 1000 Followers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media types</th>
<th>Likes/Rate</th>
<th>Shares/Rate</th>
<th>Comments/Rate</th>
<th>Total interaction rate/1000 followers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Photo</td>
<td>0.070</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emoji and text</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussions of Content Analysis

The previous section examined the following research questions: RQ1a: what content is posted by the BPD on a daily basis on its Weibo account; how the posts are distributed throughout the day; RQ1b: whether the content of the posts target different groups of citizens; and RQ1c: what media types they use to engage with followers.

The analysis of post time, frequency and distribution indicated that the administrators of the posted content almost nonstop from 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. and even at midnight during the holiday season. This result is consistent with government administrative requirements. In April
2016, the Chinese president, Jinping Xi, stated that government organizations and officials must adopt social media platforms as part of their administration duties and listen to people’s voices on social media (Xi, 2016). In the same year, the Office of the State Council issued guidelines that every government department must adopt social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat; the government must post updated content on social media; and government officials should increase both engagement with citizens and response rates to posts. Besides that, the social media engagement of governments are ranked against each other and the ranking list is made public every year (Office of the State Council, 2016). The finding also corroborates Lu and Pan’s (2021) study that Chinese government social media administrators work long hours to complete visibility and engagement on social media.

The content analysis of the BPD’s Weibo posts showed that over 60% of content is information dissemination, which is in line with previous research that the government mainly uses social media to post information. In contrast to social media content of other countries’ police departments, the educational information provided by the BPD is unique to the Chinese context. The BPD not only posted crime-related and departmental announcements, but also created a large amount of educational content on its Weibo account. For example, it instructed citizens on how to keep their children safe in public, prevent online and offline crime, and prevent fire. It even taught citizens how to read traffic signs and take care of their cars. This reflects how the BPD acts as a both law enforcement agency and educator, especially for city’s newcomers. In another study, Gu and her colleagues (2020) found that Chinese municipal governments’ Weibo accounts also offer educational knowledge about public values and behavioral norms to citizens.
It is worth noting that, in addition to crime and safety related information and education, the BPD also broadcasted “positive energy” content, which is not directly related to the police department. This is a brand-new ideological intervention promoted by Xi’s administration. “Positive energy” was originally created as a hashtag to advertise the 2012 London Olympic torch relay on Weibo. In the same year, a Chinese publisher translated an English self-help book, retitling it from *Rip it up to Positive energy*. From then, “positive energy” became a popular social media catchphrase, meaning “you are happy when you act as if you are happy” (Z. Chen & Wang, 2019, p. 207). Citizens use the phrase to encourage themselves to stay positive and cherish happiness in life. The government quickly adopted the phrase and used it to promote its ideological propaganda, which implies that good netizens only spread good information, and “good” is defined by government authorities (Zhang, 2016). Several scholars have warned that “positive energy” is a new type of ideological propaganda that the Xi administration has been promoting on the internet, including in the social media sphere (Z. Chen & Wang, 2019; P. Yang & Tang, 2018). Instead of using authoritarian slogans, the Chinese government has started using popular online catchphrases for political purposes, and it has been successful so far. As one of the government departments, the BPD helps promote this new ideological propaganda.

In terms of collecting information from citizens, other than requesting it through social media posts (as other countries’ governments do), the BPD experimented with a trending social media function, livestreaming, to interact with citizens online and offline. For example, police officers would go to a train station to patrol and ask citizens about their travel plans during Chinese New Year. While they were at the train station, they would use Weibo account to live stream their interactions with citizens and talk about how they plan to ensure everyone has a safe travel. During the live stream, they would also answer questions from people who are watching
online. The spontaneous real-time interactions on livestreaming video usually attracted thousands of people to watch. This demonstrates that the BPD made an effort to interact with citizens both online and offline.

The BPD also focused on building trusting, long-term relationships with citizens. For instance, there were posts about police officers who visited senior citizens regularly. This shows that the BPD attempted to make their daily work transparent on its Weibo account. Based on the Chinese police law passed in 1995, the police officers are required to take on the role of social service workers which “includes specifically dispute resolution, information provision, lost and found, human assistance for citizens and emergency aid” (X. Wang & Wong, 2012, p. 36).

With regard to targeting stakeholders, my study found that 40% of the BPD’s Weibo posts were customized to different groups of citizens. For instance, posts that mentioned potential criminals used phrases such as “watch out, do not commit crimes, we are watching you through surveillance cameras.” Car owners, parents, migrants, and senior citizens or their children were also mentioned frequently in posts. It is apparent that the BPD created original, customized content to engage with different groups of citizens. These groups were targeted because they might either need more social knowledge or be more vulnerable to crime. As discussed previously, two of the major jobs of the police officers in China are providing educational content to citizens and preventing crimes. On social media, the BPD created lots of customized educational content to those groups. First, a large number of posts were customized to car owners. Because, in Beijing, the traffic is busy and traffic rules are complex, it is important for car owners to receive most updated information from the police department. Providing instant traffic information could also increase engagement on its account. In addition, the vehicle purchases in Beijing has been increasing dramatically with an annual growth rate of
13 percent (J. Yang et al., 2014) and there are 5.97 million locally registered cars plus more than 700,000 non local registered cars in use in the city by 2018 (Du, 2018). With so many new car owners, it is no surprise that the BPD disseminated information about car care and car safety guide to citizens. The possible reason to target parents is that child safety is a concerning social issue in China. The majority posts targeting parents were about preventions of child maltreatment/abuse and child trafficking. The awareness of child maltreatment/abuse is low in China and 54.9% child younger than 18 in China have suffered physical/verbal/sexual abuse and 26% of them have been neglected (X. Fang et al., 2015). The parent-to-child maltreatment/abuse is even 1.5 times more prevalent among migrants (Gao et al., 2017). It is crucial for police department in China to educate citizens about what behaviors are child maltreatment/abuse.

Child abduction is another serious social problem and about 70,000 children are kidnapped each year (Custer, 2011). Finding missing children is always a year-round trending topic on Weibo. The customized content not only increases people’s awareness of child abduction prevent but also easily attracts people’s attention. In regard to the targeting to migrants, the BPD has responsibilities to ensure that migrants adapt to the city’s life and comply with the law. The population of migrants in Beijing is over 8 million and accounted for 37.2% of the total population (Liu et al., 2020). Not surprisingly, many posts were specially created for migrants.

Last, the reason to customize content to senior citizens/their adult children might be that senior citizens are more likely to be targeted by financial scams. Educating them to recognize common financial scams are essential for crime prevention.

Regarding the media types used by the BPD, the results are consistent with previous studies, which found that photo posts elicit the highest level of interaction, regardless of the number of photo posts on a government social media account. The most surprising finding was
that, although nearly half the posts contained video (47.8%), they did not attract more interactions than photo posts. One reason for this might be that many people use their mobile phones to read content on social media, and videos are longer and use more data to stream. In addition, the video might not match the content of the post very well. Chen et al. (2020) pointed out that if the media richness does not match the content of the post, rich media might reduce the engagement rate.

The findings uncover the dilemma of the BPD in trying to juggle the promotion of national ideological propaganda, efforts to experiment with engagement strategies, and building trusting relationships with citizens. It reflects how the Chinese government has been following what might be seen as the self-contradictory propaganda guidelines made by the Xi’s administration. On the one hand, it encourages interactions between the government and citizens, saying that the government should increase satisfaction and trust by providing more convenient online services and responding to citizens in a timely fashion. On the other hand, the government should also promote ideological propaganda. The BPD has adopted new and creative strategies such as creating customized content, hosting livestreaming events, and using multimedia in the post to balance the tension between this control and expression.

**Analysis and Discussion of Citizens’ Comments and Commenting Behaviors**

The sections below analyzed the characteristics of citizens’ comments and the observations on citizens’ commenting behaviors, answering RQ2a, RQ2b, and RQ2c. RQ2a asked what topics are discussed in the most commented-on posts generated by the BPD in each of 26 weeks and the reasons why those posts attracted more comments. RQ2b explored the themes that characterized citizens’ comments. RQ2c investigated how citizens expressed criticism toward the BPD.
Analysis of the Most Commented-On Posts

The following analysis answers RQ2a. To answer this research question, I analyzed the characteristics of the most commented-on posts and observed the prominent themes of the corresponding comments in each of 26 weeks to explore citizens’ commenting preferences. First, I found the coding topics to which those posts belonged in the previous content analysis section. Then, I compared the topics that attracted the greatest number of comments from citizens with the frequency of topics that were posted by the BPD to gain more insights on those most commented-on posts. Finally, to answer why those topics elicited more comments from citizens, I analyzed the content of each post and other characteristics such as the observation of the prominent themes from the top 30 popular comments under each post.

Table 20 indicates what coding categories/topics those most commented-on posts originally belonged to and the numbers of comments. The results show that the topics that attracted the greatest number of comments from citizens do not match the frequencies of the posts’ topics, as is shown previously in Tables 14 and 15. “Positive image” only accounted for 13.5% of all posts (see Table 14), while it attracted the greatest number of comments (see Table 20). Table 20 also indicates that the topic of “positive energy” elicited the second-greatest number of comments; however, “positive energy” only accounted for 4.4% of all posts (see Table 15). Citizens also like to comment on topics related to “asynchronous interaction,” which ranked third regarding the number of comments. Because the BPD used this type of posts to request citizens’ input and the comments are responding to the request for interaction. However, the post frequency of the topic was 12.7% (see Table 14). In general, Table 20 demonstrates that citizens were more interested in commenting on topics related to “pull” and “relationship
building,” even though the majority of posts were about “push” (62.2%), as is shown in Table 14.

Table 20

*The Most Popular Topics Commented by Citizens*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th># of Posts</th>
<th># of Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Push</td>
<td>Announcement</td>
<td>Crime/patrol report</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7,338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Holiday/event/conference</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Offline/online crime prevention</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3,562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fire/safety education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Child safety</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Traffic rules/car related</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive energy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14,670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis management</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9,769</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pull</td>
<td>Asynchronous interaction</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16,711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Positive image</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40,372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building</td>
<td>Network with other</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>department</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building relationship</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>with citizens</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aside from looking at the topics of the most commented-on posts, I analyzed the characteristics of each most commented-on post and observed the prominent themes of the top 30 popular comments to further explore why these posts elicited more comments from citizens.

Among the most commented-on posts, there are six unique characteristics contributing to the number of comments received from citizens: timing of the posts, controversial positive image promotion, content related to an emergent incident or trending topic on Weibo, interactive content, following up on citizens’ previous requests, and biased or false information.
Timing of the Posts. The most interesting finding is that one specific post attracted more comments than others in that week not because the content was more appealing to citizens but rather due to the timing of the post matching the issue that was most cared about and heavily discussed by citizens during that period. In addition, half of the most commented-on posts were posted on Friday or the weekend. This suggests that citizens might have more time to read the posts from the BPD carefully and generate as well as post their own thoughts on them on those days.

Based on my observations, when a criminal scandal or social issue happened and citizens would like to request that the BPD investigate the case or to receive more information about it, people tend to hijack one of the most recent posts that do not have important content to discuss, such as posts related to “positive image” or “holidays.” Under this type of post, the comments are totally irrelevant to the content. As mentioned previously in Table 20, nine posts of a “positive image” attracted the greatest number of comments. However, the comments under four of these positive image promotion posts did not discuss the content of the post at all.

Because citizens cannot create their own topic on the BPD’s Weibo account, they would go to the BPD’s Weibo account and hijack the comment section of one of the recent posts and usually the post content is not important to them. In this case, the discussion topic in the comment section diverged to the issues that citizens wanted to talk about. The comments were all about an issue that citizens cared about, and they demanded that the BPD investigate it or release more information about it. For example, on January 4, the BPD published a post to praise role model police officers and other professionals of the year, as shown below. But the majority of the popular comments under this post were about a famous rapper who had been involved in a drug abuse scandal. Citizens asked the BPD to investigate this issue and discussed the details of
the scandal rather than discussing any content about this post, as shown in randomly selected popular comments from the first page of the post below.

**Figure 5**

*Screenshot of Post Published on January 4th, 2018.*

Translation: Watch this short animated video and you will learn the stories of the role models of 2017 in Beijing within a few minutes. Please click this link: role models of Beijing Watch short animated video, learn the stories of role models of 2017 via @ Civil Beijing
Randomly selected comments under this post:

**Figure 6**

*Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 5*

Translation: *I report @ Red flower hip-hop member Pg_one was using marijuana [marijuana possession or smoking is illegal in China].*

**Figure 7**

*Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 5*

Translation: *Pggong [a Chinese rapper’s name] posted pictures of marijuana on Momo [a Chinese social networking app], you should investigate this because it can have a negative influence on teenagers and affect their perception of marijuana.*

**Figure 8**

*Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 5*

Translation: *I report PG ONE take prohibited drug.*
Translation: *Can you bring pg1 to do a drug test?*

*I am afraid that the person who is a hip-hop singer named Pg_one is taking drugs. Would you take care of it, big brother?*

**Controversial Positive Image Promotion Posts.** Besides citizens liking to hijack positive image promotion posts to discuss their own topics, the other reason that those posts attract more comments is that the content can be interpreted in different ways and become controversial topics for citizens to discuss. One example is that the BPD tried to promote its positive image by acknowledging a middle schooler who anonymously ordered five cups of coffee to be delivered to the police officers who were working hard at an intersection. Some citizens suggested that the police officers should not drink coffee given to them by an unknown person. They thought this was unprofessional behavior that could pose a risk to their safety or lead to corruption. A few people argued that it was a simple nice gesture from a teenager, and it should not be overinterpreted. Some citizens were interested in how the coffee was delivered to the police officers. Because delivery drivers are known for speeding and violating traffic rules in China, they usually try to avoid being spotted by the police officers working at a traffic intersection.
Figure 10

Screenshot of Post Published on April 7th, 2018.

Translation: (Thank you, classmate!) I thought we would not be as lucky as other police officers who received free food delivery from kind citizens. Surprisingly, this morning at Xidan
intersection, our police officers also received a very special delivery – five cups of coffee. The delivery receipt noted: “please send those coffees to police comrades, from a middle school student.” What? Who is this? Is this from the child of a colleague in our police station? The police officer called the coffee shop and learned that the coffee was indeed sent by a kind middle school student. Because he/she always crosses this interaction to school and saw those police officers are on duty all the time. He/she thought they worked very hard and ordered those five cups of coffee for them to warm up their body. You gave a cup of hot coffee in the cold wind. How could my heart not be warmed? Thank you, classmate!

Randomly selected comments under this post:

**Figure 11**

*Screenshot of Comment Under the Post in Figure 10*

Translation: It looks like a warmhearted gesture. But for police officers who are on duty, it is risky to drink coffee from unsafe sources. This kind of “warmhearted” gesture should be avoided.

**Figure 12**

*Screenshot of Comment Under the Post in Figure 10*

Translation: I’m speechless. Devil’s advocates are everywhere. It is obviously a warmhearted gesture. They insisted to overinterpret it.
Figure 13

Screenshot of Comment Under the Post in Figure 10

Translation: Did the delivery man send the coffee to the police officers by scooters?

Figure 14

Screenshot of Comment Under the Post in Figure 10

Translation: The police should follow the disciplines of The Three Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention. Otherwise, everyone can send gift to government officials. It is hard to distinguish between corruption and warm gestures.

Figure 15

Screenshot of Comment Under the Post in Figure 10

Translation: I also think that police officers should not drink beverage from citizens and should also not accept anything from citizens. Police officers should be role models. Many corruptions started from accepting small things.

Content Related to Trending Topics on Weibo. Once in a while, the BPD would select the inspiring, funny, or happy-ending stories on Weibo’s trending list and repost them on its Weibo account with its own interpretation. This type of post usually evoked many comments from citizens. In the previous section, Table 20 shows that the posts of positive energy attracted
the second-greatest number of comments. Sometimes the content was not about crime, safety, or the police department at all, and this type of post usually fell into the category of “positive energy,” which is all about positive emotions, inspirational stories, or finding joy in daily life. For example, one of the most commented-on posts was about how a dog owner found her lost dog through a lost pet poster with a simple hand-painted picture. This poster had been already viral on Weibo for a while and attracted thousands of reposts and discussions before the BPD posted it on its account. People were helping to look for this dog and laughing at the bad hand-painted picture. Under this post, people continued to make comments on the hand-painted dog. A few people tagged their friends to come to look at the post to laugh together.
Figure 16

Screenshot of Post Published on January 28th, 2018.
Figure 17

Screenshot of Second Picture in the Post Published on January 28th, 2018.

Translation: She drew her dog like this. I cannot believe that she found her dog based on this...

Picture 1: Lost Dog: I lost my dog at the apartment complex Yijiangcheng E3. It is a small black toy poodle and weighs about 3.5 pounds. The dog was wearing a jacket with a yellow hood when it went missing. The dog needs to get regular medical injections because it is sick. If you saw or found the dog, please contact me: xx. I really appreciate it! The dog roughly looks like this: lost pet poster; Picture 2: the dog wearing a jacket with a yellow hood was found.

Randomly selected comments under this post:

Figure 18

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 16

Translation: Am I the only who thinks that the drawing really looks like her dog?
Figure 19

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 16

Translation: @ another user. Dog: “To be honest with you, when I saw this painting of me, I do not want to come back.”

Figure 20

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 16

Translation: The hand-painted portrait indeed looks like her dog. It contains all the distinguishing characteristics of the dog. The part with the hair looks very funny.

Figure 21

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 16

Translation: @another user. Here is the follow-up story of the lost dog. Hahaha.

Figure 22

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 16

Translation: I predict that this post will go viral. I commented to mark a space for myself.
**Interactive Content.** Citizens also like to comment on posts where they have opportunities to interact with police officers directly. This type of post usually fell into the asynchronous interaction category. Although interactive posts accounted for the smallest percentage of the total posts (13%), they drew a great number of comments from citizens. For instance, on January 31, there was a supermoon occurring that night. The BPD posted that police officers were patrolling Dawang Street and asked citizens to call 110 if they saw something. 110 is the standard emergency telephone number for police officers specifically. Unlike 911, which is for all kinds of emergency situations, 110 is only to be used when one needs urgent help from the police. People who were watching the supermoon around that area during that night chatted with the police officers who were patrolling under that post, because right after this post, the police officers who were patrolling retweeted this post to let citizens know that they were in charge of the BPD account and reading people’s comments for emergency crime reports. A few comments complained that the police dispatch time after they called the police was too long. The majority of people were making jokes and talking about the supermoon with the police officers. A few other comments addressed the commenters’ own issues and their hope that police officers would see them.
Figure 23.

Screenshot of Post Published on January 31st, 2018.

Translation: If you see something, please call 110 directly. Location tag: Beijing, Dawang Street.

Picture: a police car and a moon.
Randomly selected comments under this post:

**Figure 24**

*Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 23*

Translation: I called the police. The dispatch time is very long. Replied by @ the BPD: The road is full of people who are watching the lunar eclipse. Please be patient and calm, we will be right there!

**Figure 25**

*Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 23*

Translation: Is this 110? My moon is stolen by someone.

**Figure 26**

*Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 23*

Translation: I think you played Legend of the Moon too much. Uncle police.

*Note:* Legend of the Moon is a popular video game in China. “Uncle Police” is a popular nickname for police officers in China. It is originally from a well-known nursery rhyme to describe the close relationship between children and police officers who were protecting them from traffic after school.
Figure 27

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 23

Translation: I am going to call the police. The smog is severe here and I cannot see anything.

Figure 28

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 23

Translation: I really admire police officers. Admire, appreciate. But my child’s father has a criminal record, which will prohibit my kid from joining the police and the army. My kid is innocent. When will the policy be changed?

Note: In China, if someone wants to work for the government, army, or police department, one’s parents and grandparents should not have any criminal record or poor credit history.

Following Up Citizens’ Previous Requests. Additionally, the posts that addressed citizens’ previous requests also elicited more comments. The posts are usually from the “crime/patrol report” category. For example, on June 19, a car sped up at a checkpoint and hit several other cars, pedestrians, and a police officer at Chaoyang Road. Many citizens hurried to the BPD’s Weibo account to demand an investigation into this crime on the comment section of a post. On June 20, the BPD posted a brief crime investigation report of this issue. Although the content did not specify this post as a response to citizens’ previous requests, citizens continued to discuss or ask questions about the case under the post. The example post is as follows:
Figure 29

Screenshot of Post Published on June 20, 2018.

Translation: #Crime Report# On June 19 around 11:00 pm, suspect criminal Ge (male, 27 years old, hometown: Liaoning province, Shenyang city) surrendered himself to the police. Based on the initial interrogation, Ge confessed that after he used drugs with another criminal named Zhao (male, 35 years old, hometown: Liaoning province, Shenyang city), he drove a car with a cloned plate with Zhao on Chaoyang road. In order to avoid the checkpoint, he sped up to run away and hit a police officer, pedestrians, and cars. The CCTV and evidence confirmed that Ge was the driver. The police arrested another suspect Zhao around 3:00 am on June 20. Both suspects’ urine samples are positive. The suspect Ge was detained by Chaoyang police station for further investigation.
Figure 30

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 29

Translation: The video [circulating online] that everyone saw yesterday. In Beijing, Chaoyang District, two males hit the police and pedestrians and ran away. Two suspects were already arrested, and they were all on drugs.

Figure 31

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 29

Translation: I hope they will get harsh punishment. Is there any update on the case of Jinlin Siping? Why is the information of further investigation not released yet?

Figure 32

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 29

Translation: The BPD did not do a good job in this case. It happened yesterday morning and the suspects were not caught until night. There was even time for him to surrender himself. The BPD should have arrested him on the road.
Figure 33

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 29

Translation: I thought there was no one in charge of this issue.

Figure 34

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 29

Translation: Cloned number plate, drug-impaired driving, hit-and-run, how come the suspect surrendered himself for a lighter punishment?

Biased or False Information. The posts containing biased or false information also evoked strong reactions and many comments from citizens. For example, the BPD released an educational post to teach people how to recognize a type of cigarette made of illegal drugs. The post elicited the greatest number of comments of that week. Many followers indicated that the picture of the cigarette in that post was photoshopped and the information was misleading. Some people tried to provide the correct information, and others criticized the BPD for posting unverified news. The post and the randomly selected comments are as follows.
Translation: (Don’t be fooled by her beautiful appearance) Rainbow smoke? What is that? Is it a strange rainbow that has appeared somewhere? Not at all! The package of the rainbow cigarette looks like a regular cigarette, which also has a paper box package. It is a new drug! It can produce special smoke that is very colorful. It looks super cool. Uncle reminds you: cherish life and stay away from drugs. Link: click to see the picture and more information about this drug.

Note: “smoke” also refers to a cigarette because “cigarette” has the same pronunciation as “smoke” in Chinese.
Figure 36

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 35

Translation: The cigarette shown in the picture must be photoshopped. Even if it can generate rainbow-colored smoke, the color would be mixed together through inhaling and exhaling. There is no way the rainbow colors will appear in order. Unless you post a video of someone blowing rainbow smoke from their mouth, I will not believe it.

Figure 37

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 35

Translation: This is really old. The cigarette shown in the picture was called “Jiaozi 08.” It isn’t sold anymore. Also, the smoke is not rainbow-colored, and it’s just like regular smoke.

Figure 38

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 35

Translation: Isn’t this a photoshopped picture? That’s so out-of-date. The official BPD Weibo should not do this, right? @the BPD
Figure 39

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 35

Translation: As a government department, can you not use a misleading picture? There are rainbow-colored cigarettes, but they can’t make rainbows! Have you considered the feeling of the “Jiaozi” cigarette? Please publish fact-checked news. In fact, rainbow is a word on the package.

Figure 40

Screenshot of Comment under the Post in Figure 35

Translation: Who do you want to fool? Can you tell me what ingredients are in this new drug? How was it produced? One pack of cigarettes can generate such colorful rainbow smoke at night. It must have lots of ingredients. Compared with other drugs’ prices, how much is this cigarette? Based upon a picture, you can make up a whole new story.

In general, the above section indicated the six characteristics that often led to a post eliciting more comments from citizens during that week. The results demonstrate that a post that generates more comments than others is not necessarily one that citizens like or feel more engaged with. People left more comments on positive image-related posts, either because the date and timing aligned with another topic they cared about, or because the post had controversial content. In addition, the BPD has borrowed trending topics and reposted them on
its account to attract people to engage with it. Trending topics helped the BPD to attract clicks and comments, which might increase the visibility and awareness of the account and other topics. Similar behaviors were found by Lu and Pan (2021), who studied the non-government-related topics on official government accounts on WeChat, which is another important social media platform in China. They found that Chinese government social media administrators use trending topics as clickbait to attract citizens to visit their sites.

Furthermore, citizens like to comment on interactive posts, especially when they know that police officers are reading their comments and they might receive a direct response from the BPD. Among the crime/patrol report–related posts, it seems that the content following up on citizens’ previous requests for crime investigation or providing continuous details of a widely discussed criminal case drew more people’s comments than a brief single crime/patrol report. In terms of educational posts, the most commented-on ones all contained biased or false information, which suggests that people tend to leave comments on questionable educational posts.

**Thematic Analysis of Citizens’ Comments**

The previous section analyzed the characteristics of the most commented-on posts. The following section reveals the themes that characterize citizens’ top five comments under the most commented-on post for each of the 26 weeks within the original 780 comments data sample. The total of 130 comments were analyzed for the thematic analysis. There are three reasons to only analyze the top five comments. One is that the top five popular comments usually have the most elaborated viewpoints based on the observation. In addition, people’s comments on the BPD’s Weibo account tended to be either polarized or similar. The top five comments would be sufficient to capture the different representative viewpoints. The second reason is that the top
comments are the most influential and attracted most likes and subcomments. Therefore, the comments and its subcomments discussions are more likely to be key issues that people care about. Selecting the most popular comments to analyze can also highlight the most important themes as “many comments are not meaningful and will only introduce noise.” (Z. Lu et al., 2018, p. 11) The third reason is that that the top comments are more likely from genuine frequent Weibo users based on Weibo’s ranking algorithm. This not only encourages people to engage on Weibo more frequently but also protect thoughtful contributors from potential trolls.

Four themes were identified to capture important patterns across and within the dataset of 130 comments that collectively address RQ2b, which asked what themes characterize citizens’ comments on the BPD. As mentioned in the methodology section, Braun and Clarke (2006) detailed six recursive phases of thematic analysis. Another researcher and I followed those steps. We familiarized ourselves with the 130 comments, taking note of initial ideas for meaningful extracts. We found apparent patterns and grouped them together to form relevant themes. We then discussed them together to reach agreement on the finalized themes. Here, we need to keep in mind that the purpose of the thematic analysis was not to quantify the content of the 130 comments, but to look for underlying and more nuanced recurrent themes among them (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Although the importance of a theme is based on relevance and salience rather than frequency (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I report the findings in order based on frequency to highlight the number of comments that related to each theme in the following section.

**Commenting for Personal Expression and Interaction (53 Comments).** Comments within this theme represented the greatest volume of material. They reflected various aspects of how citizens expressed their views of the posted content and sought interaction with other
citizens or the BPD. The majority of the material within this theme highlighted citizens’
eagerness to express their stories, emotions, or opinions about the posted content. Among those
comments, some of them received direct responses from the BPD.

The first example was shared under a positive image–related post. The original post was
about statistics on how many law enforcement officers were killed in the line of duty in recent
years. This person shared a personal related story that their mom’s best friend’s husband died in
the line of duty as a police officer. The mom’s best friend later decided to switch her career from
nurse to police officer, and their two children are both police officers.

Figure 41

Screenshot of Comment

Translation: The husband of my mother’s best friend was a police officer who perished in the line
of duty 20 years ago. She was a nurse but later decided to become a police officer. At that time,
one of their children was only three, and the other one was still in her belly. Now the older kid is
also a police officer, and the little one is studying in the police academy. The mother is still
single. Every time I mention them, my heart is filled with deep respect.

In the following example, the comment was full of emotions and anger toward a crime
report on a mass stabbing attack that happened in a shopping mall a few days before the Chinese
New Year. The person is proclaiming that the criminal should not murder a young girl especially
during the New Year time.
Figure 42

Screenshot of Comment

Translation: What the fxxk, you killed a girl right before the new year’s holiday. Fxxk, you don’t want to celebrate but she wanted to celebrate the new year. How can you kill a young girl?? What kind of scumbag are you? You are worse than a beast! How can this type of person live 35 years? Why has not he been beaten to death by someone else?

In the example below, the commenter offered more background information and explanation of the situation in the original post. The post was about citizens always having to stand in a long line to buy subway tickets at one specific station, which caused some ticket scalpers to resell tickets for a higher price. Police officers were trying to crack down on the illegal ticket scalping. The original post did not mention any information about the construction of the station or the reasons for this situation, such as that most people who use this station do not have a smartphone to buy a ticket in advance.

Figure 43

Screenshot of Comment

Translation: The newer subway stations were all renovated. However, subway lines 1 and 2 are the oldest, which were built in the early 70s and 80s, respectively. Both subway lines could not be suspended for renovation because they are always filled with people. Especially at the
Qianmen Station, which is full of tourists and migrant workers, people have different wealth levels, and many of them do not have smartphones. Older people insist on using cash to buy tickets. I also saw people who do not know how to enter a subway station at all. There are designated police officers to educate them on how to buy tickets or use the subway. The whole picture of the issue is not like what you get from the post.

The comments that expressed detailed stories could encourage people to share similar stories. The first comment in Figure 41 shown above attracted over 100 people who also shared their own stories under it as sub-comments. Although I did not analyze sub-responses to the comment, many of the responses I read through contained their own personal stories. In addition, strong emotional comments like the second example in Figure 42, which elicited about 6,000 likes and 150 sub-comments, might have evoked powerful emotions in some people, so they hit the like button or replied to share their emotions too. The comments like the one shown in Figure 43 that provided more context to the original posts normally induced lots of discussions around the topic among followers. For example, approximately 20 people were discussing the subway’s design and construction history based on that comment. Those comments reflected the fact that people who leave comments under the BPD’s social media posts do so not only for the administrators of BPD’s Weibo account, but also to express themselves and stimulate conversations with other people.

Among the popular comments, some comments specifically focused on seeking interaction or responses directly from the BPD. Comments that were time-sensitive and not very critical seemed to receive direct replies from the BPD. For instance, under one post, police officers specifically indicated that they had written it in the line of duty and were reading the comments. Citizens were excited and left lots of comments to chat or report issues to them. One
person reported that they did not see the police officer in that area. The BPD replied to them that
the police officers were indeed patrolling around that area right now:

**Figure 44**

*Screenshot of Comment*

Translation: *Hi sir, I did not see the police officer who looks like Andy Lau [a well-known
Chinese actor] on Dawang Road!!! Replied by @ the BPD: He is there, patrolling on Dawang
Road.*

**Figure 45**

*Screenshot of Comment*

Translation: *I called the police. The dispatch time is very long. Replied by @ the BPD: The road
is full of people who are watching the lunar eclipse. Please be patient. The police officer will be
there right away.*
Among the collected sample, the comments that were appreciative and complimented the BPD’s work also received direct responses from the BPD. Three examples demonstrated this as follows:

**Figure 46**

*Screenshot of Comment*

Translation: *The picture is super cute! Thank you, I really appreciate the work you have done this year! I hope we can all enjoy the New Year’s Gala~ Stay safe on New Year’s Eve. Replied by @ the BPD: Wishing you a Happy Dog Year~*

**Figure 47**

*Screenshot of Comment*

Translation: *On December 26, 2016, I saved a lady who was stabbed by an assailant, and I also caught him. When the police officers arrived, I told them about what happened and also showed them the pictures that I took of the crime scene. They were all shocked about how calm I was. One doctor said that the lady would have died if I had not saved her. Although I am not a government official, I admired police officers when I was little. I have never thought that I could*
save someone’s life. I am accumulating good deeds to have great merit and much virtue...Replied by @ the BPD: emoji (thumbs up).

Figure 48

Screenshot of Comment

Translation: I am a police officer’s husband. My wife had to work and be on call during this Labor Day and she could not attend the family gathering. Parents complained that she is the only one who missed the family gathering. She was very sad about it, but she could not change her shift. I assured her that I would take care of the family so that she could focus on her work and health. I just want to say that if you cannot do things like what I am doing, please do not marry a police officer. Replied by @ the BPD: emoji (thumbs up)

Criticizing the BPD or Pointing Out the Mistakes on the Posts (42 Comments).

Comments in this theme focused on criticism of the BPD’s handling of crimes, behaviors, or suspected corruption. People also criticized the content of the posts on Weibo if it was inappropriate, misleading, or biased. Some of the criticism was very subtle and indirect. Some commenters used detailed stories to indicate their dissatisfaction with the police or to express criticism in question form. Seventeen examples are given below to illustrate the different ways of criticizing the BPD.
The first example in Figure 49 used a personal story that has date, location, and details to thoroughly describe that a drunk guy assaulted several of his neighbors. But the police did not arrest this drunk guy and left him there. Later, this drunk guy broke his apartment’s window and set fire to his apartment. This commentor criticized the police as irresponsible to handle this case.

**Figure 49**

**Screenshot of Comment**

Translation: *I was abroad for some businesses. A drunk guy set fire to my apartment at 12:00 am on March 30th. Before he set fire, he assaulted several of my neighbors in my compound. The police were there on site and watched the drunk guy crazily knocking my door. They did not arrest that drunk guy and left immediately after checking that no one was injured. Later, this guy broke my apartment window at the first floor and set my apartment on fire with a lit broom! The police officially dispatched some police officers to look for this drunk guy on March 31st. Then they told me that they could not catch this guy. Isn’t it irresponsible to conclude and close the case so fast?*

In the example below, a citizen was questioning whether police officers should take pictures with a celebrity. The original post was related to a positive image that showed police officers who had taken a picture with a celebrity while maintaining traffic safety on a snow day. The comment did not directly state that police officers should not take a picture with someone
when they are on duty. Instead, the commenter only asked if an ordinary citizen could request to take a photo with police officers on duty and whether it was a violation of the code of conduct.

**Figure 50**

*Screenshot of Comment*

Translation: *I have two questions [pictures show that police officers took photos with a celebrity when they were on duty]. 1. When people’s police officers are patrolling, can ordinary citizens ask to take photos with them? 2. Does taking photos with a celebrity violate the rules and regulations of police when they are in the line of duty?*

Some people expressed criticism more directly and harshly. A few of them even pointed out that their post was deleted by the BPD or the whole comment section was occupied by fake accounts.

A citizen writing in Figure 51 vented their disappointments about how police officers refused to take care of their case. The original post was about a positive image depicting police officers working to help citizens efficiently.

**Figure 51**

*Screenshot of Comment*

Translation: *I went to the police station to report a crime in person. The police refused to file charges. How dare you say when you have difficulties, find the police to help you? I am completely disappointed with you.*
Another citizen in Figure 52 expressed directly that they thought police officers have too much power and funding.

**Figure 52**

*Screenshot of Comment*

Translation: *With all due respect, what is the point to pay tax to you? You cannot even solve a tax evasion criminal case. Is that you are not capable to solve the case or you do not want to investigate it! If the report from Cui Yongyuan was not true, then he should face defamation charges. Why did not you look into this big case? If the report from Cui Yongyuan was true, the criminals have not gotten their deserved punishment yet! From ancient times to present, the government officials are like parents who are upholding justice and serving citizens. But now, you are just being bossy parents. What else do you do for citizens?*

The example below directly demonstrated that some citizens who criticized the BPD had their negative comments deleted. Besides deleting negative comments, people also suspected that some supportive comments were generated by fake accounts.

In Figure 53 below, a citizen revealed that their previous comment was deleted by the BPD because they mentioned that the government should be held accountable for the flood hazards during the rainy season. They were furious about it. The original post was safety-related educational content that taught people to stay away from a flooded area.
Figure 53

Screenshot of Comment

Translation: *I understand that typhoons and earthquakes can kill people. But how come rainy weather can also kill people? How dare you only warn people to stay away from a flooded area. Hmm, how interesting! I only said that someone must be responsible for the incident that caused people to die. You even deleted my comments. What can I say? I can only encourage people especially victims’ families to XXXXX!*  

Figures 54 and 55 demonstrate a citizen skeptical about the BPD’s debunking of false information on a milk safety scandal that happened to a reputed dairy company called Yili. The first comment showed that they did not believe the debunking and thought the BPD had been bribed by the company. They also suspected that the supportive comments under this post were all from fake accounts. The second comment indicated directly that the commenter thought all the supportive comments were the same content, which might have been copied and pasted by the same group of people who were controlling the fake accounts.
Figure 54

Screenshot of Comment

Translation: *The verified Weibo account of the BPD is running naked, emoji (smile face) Isn’t it a shame? There are no people who support the content of this post except the fake accounts employed by Yili.*

Note: “running naked” is Chinese Internet slang that means someone is showing their true colors.

Figure 55

Screenshot of Comment

Translation: *Fake accounts can only copy and paste the same thing on the BPD. Can they change to another strategy?*

Comments that criticized the positive image content also elicited more discussions and likes. This implies that the posts that attracted a greater number of comments did not mean that people intended to request more similar content. The two comments below implied that they did not think police work was harder than other people’s work. The positive image–related posts were not very convincing for them.

Figure 56 shows that someone did not think police officers’ work conditions were that bad because they had had a worse working environment. The original post was about police officers on duty having lunch outdoors in snowy weather. Figure 57 illustrates that one citizen did not like how the BPD used the number of police officers killed in the line of duty to promote
a positive image. They thought the death toll of coal miners was higher. This comment references one of the most ignored issues in China: that the death toll of coal miners either receives little media coverage or is twisted by the government. The post suggests that it is ironic that the number of police killed in the line of duty can be reported publicly as a way of promoting a positive image, while the report of the death toll of coal miners is strictly regulated by the government.

Figure 56

Screenshot of Comment

Translation: Honestly speaking, I used to squat and had five-yuan cheap food in an electrical cable compartment on a construction site. I had more hardships than those police officers shown in the picture. Of course, I also got paid more than the police officers. This is also the truth. Maybe those pictures can fool young people. I have seen many of this kind of thing across the country.

Figure 57

Screenshot of Comment

Translation: Is there a greater number of coal miners who died in accidents than police who died in the line of duty, isn’t it? Your lives matter. Do coal miners’ lives not matter?

In some examples of criticism, citizens pointed out mistakes in the posts or indicated that the content was not appropriate to be published on the Weibo account of the BPD. For instance,
the comments displayed in Figures 58, 59, and 60 all called attention to the mistakes in the content, videos, or pictures of the posts. In Figures 61 and 62, some citizens strongly suggested that the BPD should not publish the details of a crime, which might induce copycat crime, and they should not mislead citizens to believe that they can call the police for any kind of help in their life. The original post for Figure 62 was about how police officers used a police car to drive a student who was late for their college entrance exam to their exam site.

**Figure 58**

*Screenshot of Comment*

![Translation](image)

Translation: *The picture in the post is photoshopped.*

**Figure 59**

*Screenshot of Comment*

![Translation](image)

Translation: *@ The BPD the cigarette example shown in the Weibo post is called 08 Blue and White Pottery and is already discontinued by its holding company, Jiaozi. It does not have any association with the illegal drug “Rainbow cigarette”! Please do fact-check before you publish the post and the picture example. It is very irresponsible to use a photoshopped and misleading picture in the post! I hope the BPD Weibo administrators can delete this post and educate citizens with the correct information.*
Translation: There is strong evidence [to prove the post is incorrect]. The attached video showed that the gun does not have a recoil operation and a bolt.

Translation: Can you stop posting this type of post, those posts can attract people’s attention and arouse their curiosity as well. There is a type of crime called imitation of criminal models.

Translation: Can you stop saying “don’t hesitate to call people’s police when you have any trouble,” ok? Isn’t there already a huge waste of police manpower on this unimportant issue? Police are already stretched thin. Save some energy to deal with real crimes!

In some instances, people not only criticized the BPD but also offered suggestions to solve issues. In Figures 63 and 64, the original post was an educational post to teach citizens that it is dangerous to walk around an electrical enclosure box if the area is flooded. Citizens argued instead that they should call the city’s electric department and the government to implement
regular safety checks on the electrical facilities instead of teaching people to be careful.

Likewise, in Figure 65, the comment harshly condemned police officers for punishing citizens who are driving electric scooters, saying they should target the business that is producing and selling these scooters. The original post was a crime/patrol report that someone had received a ticket for driving an electric scooter on the road.

**Figure 63**

*Screenshot of Comment*

Translation: *On the one hand, you need to keep calling people to stay away from the electrical enclosure box of street lights in a flooded area. On the other hand, you need to ask the companies to check out their electric boxes. The latter can solve the problem completely— emojis (crying face, crying face).*

**Figure 64**

*Screenshot of Comment*

Translation: *I have the impression that there are people who die from electrical leakage from electrical enclosure boxes every summer. This makes me afraid of going out. Every bus station has an electrical enclosure box, and there are electrical boxes for street lighting too. Can you tell me how to avoid them! The best solution is that you need to ask the city’s electricity*
department to check them out regularly. Otherwise, there are so many electrical enclosure boxes in the city. How can we avoid all of them!

Figure 65

Screenshot of Comment

Translation: Are you saying that the electric scooters for the elderly should be flying in the sky? You should investigate who is producing and selling those scooters illegally instead of punishing people who are riding them if they already spent money to buy them.

Citizens’ Requests for Criminal Investigations (22 comments). Comments in this theme focused on reporting suspected criminals and requesting that the BPD investigate criminal cases that citizens cared about. In most cases, citizens participated in reporting a crime and requesting the BPD’s investigation collectively under one post’s comment section. As mentioned earlier, the hijacked post usually did not have important content to discuss and was mostly related to “positive image” or “holiday.” Based on my observations, the crime was usually reported by regular citizens by posting pictures or videos on their individual Weibo accounts. Later on, it became a trending discussion topic on Weibo. As more people joined the discussion, they quickly recognized that the BPD had the responsibility to take charge of it. Many of them would go to the BPD’s Weibo account and hijack the comment section of one of the most recent unimportant posts. Commenting together about the criminal case could press the BPD to make a formal investigation and report the follow-up information on Weibo. On the other hand, a few comments also demanded that the BPD look into their own cases. Those comments usually
contained more information or specific names but were less likely to get any response from the BPD.

Below are four examples of requests for one criminal investigation. The comment section of the original post was hijacked by citizens. The majority of the comments requested that the BPD look into an assault that happened under Shuangjing Bridge on May 18, 2018. On May 19, the BPD followed up on the request and posted that they had arrested the suspects. On November 22 of the same year, Xinhua News reported that the criminals were sentenced to 1 year and 2 months in prison (Kong & Qu, 2018). The news report specified that the online discussion and massive citizens’ requests to the BPD helped get the case solved faster.

**Figure 66**

*Screenshot of Comment*

Translation: *You should investigate motorcycle rider who beat someone.*

**Figure 67**

*Screenshot of Comment*

Translation: *I report motorcycle rider who assaulted someone under the Shuangjing bridge.*

**Figure 68**

*Screenshot of Comment*
Translation: A motorcycle rider who is wearing black clothes beat pedestrians at Shuangjing area and ran away.

**Figure 69**

*Screenshot of Comment*

Translation: You should investigate the incident of assault at Shuangjing area. You can find more details on the Weibo posts that I retweeted.

In terms of individual requests, people tried to provide as much information as possible. In this case, they could prove that they had not made up the case they were discussing and hope the BPD would solve the issue as soon as possible. Unfortunately, they usually did not get any response from the BPD.

**Figure 70**

*Screenshot of Comment*

Translation: The police officer’s name is Mu Ruizhong who is working for the team of airport transportation which belongs to Cuige village, Chaoyang District, Beijing. His badge number is 007867. He has been colluding with a gang group to illegally clear driving records for people for over a year. I hope the relevant department can investigate this case soon. You can find more details on my Weibo.

**Discrimination toward Migrants Living in Beijing (13 Comments).** The final theme demonstrated that local Beijing residents were showing prejudice, stereotypes, or discrimination...
against migrants whose residence registration (Hukou) was not in Beijing. The first example
shows that someone assumed that the person who stabbed people in a shopping mall was a
migrant worker, saying that they should not come back to Beijing for work after the new year’s
holiday. The second comment in Figure 72 is a good illustration of people emphasizing that the
criminal was a migrant and originally from another province. The third and fourth comments in
Figures 73 and 74 are classic examples of stereotypes that people have toward migrants from
northeastern China.

**Figure 71**

*Screenshot of Comment*

Translation: *I have heard that a mass stabbing spree took place at Xidan Joy City shopping mall.*

*I suggest that migrants who went back home to celebrate the New Year do not come back to
Beijing anymore. Find a job in your local city. Beijing is too dangerous!*

**Figure 72**

*Screenshot of Comment*

Translation: *Male, 35 years old, from Xihua County, Henan Province [information about the
criminal]*
Figure 73

Screenshot of Comment

Translation: *Criminal is from Henan province... Kick these useless, cheap, and illiterate migrants out. Seven or eight out of ten criminals are migrants. You [migrants] are here not for contributing to Beijing.*

Figure 74

Screenshot of Comment

Translation: *There are many people like them [criminals]. They all have a northeastern accent.*

Figure 75

Screenshot of Comment

Translation: *People from northeastern China are not capable of doing anything. All they do is either commit crimes or get involved in brawls. They feel good about themselves. This is Beijing! This is Beijing! Do you think that you are better than a Beijinger? You guys are notorious for having lower literacy and making trouble every day. Everyone knows that people from northeastern China have a very bad reputation, just like a mouse, for wherever it goes, the vituperation follows.*
In sum, the four themes of citizens’ comments showed that citizens use the comment section to seek interactions, criticize the BPD, and request the BPD to do criminal investigations of their own interests. It also revealed the tip of the iceberg of the longstanding crime stigma and discrimination against migrant workers in Beijing.

The first theme illustrated that citizens not only left comments for the BPD but also used the comment section as a discussion board for public expression and social interactions with other users. Citizens created small discussion groups under the popular comments and forged extensive discussions under the personal stories, emotions, or opinions shared in the comment section. These discussions generally required the same cultural background knowledge to be understood (G. Yang, 2003). Yates and Hasmath (2017) stated that people who share the same cultural expressive symbols and background to produce similar emotional responses can form an in-group community. In addition, many scholars have argued that in the Chinese context, political opinions do not present as formal, purely political discussions. They are usually embedded in jokes, entertainment content, and the banal communication of social media comments (Bouvier & Machin, 2018; Wu, 2011; Yates & Hasmath, 2017). In this regard, the significance of the expression and interactions goes beyond its content—it is a participatory activity involving multitudes of people interacting in which public opinion is formed.

In addition, criticism of the BPD is the second dominant theme among the popular comments. Criticism was expressed in different forms. Some criticisms were conveyed as questions or stories, which were subtle and indirect, while others were direct and harsh.

Moreover, the third theme is about citizens’ collective and individual requests for criminal investigations. This demonstrated that citizens hoped to collaborate with the BPD to
solve the issues that they cared about, especially those who provided clues or information about a case.

The last theme of discrimination against migrants living in Beijing revealed the tip of the iceberg of a long-existing social issue in China. As mentioned in the target audience analysis of the previous section, the BPD has been creating customized content that targets migrant workers, such as teaching them to navigate urban life. However, the migrant workers were mostly portrayed by the BPD as less-educated people who have trouble adapting to urban life or are associated with crime reports. For example, the BPD framed some migrant workers as having low literacy and not knowing how to use the Internet in Figure 76. In the second instance in Figure 77, the BPD specified in a crime report that a migrant worker who had had a hard time finding a job eventually became a thief.

**Figure 76**

*Screenshot of a Post Referring Migrant Workers from the BPD’s Weibo*

Translation: #Mobile drug education classes# How did we provide drug abuse resistance education to migrant workers with low literacy who do not know how to use the Internet?

Answer: we used picture boards, drug abuse resistance–related public service advertisements,
films, and live seminars to educate them instead of flyers, brochures, and online interactive education.

**Figure 77**

**Screenshot of a Post Referring Migrant Workers from the BPD's Weibo**

Translation: *(Aggressive lock pick crimes, Police officers from Fangshan district solved a burglary case)* Zong, a migrant worker, came to Beijing to find a job. Because he could not find a suitable job, he then became a thief. He broke into one-floor rental properties. Since March 7 this year, Zong has committed approximately 12 crimes, including stealing cigarettes, laptops, and over 1,000 in cash in total.

This theme of the comments suggested that the negative portrayals of migrant workers induced stigma and anti-migrant sentiment among residents in Beijing. When crime- or patrol-related posts did not even mention information about the criminals, citizens already started to suspect the criminal was a migrant worker.

The themes identified within this section provide important messages that censorship and limited access to participation in public political discussion and the government policymaking
process do not put an end to Chinese citizens discussing important social issues and expressing political opinions altogether. Political expression is not always about political opposition or restricted to political topics (G. Yang & Jiang, 2015). In China, the daily discussion of social issues can be seen as a form of political expression. Through interactions on the same topic in the comment threads and collective requests for criminal investigations on the Weibo account of the BPD, citizens are practicing participating in discussions about public issues and the work of a government department. The findings also confirm that the BPD allows criticism of its work and certain collective expression as long as it is only crime related. The results also suggested that the BPD should work on their frames of migrants because the negative and biased frames of migrants can negatively impact them.

**Critical Discourse Analysis of Citizen’s Expression of Criticism Toward the BPD**

The analysis in this section answered RQ2c, about how citizens express criticism under the BPD, mediated by self-censorship, state power, and social media providers. It aims to analyze citizens’ comments in their social context, which is highly restricted, and uses CDA to address the questions of power, ideology, and inequality. In this context, the CDA method allows us to explore insights into how citizens carefully express themselves and interact with the authorities in power (Shirazi, 2013).

As discussed in the literature review, the Chinese government has actively participated in online discussions to disrupt public discussion, impose its ideology, and implement a sophisticated system of censorship on social media, while citizens have employed discursive strategies such as using coded communication to discuss political issues. This section applies the CDA method to demonstrate how citizens positioned themselves and how criticism was
expressed in the BPD’s comment section to echo the current trend of censorship and ideology on social media.

First, citizens positioned themselves as someone that needed guidance and protection from the police or as a friend of the police. They tended to use words such as “uncle police,” “people’s police,” or “you” to address the police officers. The terms “uncle police” and “people’s police” echo the historical ideology that the Chinese government has been disseminating that government is the provider and protector for its citizens (Shao & Wang, 2017). The pronoun “you” reflects the recent trend that the government has been portraying itself as an open government that listens to citizens’ opinions, especially on social media and in online consultation events (S. J. Balla & Liao, 2013).

The phrase “uncle police” was prevalent in the comment section. In many critical comments, citizens positioned themselves to the police as naïve children. On the one hand, these personal forms of address made citizens’ criticism sound like they were having a personal conversation with the police rather than trying to evoke a public discussion. On the other hand, these family metaphors echo the mainstream Chinese government ideology that the relationship between citizens and government is like that of a parent or relative to a child, or a senior to a junior. Li (2006) indicated that the society as a family metaphor is deeply rooted in the Chinese culture and government institutions. The family relationship metaphor is commonly used as a discursive tool in political discourse. It legitimizes the government regulation to the child/junior (M. Guo, 2019).

Citizens positioned themselves as children/juniors to express criticism to show that, like children, they were not responsible for their behaviors. This not only reframed criticism as
ignorant childish speech but also might shield them from being punished if their words seem to be too harsh to the BPD.

**Figure 78**

*Screenshot of Criticism from Citizens*

Translation: *I am brave enough to ask: There are so many uncle police on Changan street. Why do none of them manage the traffic? @the BPD When will you pay attention to the electric scooters that run red lights?! Can’t you protect the pedestrian’s safety?*

Citizens also liked to use “people’s police” to address the BPD in criticisms. The title of “people’s police” reflects that police officers should serve citizens and place their interests first. This ideology and image of the police have been promoted by the Chinese government since the People’s Police Law of 1995 passed (Y. Ma, 1997). The law established that police officers in China are service-oriented and primarily provide assistance in people’s daily lives, functioning as moral moderators beyond just enforcing laws. As indicated by Jiao (2001), Chinese police principles are heavily influenced by a cultural tradition that emphasizes moralities and ethics and collective responsibility. In addition to law enforcement, they function as educators and public order managers to maintain the harmony of the communities. For example, they conduct fire prevention education, help minors and disabled in the community, rely on moral principles to solve the conflicts between neighbors.

There is a popular phrase promoted by the police: “Don’t hesitate to call the people’s police no matter what trouble you have (有困难，找民警).” Chen, Liang, and Wu (2018) reported that police officers spent most of their time at work handling service- or moral support-
related calls, such as controlling stray dogs, checking on senior citizens, opening locked doors, etc.

Citizens used this title or their own slogan to remind the BPD that they had high expectations of them, as the law promised, and the police should always be nice to citizens. When citizens were not satisfied with the police’s work, they used those words to satirize the police. For example, several comments emphasized “people’s police” or “people’s servant” when criticism was expressed.

**Figure 79**

*Screenshot of a Comment*

Translation: *I think there should be a policy to prohibit people’s police officers from accepting these things [free beverages from citizens]. It is very unprofessional.*

**Figure 80**

*Screenshot of a Comment*

Translation: *Where are the police? Why is there no follow-up to the case that Kuqi company did not return users’ deposit? The Chinese consumer association claimed that they reported this case to the police at Tongzhou district. Why does not police investigate this case? Can police put more efforts to process criminal cases? Thank you “people’s servant.”*
Translation: *I have hated cops most of my entire life. “Serve the people with whole heart and soul.”* Hmm. How interesting. *They do not take crimes seriously. If you have money to bribe them, the police will release the criminals immediately.*

Criticisms were mostly expressed as rhetorical questions or mini-stories that contained specific information including when, where, what, and why. This form of criticism follows the similar approaches that citizens have been utilizing to express their opinions, advice, and frustration with the government during several public consultation events on social media. Online public consultation is one of the governance reforms which were initiated by the Hu administration in 2008 and heavily championed and implemented by the Xi administration (S. Balla, 2017). The public consultation events held on social media by different levels of government agencies which aims to invite citizens to provide feedback to the government and participate in the policy-making process directly. As discussed in the literature review, the Chinese government has actively used social media to engage with citizens for a variety of reasons, such as maintaining its power, cultivating popular support, and monitoring public opinions. At the same time, it provides opportunities to citizens to interact with the government and offer their input to the policymaking process directly. Researchers have found that a pattern that the public comments expressed during these online consultation events held by the government either were negative or addressed opinions in great detail (S. J. Balla & Liao, 2013). Besides that, rhetorical techniques were also commonly used to criticize the government in these
events (T. Wang, 2016). My study found that citizens have also used these techniques and
different expression form in the commentary section of the BPD. As shown in Figure 82 and Figure 83,
the comment has lots of details to back up its criticism.

**Figure 82**

*Screenshot of a Comment*

Translation: *Brothers, a true story to share. Location: somewhere in Xi’an. People: a couple and
couple and several thieves. Incident: A thief stole the lady’s cellphone. The guy found the thief and tried to
got her phone back. But he was beaten up by a few thieves. They claimed that the guy tried to
steal their phones. The guy called the police. The police came over and took a statement. There
was no follow-up afterward. I contacted the guy right before typing out this comment. The couple
have already broken up now, and they never heard anything back from the police. It is said that
this criminal group and the police are as close as a family.*

**Figure 83**

*Screenshot of Criticism from Citizens*
Translation: Someone pretended to be a parking lot attendant at an unmarked parking area where is located in Tonghui River east road and the south of Soho modern city mall. [The name on the work badge is: Yu, Zhilin] This person forced charged parking fee and promised that this fee is used to protect car owner and property safety. He/she verbally threatened car owners who refused to pay the fee in advance. After car owners left, he/she slashed the car tires and caused big damage on both property and car owner’s safety. I reported this case to the Jianwai police station in Chaoyang district and submitted testimony but have not heard any updates until now.

Rhetorical questions were commonly used to criticize the BPD’s work in the collected comments. For example, the comment in Figure 84 implied that the BPD never enforced any punishment for government officials’ corruption. The comment in Figure 85 was made by an angry citizen who questioned an unreasonable traffic policy enforced by the police.

**Figure 84**

*Screenshot of Criticism from Citizens*

Translation: Don’t you know the level of government corruption? The level can’t compare with other countries [other countries refer to democratic countries]. There is no severe punishment enforced. When have you enforced any severe punishment [regarding corrupt government behaviors]?
Translation: *Are you kidding me? Can traffic police officers be reasonable? Are you bullying senior citizens? You allow electric scooters to be produced, sold, bought but don’t allow citizens to get a license plate for it and drive it. Do you understand logic? Do you expect citizens to buy a scooter to put it in storage? Scooters are sold everywhere on Jingdong [online shopping platform], on Taobao [online shopping platform], and in stores. Why don’t you regulate those places? Police must provide us reasons!*

Lastly, as indicated in the literature review section, there is an extensive scholarly discussion about how Chinese citizens use linguistic tricks to escape filters and censors to participate in the public sphere. Censorship cannot stop citizens from discussing political issues but only channels such discussion into specific forms, such as coded communication (G. Yang & Jiang, 2015). Contrasting with regular social media discussions, no linguistic tricks and coded communication such as pinyin or homophone were observed in government criticism in the comment section of the BPD’s Weibo account. One reason might be that those comments existed but were deleted by the BPD. For example, in the comment below the writer indicated that their comment had been deleted.
Figure 86

Screenshot of Criticism from Citizens

Translation: (Both of my comments were deleted, why did you do this?) As a law enforcement department, you should abide by the law, open justice, and follow your own policy of open supervision by public opinion! Censoring freedom of speech will cause a backfire. Once it has reached the breaking point, it will be like a flood. Just like the “Tacitus Trap”—an existential legitimacy crisis caused by losing the confidence of the people. At least the modern Chinese have become aware of their civil rights and right of participating in politics.

The other reason is citizens’ self-censorship. In recent years, the Xi administration has emphasized self-disciplined ideological propaganda rather than persuasion or control. The goal is to make citizens internalize the party’s interests and self-regulate their online expressions which is a form of self-discipline (Z. Chen & Wang, 2019). When commenting on the government-generated posts on Weibo, citizens might have exercised a higher level of self-censorship than when posting other places. The findings also support a recent trend that the Chinese government penetrates the social media public sphere to impose ideology. Regarding censorship in the Chinese context of social media, the government switched from tight control to providing a “safety valve” and guides citizens to express their criticisms.

The CDA analysis of citizens’ criticism of the BPD has shed light on the positions that citizens take when they seek engagement with the BPD. These positions reflect the inequality in the power relations, where the police still represent the powerful side yet try to create close relations with citizens. It is open to citizens’ criticism but also deletes some comments.
unexpectedly which leaves citizens wondering or complaining about the boundary of censorship. The analysis also showed that the Chinese citizens have accepted the identities that were constructed by the BPD and government when seeking engagement with the BPD. On the one hand, they have tried to position themselves as needing to be protected and guided by the government. On the other hand, they have been practicing being a modern citizen to follow the forms of online consultation to voice their criticism of the BPD. This dilemma is caused by the absence of clear-cut line of censorship and the apparent reality that the regulations are changing all the time. It is difficult for individual citizens to identify what issues are safe to discuss and how to talk about them. Spires (2011) indicated that netizens keep observing, testing, and tracking what criticism of the government were tolerated and which were deleted, and then exercise their own judgements when writing criticism to the government.

Accepting the identity constructed by the government while utilizing the government’s online consultation form to express criticism does not mean citizens are powerless. These acts could be seen as a compromise and strategic approach to voice their opinions in public and gain attention from the BPD. Although it does not bring any drastic changes immediately, voicing their opinions on social media and exposure to diverse public online discussions may increase citizens self-efficacy in political participation (T. Wang, 2016). The critical comments such as these attracted a great number of likes and sub-comments can help people to be better connected and exposed to diverse information, which will in return encourage political participation and civic engagement (L. Guo & Chen, 2021).

In sum, the above three sections of analysis and discussion of citizens’ comments and commenting behaviors demonstrated that Weibo as a social media platform can empower citizens not only to interact with the BPD but also connect with other citizens, create and pursue
their own agendas, spread information, and construct a collective identity of public discourse. Even though Weibo as a commercial social media platform is operated to maximize the business profit, its core affordance of interaction creates an environment that encourages daily mundane political discussion (Stockmann & Luo, 2017).

Although the Chinese government has transitioned from using coercive approaches to utilizing soft power to intervene and manipulate online public discussion, the communication on the BPD is diverse, ranging from seeking discussion with other citizens, sharing emotional personal stories, and requesting the crime investigations, to criticizing the BPD’s work. As Bouvier and Way (2021) argued, it is crucial to examine banal comments on Chinese social media for the value of politics because political discussion in Chinese social media is more subtle and indirect. Commenting on the posts of the BPD and exposure to the information in the comments will be likely to increase awareness of public issues and political efficacy, which in turn may function to encourage political discussions and civic engagement.

**Chapter 5 Conclusion**

This dissertation takes an interdisciplinary approach by incorporating studies and concepts from multiple disciplines, including e-government, public relations, social media in China, and public sphere, to advance our understanding of the Chinese government’s use of social media and expand our knowledge about citizens’ generated content on government social media. It provides a comprehensive examination of the BPD’s daily use of Weibo and their engagement strategies, the content of users’ comments, and the criticisms of the BPD obtained through rounds of close content, thematic, and critical discourse analyses. The dissertation’s implications for research and practice, theoretical and methodological contributions, and limitations that identify directions for future research opportunities are discussed as follows.
Government Use of Social Media in Authoritarian Countries

This dissertation fills the gap in government social media usage studies in authoritarian countries such as China. Many previous research studies of government use of social media in Western countries such as the UK and the United States and European countries have applied Mergel’s (2013a) framework of push, pull, and networking to interpret the content posted by government social media. Some scholars have also found that government agencies frequently use social media to promote a self-favorable image and suggested adding positive image promotion or impression management to this framework (DePaula & Dincelli, 2016; Hand & Ching, 2014; L. Zhou & Wang, 2014). However, while in the Chinese context, prior research mainly focused on government social media adoption rate or usage during emergencies. Very few research studies have applied Mergel’s (2013a) framework or the extended framework to examine government use of social media in an authoritarian context.

Drawing from previous literature, my study adopted Mergel’s (2013a) framework of interpreting social media interactions in government organizations and revised it to better suit the Chinese context. I also conducted a literature review on social media use in government, stakeholder theory, and image management to establish a comprehensive typology to examine the interactions and information characteristics of the Chinese government’s social media usage, specifically the BPD’s. This would help us to better understand how the BPD operates its social media on a daily basis and what engagement strategies they are using.

The results of the content analysis showed that the educational information, synchronous events, and propaganda messages posted by the BPD are unique to the Chinese context. When coding the content of government social media accounts in China, it is important to incorporate educational information into the coding scheme. As Gu et al. (2020) suggested, educational
information reflects the government’s authoritarian and caring role in guiding citizens’
behaviors, public values, and social norms, especially for citizens who are migrants to big cities.
The propaganda “positive energy,” which has been highly promoted by Xi’s administration, was
also found on the BPD’s posts. It reflects the government’s use of online catchphrases for
propaganda promotion and political purposes, which is more subtle than authoritarian political
slogans. Any future studies on social media use in Chinese government agencies should look for
similar types of propaganda content. For example, they could investigate what other catchphrases
have been used by the government for its own agenda or examine citizens’ opinions about this
form of propaganda.

In addition, this research found that the BPD has been using live streaming services to
host synchronous events to interact with citizens online and offline at the same time on its Weibo
account. To the best my knowledge, no study has found other government departments in China
that used the same approach to interact with citizens. As mentioned before, one reason might be
that the police department’s work can affect citizens’ daily lives directly and police officers often
confront citizens in stressful and unpleasant situations. It is important for them to have a channel
to listen to and interact with citizens peacefully. The other reason might be that this is a creative
approach that the BPD has found helpful for them to receive more engagement from citizens
since their performance on social media engagement is tracked and compared with other
government departments. They have strong incentives to try new strategies to compete for
visibility.

This study contributes to new knowledge about the daily time distribution and post
frequency of the BPD, which operates its Weibo account even in the holiday season. The
findings showed that the BPD publishes almost one post every hour from 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m.
and even posts more at midnight during the holiday season. These are aligned with the
government administrative requirement and with Lu and Pan’s ethnographic study of four local
Chinese government social media management offices (2021) which found that social media
administrators at government must actively use government accounts to post information and
engage with citizens every day. This informs us that the Chinese government works hard to use
social media to engage with its citizens and also monitors and interferes with the online public
sphere. Shao and Wang (2017) noted that the online public sphere in China is constructed by the
government and citizens and is always under political pressure. It also seems that the BPD
believes that the more posts they publish, the higher the engagement they will receive since they
are under the pressure of engagement measurement competitions with other government
departments. Whether or not a significant correlation exists between posting frequency and
measures of engagement rates is a question that could be explored in future studies.

In terms of engagement strategies, tailored content could help government social media
to increase its engagement and cultivate stronger relationships with citizens (M. J. Lee & Cho,
media content in the United States and in South Korea and found that the South Korean
government posted more personal and customized content. They indicated that societies that
share a collective culture could make this possible because it is easy for the government to
design personal messages based on their shared values. In this dissertation, I also found that the
BPD in the collective culture context has created customized content for different target
audiences. This means that the BPD has realized the pressing need to use various engagement
strategies to enhance its interaction with citizens. In addition, managing and satisfying the
interests of various stakeholders can enable the police department to communicate with them
directly and thus help them build long-term trust and relationship with citizens (Huang et al., 2017). This has important implications for the social media administrators in the police department, who should consider creating more customized content for their followers.

The BPD also heavily uses multimedia content to increase citizens’ engagement, especially video content, which comprises nearly 50 percent of its posts. This finding is different from previous studies indicating that government using social media mainly posts with links or pictures. There is also disagreement on whether rich media posts drive more engagement than text-only posts on government social media among scholars. While some prior research found that pictures receive the highest engagement rate, a few scholars discovered that rich media types such as videos and pictures do not always attract more engagement. Rich media content even reduces engagement if it does not match the text in the post (Q. Chen et al., 2020). This study found that the richest media type, video, does not attract the highest engagement. Posts containing pictures yielded the highest engagement rate. This alerts the government social media administrators that they should choose the appropriate media type to match the post rather than going for the richest media type.

This dissertation reveals that the BPD has made tremendous efforts to provide updated information, create various content to target different audiences, and experiment with different engagement strategies, such as incorporating videos and holding livestreaming events to engage with citizens. However, it has followed the national ideological propaganda guidelines made by Xi’s administration, which emphasize both citizen engagement and ideological propaganda promotion on the government’s social media accounts. These paradoxical guidelines have not only invited the government’s interference in the public sphere but also provided a space for
citizens to participate in public discussion with the government and vent dissenting views or critical voices.

**Citizens’ Interests, Comments, and Criticism on the Government Social Media**

In this study, I argued that government social media accounts provide a public space for Chinese citizens to discuss social issues that are of common concern. Interactivity is one of the most essential aspects of social media (Medaglia & Zheng, 2017). KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh (2017) suggested that the comment section on social media platforms is designed to attract public input, and this bottom-up user-generated content should receive attention on institutional organizations’ social media accounts. This feature offers a space for ordinary people to interact with government agencies, which could allow for bottom-up discursive power to be exercised. According to Habermas (1996), the public sphere is viewed as “a network for communicating information and points of view” (p. 360). As mentioned in the literature review, Chinese citizens tend to visit government-administered websites to discuss political issues or their concerns collectively because they perceive the government as a provider (Y. Zheng & Wu, 2005). In this case, the social media comment section, which involves the exercise of discursive power, could be considered a public sphere.

Studies of government social media use have mainly been focused on analyzing the quantitative metrics of engagement or the content generated by the government. The quantitative indicators, however, do not provide a full picture of the nature of citizen engagement. Ordinary user-generated public opinions on government expressed in the social media comment section and the imbalanced power between two parties have been neglected by researchers. This dissertation’s author fills this gap by applying thematic analysis and CDA to examine citizens’ comments, criticism of the government, and the imbalance of power in this public space.
The findings showed that quantitative metrics of engagement can be highly misleading. For example, among the most commented-on posts, positive image-related posts elicited the greatest number of comments. But the comments under these posts clearly demonstrated that people used these posts’ comment sections as free space to initiate and discuss their own interested issues or send requests to the BPD instead of engaging with the post content. This implies that if the BPD only look at the numbers of comments to measure people’s interests, they might think that people are really interested in discussing this type of posts. It is crucial for the BPD to read these comments and learn about the issues that people care about under these posts, thus, to improve their future work and presentation on social media.

The thematic analysis demonstrated that citizens do not passively accept information pushed to them. They actively share their opinions, knowledge, personal stories, interact with others, or criticize the government in the comment section. In the Chinese context, it is very important to stress and investigate this mundane communication on social media for its political value because political discussion on social media is subtle and indirect (Bouvier & Way, 2021). Some scholars indicated that online political discussions are embedded in jokes, daily conversations, or entertainment information (M. Guo, 2018; Wu, 2011; Yates & Hasmath, 2017).

Lacking a common public space to discuss public issues and channels to interact with the government, this study showed that Chinese citizens utilize the government social media comment section to initiate their own discussion topics and interact with others to form public opinions. They also use this channel to contribute their thoughts about social media content, question the government’s incorrect educational information, as well as criticize the government. To the best of my knowledge, this dissertation is the first study that examines citizens’ daily comments under a government social media account in China. This improves our understanding
of how Chinese citizens utilize the limited public space and channel to participate in political discussions and interact with the government.

In recent years, the study of dissenting voices and criticism of the government on social media under censorship has emerged as one of the dominant subfields in political communication in China (K. Fang & Repnikova, 2018). For example, research by King et al. (2013) suggested the Chinese government tolerates a wide variety of criticism of government officials and polices as long as the criticism does not call for collective action. Other studies have indicated how savvy Internet users employ linguistic tricks, coded communication, violent language, or satire to actively engage in political discussions and negotiate restrictions (M. Guo, 2018; Xu, 2014; G. Yang & Jiang, 2015). Aligned with previous research, this study also found a large amount of citizens’ criticism of the government on the BPD.

This dissertation employed CDA to study how bottom-up criticism was expressed and how citizens position themselves when they know that their critical comments might be seen by the BPD or police officers. CDA is suitable for this study because it is interested in analysis of how language used in unequal power relations. In the past, researchers have used CDA to analyze the language powerful institutions and elites have produced and to show how those in power impose their ideology and manipulate people’s thoughts, but recently some scholars have argued that ordinary people could negotiate with or counter the discourse elites have created from a bottom-up direction on social media (Bouvier & Machin, 2018; KhosraviNik, 2017).

CDA reveals that the languages citizens use has been influenced by government propaganda and ideology. As mentioned in earlier section, when citizens have offered direct and harsh criticism, they would use phrases such as “people’s police” or “uncle police” that the government has invented and used to impose its ideology that the police are responsible for
educating, regulating, and serving citizens. On the one hand, this suggests that elite texts and ideologies heavily influence the way citizens should communicate with police. On the other hand, this means citizens use these phrases as self-censorship and position themselves as “good citizens,” which might shield them from being punished or having their harsh comments deleted.

Furthermore, in contrast to earlier studies in which researchers found Chinese netizens heavily use linguistic tricks and coded communication that is less obvious and requires deep understanding of the cultural background to voice their criticism on social media (Meng, 2011; Nordin & Richaud, 2014), this research showed that people expressed criticism in the form of rhetorical questions or mini stories with specific details rather than implicit expression. This finding aligns with the current trend: the government hosts online public consultation events to gather citizens’ input about its policies. The majority of citizens’ comments to the government have been expressed in rhetorical questions or detailed stories (S. J. Balla & Liao, 2013).

**Theoretical and Methodological Contributions**

This dissertation broadens our understanding of government social media daily usage, engagement strategies, and citizen discourse in the Chinese context by combining e-government, public relations, and political communication literature. Guided by previous frameworks for interpreting government social media posts, in this dissertation, I found that, other than crime prevention, building long-term relationships with citizens and providing educational content to citizens are important responsibilities of the BPD. Customization of content for different target audiences, propaganda promotion, synchronous engagement strategies, extensive use of video posts, and hourly publication of new content are distinctive activities that were found not in the Western police department social media accounts. This not only suggests that a single framework or theory is not sufficient to explain the variety of government behaviors on social media but also
implies that political and cultural background should be considered when interpreting government social media usage. This study also demonstrates the value of an interdisciplinary approach that integrates theoretical perspectives from various disciplines to paint a comprehensive picture and reflect the theoretical progress of social media studies (Aragón et al., 2012).

Regarding citizens’ daily discourses on government social media, I applied public sphere theory to analyze citizen-generated texts and citizens’ commenting behaviors but argued that Habermas’s public sphere is not fully applicable to the Chinese context. I found that citizens are passionate about discussing the issues that concern them and are not limited to the topics the BPD initiates in its comment section. Because of the nature of the interactivity of social media and the threaded comments feature on Weibo, these discussions enable citizens to express their viewpoints on certain topics and to be exposed to diverse voices. This creates a public sphere that allows citizens to exchange their opinions. This finding is echoed in the previous literature, according to which government participation in public discussion has always been a part of the public sphere in China (Shao & Wang, 2017; D. Wang, 2008). The current work not only provides more empirical evidence for the study of the public sphere in the Chinese context but also contributes to the research on government social media studies; most of the prior literature on this topic has completely ignored the examination of citizens’ generated texts on government social media.

I also addressed censorship and dynamic negotiations between citizens and governments. I found that citizens published a great deal of criticism under the BPD’s Weibo account. This confirmed King’s (2013) finding that the Chinese government allows criticism by citizens. Although prior literature focused on demonstrating how citizens can skillfully escape censorship
rules and use linguistic tricks to ensure the government does not see or understand them, this dissertation reveals how government-produced languages and ideologies influence citizens’ expressions, and what position they try to portray themselves as being in when confronting the power of the BPD directly and knowing that their criticism might be seen by the BPD and other government officials. This improves our understanding of the fast-changing social media censorship norms and level of government tolerance of free speech in China.

Methodologically, in this dissertation, I used mixed-methods to paint a more detailed picture of government and citizens’ activities on the BPD’s Weibo account. Mixed-methods designs, which combine the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods, have great value in social media research (Snelson, 2016; Witschge, 2008). In line with commonly used methods in previous studies, I used the quantitative method to categorize daily social media posts by the BPD and calculate the engagement rate of different media types. This allowed me to quantify and interpret the large number of posts I collected from the BPD over the 6-month period. The comprehensive and inclusive coding schemes developed in this study can be used to analyze social media accounts of other police departments in China or in other countries.

Moreover, the use of thematic analysis and CDA in this dissertation made it possible to identify the nuances and contextual information of citizens’ comments. Many previous researchers have focused on quantitative factors of citizens’ engagement and have neglected to study one of the most important benefits of social media—user-generated content and interactivity on government social media. In contrast, the current study contributes solid empirical evidence to the existing literature and methodology about Chinese citizens’ discourses on the BPD’s Weibo account about the government and other issues. I also argue that the CDA is especially useful and applicable in exploring power imbalances and citizens’ challenges to
censorship when offering criticism to the government in the authoritarian social media context. The CDA not only allows us to examine texts in their social context but also displays how ordinary people can counter languages that people in power have imposed on social media (Bouvier & Machin, 2018).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this dissertation offers important insights into the use of social media by the Chinese government and interactions between citizens and the government, the limitations below should be addressed in future studies. China’s social media, political environment, and internet regulations are rapidly changing. It is important to capture how these changes influence interactions between citizens and the government over time. In this dissertation, I used only a limited sample size and time period. The comments sample only included the top 30 most popular comments due to the limitation of data collection tool. Future research could use larger samples and longitudinal analysis to gain a fuller understanding of this topic. The other limitation is that, although there is no evidence from this study or prior studies that government organizations in China employ a large number of fake accounts or automated bots to artificially manipulate interaction rates, the percentage of nonactive fake followers and nonverified government employees is unknown in this study. This could potentially affect the accuracy of the quantitative engagement rate of media types because the number of followers is one of the variables in calculating the engagement rate. This issue could be addressed by examining the demographic information of BPD followers in the future. Furthermore, in this study, I found that, although citizens are allowed to offer criticisms of the BPD, some comments were deleted for unknown reasons. Future researchers could thus implement a more nuanced approach to detecting which comments were deleted and why. It could also explore whether comments were
deleted in bulk, or whether only one comment that violated the rules was deleted. This could contribute to the ongoing research on what kinds of social media expression have crossed the government tolerance line and how the decisions to delete comments were executed in a government social media comment section.

To conclude, this study offers a systematic examination of how the BPD uses social media and how citizens engage with it and voice their opinions on its platform. The collected data reveal that the Chinese government has transitioned its administrative style from an authoritarian hierarchical one to an authoritarian but caring one. It has implemented a complex and paradoxical social media management approach to balancing citizens’ needs and government’s political control over the online discourse. On the one hand, government social media administrators work hard to provide updated information, use different engagement strategies to encourage citizen interactions, and improve their relationship and image among citizens. Additionally, they allow citizens to express their criticism extensively. On the other hand, they promote ideological propaganda and allegedly delete comments. Undefined rules of censorship are still in force on social media.

Although dissenting voices and discussions of social issues are raised in a limited controlled public space, the nature of social media allows citizens to discuss, share, and connect with each other in public discussions on a daily basis on government social media accounts. Being exposed to this rich information and having the freedom to exercise political participation might increase citizens’ awareness of public issues and political efficacy, which in turn could lead to a deeper level of civic or political participation, offline grassroots activism, and even potential social change. As Loader and Mercea (2011) stated, on social media, “The citizen no longer has to be a passive consumer of political party propaganda, government spin, or mass
media news, but is instead actually enabled to challenge discourses, share alternative perspectives, and publish their own opinions” (p. 762). Some researchers, however, have suggested this is only a “safety valve” that the government has provided to allow the public to vent their anger, dissatisfaction, and suggestions to the government policy in order to keep the Communist Party in power (D. Chen, 2016; Hassid, 2012).

Future studies could examine to what extent and in what situations the “safety valve” is not safe anymore for the government. For example, during the lockdown period in Shanghai in April 2022, I observed that several local government social media accounts in Shanghai and local synchronous conferences held on social media were flooded by criticism and dissenting voices. These accounts and conferences had to disable their commenting section completely. The number of online dissenting voices seems to have exceeded the government’s ability to censor or delete them, and local protests against the extremely strict lockdown continue to occur, on occasion. Future researchers could investigate citizens’ motivation, self-efficacy, or opinions about their interaction with the government agencies during the lockdown period.
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Appendix 2: Post-Hoc Statistics

Table 1

*Kruskal-Wallis Test of Interaction rate of media types*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Types</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean of Ranks</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$X^2$</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Photo</td>
<td>651</td>
<td>1700.25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>1379</td>
<td>1368.83</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>1283.99</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>326.382</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emoji and Text</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>1098.87</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>967.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

*Pairwise Comparisons of the Interaction of Media Types*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Types</th>
<th>Test Statistic</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Std. Test Statistic</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Adj. Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text vs Link</td>
<td>316338</td>
<td>60238</td>
<td>5252</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text vs Video</td>
<td>-401.175</td>
<td>48.499</td>
<td>-8.272</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link vs Photo</td>
<td>-416260</td>
<td>53321</td>
<td>-7.807</td>
<td>000</td>
<td>000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text vs Photo</td>
<td>-732.598</td>
<td>42.312</td>
<td>-17.314</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video vs Photo</td>
<td>-331423</td>
<td>39582</td>
<td>-8373</td>
<td>000</td>
<td>000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emoji and Text vs Photo</td>
<td>-601.381</td>
<td>192.272</td>
<td>-3.128</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.018*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link vs Video</td>
<td>-84873</td>
<td>58353</td>
<td>-1454</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emoji and Text vs Link</td>
<td>185.121</td>
<td>196994</td>
<td>.940</td>
<td>.347</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text vs Emoji and Text</td>
<td>-131217</td>
<td>194304</td>
<td>-675</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emoji and Text vs Video</td>
<td>269.985</td>
<td>193.728</td>
<td>1.393</td>
<td>.163</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
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