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EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION IN SOCIAL MEDIA CRISIS COMMUNICATION: EVIDENCE FROM KAZAKHSTAN AND CHINA

This study analyzes how emotions are communicated on social media during crisis events and explores how governments, media, and other communication actors influence public perception through emotional messages. The study helps explain how emotions work in crisis communication and offers ideas for improving online crisis management and public communication. The study addresses the following research question: how do governments and media actors use emotional language to shape public opinion and collective response during a crisis? It is based on the assumption that emotional communication strongly affects public trust, group identity, and public attitudes.

Methodologically, the research combines crisis lifecycle theory and situational crisis communication theory with qualitative text analysis and simple data visualization. Two crisis cases are compared: the January Events in Kazakhstan (2022) and the Zhengzhou flood in China (2021). Social media data were collected from Instagram and Telegram for the Kazakhstan case and from Weibo and Douyin for the China case using crisis-related keywords. The dataset includes post content, post type, and basic engagement data such as views, likes, and comments from different stages of the crises.

The study uses three steps. First, the dataset is built from social media posts. Second, emotions are coded according to Ekman's six basic categories. Third, emotional patterns and platform dynamics are compared between the two cases. The analysis shows that emotional framing shapes news narratives and audience responses during crises. Emotional communication affects public trust, collective identity, and the emotional tone of online discussions.

This cross-disciplinary and comparative approach contributes to a better understanding of emotional communication in crisis contexts by providing empirical evidence from Kazakhstan and China. It also offers practical guidance for government media organizations and public institutions on how to manage emotions more thoughtfully and promote a more rational public communication environment during crisis situations.

Keywords: Crisis communication, Emotional expression, social media, Emotional amplification.

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Дағдарыс кезінде әлеуметтік желілердегі эмоциялық экспрессия: Қазақстан мен Қытай мысалы негізінде

Бұл зерттеу жұмысы дағдарыс кезеңінде әлеуметтік желілерде эмоциялардың таралуын талдауға және мемлекеттік құрылымдар, медиа және өзге де коммуникациялық акторлардың эмоциялық тұрғыдан таңбаланған хабарламалар арқылы қоғамдық қабылдауға қалай ықпал ететінін айқындауға негізделген. Жұмыс дағдарыстық коммуникациядағы эмоциялардың рөлін тереңірек түсіндіруге мүмкіндік береді және онлайн-дағдарысты басқару мен қоғамдық өзара іс-қимыл практикаларын жетілдірудің теориялық негіздерін қалыптастырады.

Зерттеу жұмысы мына сұраққа негізделеді: дағдарыс кезінде мемлекеттік және медиалық акторлар қоғамдық пікір мен ұжымдық реакцияларды қалыптастыру үшін эмоциялық реңкі бар тілді қалай пайдаланады? Бастапқы гипотезаға сәйкес, эмоциялық коммуникация қоғамдық сенім деңгейіне, топтық сәйкестендіру үдерістеріне және қоғамдық ұстанымдардың динамикасына айтарлықтай ықпал етеді.

Зерттеудің әдіснамалық негізі дағдарыстың өмірлік цикл теориясы мен жағдаяттық дағдарыстық коммуникация теориясын біріктіріп, жиналған деректерге сапалық және сандық талдаулар жүргізілді, сондай-ақ деректерді визуализациялау әдістері қолданылды. Зерттеу екі дағдарыстық кейсті салыстырылды: 2022 жылғы Қазақстандағы Қаңтар оқиғасы және 2021 жылғы Қытайдың Чжэнчжоу қаласындағы су тасқыны.

Эмпирикалық база әлеуметтік желілер материалдарынан құралды: қазақстандық кейс бойынша – Instagram және Telegram, қытайлық кейс бойынша – Weibo және Douyin (TikTok) платформалары. Деректер дағдарысқа қатысты релевантты кілт сөздер арқылы жинақталды. Деректер қоры жарияланым мәтіндерін, жарияланым түрлерін, сондай-ақ дағдарыстың әртүрлі кезеңдеріндегі негізгі қатысу көрсеткіштерін (қаралым саны, «ұнату» белгілері, пікірлер) қамтиды.

Бұл зерттеу үш кезеңнен тұрады: бірінші, әлеуметтік желідегі жарияланымдар негізінде деректер қорын құру; екінші, П. Экманның алты негізгі эмоция моделіне сәйкес эмоцияларды кодтау; үшінші, екі кейстегі эмоциялық паттерндер мен платформалық динамиканы салыстырмалы талдау.

Зерттеу нәтижелері көрсеткендей, дағдарыс кезінде эмоциялық фреймдер жаңалықтық нарративтің құрылымына және аудиторияның реакциясына әсер етеді; эмоциялардың таралуы өз кезегінде қоғамдық сенімге, ұжымдық сәйкестіктің қалыптасуына және онлайн-талқылаулардың эмоциялық тональдылығына ықпал етеді.

Қазақстан мен Қытайдың эмпирикалық материалдарына негізделген пәнаралық салыстырмалы тәсіл дағдарыс жағдайындағы эмоциялық коммуникация механизмдерін нақтылауға мүмкіндік береді және мемлекеттік органдар, медиа ұйымдар мен қоғамдық институттар тарапынан эмоциялық күн тәртібін жауапкершілікпен басқаруға бағытталған практикалық ұсынымдар ұсынады. Бұл өз кезегінде қоғамдық диалогтің неғұрлым ұтымды әрі орнықты коммуникациялық ортасын қалыптастыруға ықпал етеді.

Түйін сөздер: дағдарыс коммуникациясы, эмоциялық мәтіндер, әлеуметтік медиа, эмоциялық амплификация.

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Эмоциональная экспрессия в кризисных коммуникациях в социальных медиа: на примере Казахстана и Китая

Цель исследования заключается в сравнительном анализе механизмов распространения и фрейминга эмоциональной экспрессии в социальных сетях Казахстана и Китая в периоды кризисов для определения их влияния на общественное мнение и выработки практических ориентиров по управлению коммуникационной повесткой.

В центре внимания находится следующий вопрос: каким образом государственные и медийные акторы используют эмоционально насыщенный язык для конструирования общественного мнения и коллективных реакций в условиях кризиса? Исходная гипотеза состоит в том, что эмоциональная коммуникация существенно влияет на уровень общественного доверия, процессы групповой идентификации и динамику общественных установок.

Методологическая рамка исследования основана на сочетании теории жизненного цикла кризиса и ситуационной теории кризисной коммуникации. В эмпирическом анализе используются качественный текстовый анализ и методы визуализации данных. В сравнительной перспективе рассматриваются два кейса: январские события 2022 года в Казахстане и наводнение в Чжэнчжоу 2021 года в Китае.

Эмпирическую базу составляют материалы социальных сетей – Instagram и Telegram в казахстанском случае, Weibo и Douyin (Tik Tok) в китайском; сбор данных осуществлялся по релевантным кризисным ключевым словам. Корпус включает тексты публикаций, их типологические характеристики, а также базовые показатели вовлечённости (просмотры, отметки «нравится», комментарии) на разных стадиях развития кризиса.

Исследование реализовано в три этапа: формирование корпуса публикаций; кодирование эмоционального содержания в соответствии с моделью шести базовых эмоций П. Экмана; сравнительный анализ выявленных эмоциональных паттернов и платформенной динамики. Результаты показывают, что эмоциональные фреймы в кризисный период во многом задают конфигурацию новостного нарратива и характер отклика аудитории; распространение эмоций, в свою очередь, оказывает влияние на уровень доверия, процессы конструирования коллективной идентичности и эмоциональную тональность онлайн-дискуссий.

Междисциплинарный сравнительный подход, основанный на эмпирическом материале из Казахстана и Китая, позволяет уточнить механизмы эмоциональной коммуникации в условиях кризиса и предлагает практические ориентиры для более ответственного управления эмоциональной повесткой со стороны государственных органов, медиа и публичных институтов с целью поддержания более рациональной и устойчивой среды общественного диалога.

Ключевые слова: кризисная коммуникация; эмоциональное выражение; социальные медиа; эмоциональная амплификация.

Introduction

While digital media is now an integral part of public opinion formation and social communication, social media has become the most energetic outlet for conveying information in extraordinary circumstances. In moments of particular social agitation and crises catalyzed by natural disasters, the social media demonstrates not only the informative functions in relaying updates and capturing the mood of the masses but also serves as a vital emotional outlet for individuals and a site for collective mourning and commensurability. Compared with conventional media, which focuses on objectivity and neutrality, social platforms are replete with subjects and emotional content from the users themselves. Emotions such as rage, grief, terror, being at a loss, and kinship spread instantaneously due to mass media, which may be called “emotional fields”. These emotional fields can heavily affect people’s risk assessment, decision making, and even the response of government agencies. The “Affective Turn” approach has become a fundamental area of exploration in a range of academic fields in recent years. Papacharissi (2015) introduced the term “affective publics”, which stressed the role emotion plays in the digital age by targeting the active role of emotion in digital communication. Emotions are no longer seen as passive, secondary to content, but as central mechanisms in political engagement, social organization, and public discourse formation. In the context of crisis communication, emotions are not merely outcomes of expression – they often serve as the very starting point of information flow and cognitive framing. Understanding how emotional expression emerges and circulates on social media is thus essential for improving crisis communication and fostering a more rational and resilient public discourse environment.

This paper focuses on the phenomenon of emotional expression in social media crisis communication, taking as case studies the 2021 “7.20” flood disaster in Zhengzhou, China, and the 2022 “January Events” in Kazakhstan. Platforms analyzed include Weibo and Douyin (China), as well as Telegram and Instagram (Kazakhstan). By conducting content analysis of user comments, platform discourse mechanisms, and mainstream media narratives, the study investigates how emotions are triggered, amplified, and transformed into collective expressions within different political and cultural contexts. Adopting a comparative approach, this paper seeks to reveal how emotional expression helps shape cri-

sis narratives in specific media environments and reflects on its implications for platform governance and public opinion management strategies.

Literature review

In communication studies, emotional expression typically refers to individuals conveying their emotions through language, text, images, or other means and transmitting them to others. These emotions may include anger, fear, sadness, sympathy, and others. In early communication research, emotions were often understood as purely personal psychological experiences. However, as the communication environment has evolved, an increasing number of scholars have begun to interpret emotional expression from the perspective of social interaction. Emotions are not merely personal sensations; they also influence others during communication and gradually enter public discourse. When individuals express emotions in public digital spaces, these sentiments become visible to broader audiences, effectively shaping the collective understanding of events.

Within media and journalism, emotional expression has always been present in information dissemination (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). News reporting not only presents facts but also conveys certain emotions through narrative techniques, language choices, and visual presentation when covering social events. Take disaster coverage as an example: media outlets often emphasize sadness or sympathy when recounting events, using visuals and narratives to facilitate emotional resonance among audiences (Pantti et al., 2012). Such reporting can influence how audiences perceive events and, to some extent, alter the direction of public attention. With the rise of digital media, the role of emotional expression in communication has become increasingly prominent. Social media platforms provide ordinary users with spaces to express emotions and participate in public discourse. Emotional expression no longer originates solely from media institutions; ordinary users have also become active participants in emotional transmission. Through comments, reposts, images, and videos, users convey their feelings. These emotions are amplified through continuous interaction, gradually forming a collective emotional atmosphere. In such a communication environment, emotional expression not only reflects individual attitudes but also influences how the public perceives public events and social issues.

In recent years, social media has become one of the most important spaces for crisis communication,

and emotional expression has increasingly shaped how the public understands and reacts to crises. Papacharissi (2015) introduced the concept of affective publics to describe how emotions shared on social media connect people around specific events. Through everyday practices such as posting, commenting, and sharing, individual feelings gradually turn into a collective emotional atmosphere. On social media, algorithms and interactive features make some emotional messages more visible than others. As a result, certain emotions are amplified and spread more widely across platforms.

During crisis situations, social media also becomes a key channel where people both look for information and express their feelings. Pond (2016) showed that emotionally charged messages on Twitter receive more attention and interaction during crises. Platforms also tend to promote this kind of content, which further increases the spread of emotions in crisis communication.

In the Chinese context, researchers have paid growing attention to emotional expression during public crises. Yang (2021) found that emotional content spreads faster and reaches wider audiences than non-emotional information, and that it plays an important role in shaping online discussions. Wang et al. (2023), in their study of emotional contagion during the COVID-19 pandemic, also showed that negative emotions moved more easily across social media and increased public anxiety. Emotional communication further influences how crisis events are remembered and understood. Zhang et al. (2020) showed that emotional expression on social media helped people form shared interpretations of crisis events in China. As comments, images, and videos circulate again and again, users remember not only what happened but also how it felt. Over time, emotions such as fear, anger, and sympathy become stronger through repeated sharing and begin to dominate online conversations.

In Kazakhstan, research on crisis communication and emotional expression on social media has expanded in recent years. Studies consistently indicate that social media functions as a key channel for both information access and emotional expression during crises, and that institutional communication strategies significantly shape public trust (Burkitbayeva, 2024). Emotional dynamics on social networks have been identified as a critical factor influencing public reactions. Ibrayeva & Nurshaikhova (2024) demonstrated that emotional accumulation through user interactions contributes to opinion polarization and intensifies perceptions of crisis, thereby complicating crisis management processes.

Research on the January 2022 events shows that social media not only disseminated information during the crisis but also served as a crucial space for public expression of emotions. Taking Telegram example, Ternov et al. (2024) analyzed content from multiple Telegram channels during the January events. They found that while disseminating information, many channels also consistently featured narratives with pronounced emotional overtones. Users expressed their attitudes through reposts comments and channel discussions. Within this interactive environment emotionally charged content tended to attract greater attention and gradually influence the direction of public discourse. Troitskiy et al. (2024) focused on their research in expert discourse within social media. They compiled comments from multiple Kazakhstani experts on social media platforms and observed that these discussions often included not only factual explanations but also personal evaluations. When experts expressed concerns, criticism, or support, these emotional expressions influenced how audiences understood events and were amplified throughout the discussion process. Regarding crisis information dissemination, misinformation also impacts the spread of emotions. Akseiit & Kabdugaliyev (2023) examining fact-checking practices in Kazakhstan's media landscape mention platforms like Factcheck.kz and Stopfake.kz attempting to identify and correct misinformation online. The study suggests that during social crises, unverified information readily heightens public uncertainty and triggers emotions like fear or anxiety, which then spread further through social media interactions.

Together, these studies suggest that emotional communication on social media is not only about individual feelings. It is a collective process shaped by platforms and user interaction. This process can be understood as emotional amplification, meaning that personal emotions become stronger and turn into shared public feelings through repeated sharing and platform visibility. Emotional amplification influences how people interpret crises and how they think about risk, responsibility, and social relations.

Based on this theoretical perspective, this study examines emotional expression across different phases of two crisis events in Kazakhstan and China and explores how political and cultural contexts shape the spread of emotions on social media. By using emotional amplification as a comparative lens, the study aims to show how emotions circulate and gain meaning in digital crisis communication.

Materials

The materials used in this research come from social media posts and online news related to two crisis events: the January 2022 unrest in Kazakhstan and the July 2021 flood in Zhengzhou, China. These two cases were widely discussed online and produced a large amount of user-generated content. To observe how people express emotions during crises, this study collected data from several major social media platforms used in the two countries.

For Kazakhstan, the data mainly comes from Instagram and Telegram. These two platforms are widely used by the public to follow news and discuss social issues. Instagram is built around images and short videos. Users usually share information through posts and then interact through comments and likes. Telegram works differently. Besides private messaging, it allows users to create channels and groups where information can be shared with large audiences. In many cases, news or opinions first appear on Telegram channels and are then discussed further in group chats. Because of this structure, crisis-related information and emotional reactions can spread very quickly on these platforms.

For the Chinese case, the main platforms examined in this research are Weibo and Douyin. Weibo is a microblogging platform where users post short messages and join discussions through hashtags. Government departments, media organizations, and ordinary users all take part in these conversations. Some topics can quickly become widely discussed and attract thousands of comments and reposts. Douyin is a short-video platform created by ByteDance for the Chinese market. The international version of this platform is TikTok. Unlike Weibo, which focuses more on text-based discussions, Douyin spreads information mainly through short videos. Its recommendation system also helps popular content reach a large number of users.

Taken together, these four platforms form an important online space where crisis information circulates and public discussion takes place. Government accounts release official information, media outlets report updates, and users respond by commenting, sharing, or posting their own views. The content appears in different formats, including text posts, photos, short videos, and comment threads. These different formats create multiple ways for people to express their emotions and opinions during crisis events.

During the data collection stage, the study searched for posts using event-related keywords,

hashtags, and discussion topics. In the Chinese case, materials mainly came from comment sections and video responses under topics such as “Zhengzhou Flood” and “Metro Line 5 Rescue.” For Kazakhstan, the data included Telegram group discussions about protests, internet shutdowns, and political developments. It also included posts and comment interactions from government agencies, independent media, and journalists on Instagram. After collecting these materials, representative examples were manually selected and organized into datasets for further analysis.

Methods

This study adopts textual analysis as the primary research method, combined with a case-comparative approach, to explore the specific characteristics and temporal evolution of emotional expression in social media crisis communication. The same analytical framework is used for both cases so that emotional expression can be compared across the same stages of the crisis.

The analytical framework integrates theories from emotion psychology and media communication. Drawing on Ekman’s six basic emotions (anger, sadness, fear, surprise, disgust, joy), emotional categories were assigned to the data, alongside identifying emotion-related discursive frames commonly used on social media. Emotional expressions in both cases were coded using the same coding rules and analytical procedures. After classification, all texts were chronologically divided into three phases: crisis outbreak, peak public attention, and post-crisis reflection based on Fink’s Crisis Lifecycle Model. This stage division allows emotional patterns to be compared by crisis phase rather than by calendar time. Within each phase, the frequency and dominance of emotional types were measured to understand the social functions these emotions served in the evolving communication process.

In the early phase, most posts showed shock, fear, and anxiety because the event happened suddenly. During the peak phase, anger and blame appeared more often, and many users expressed protest and dissatisfaction with slow and unclear responses. In the final phase, emotions such as solidarity, comfort, and calls for rationality gained traction, reflecting both public emotional self-regulation and the effect of platform-driven emotional moderation strategies. These shifts help illuminate the dynamic relationship between emotional expression and crisis communication strategies.

To better understand how emotions spread, this study also looks at how each platform works. Social media is not a neutral space for emotions. Algorithms and moderation rules influence which emotional messages are seen and which are limited. By comparing Weibo's trending topic algorithm, comment sorting logic, and the update rhythms of Telegram channels, and combining this with observations of language style, visual content selection, and comment moderation strategies on the analyzed Instagram accounts, this study explores how emotions are triggered, amplified, or constrained through platform structures. It further outlines how platforms technically participate in the construction of emotional dynamics.

This study also examines how official messages and user responses influence each other. In both cases, government and mainstream media accounts changed their communication style across different crisis stages. Early posts were mostly neutral in tone in order to keep stability, while later posts used more emotional words such as "hero," "moving," and "united as one" to respond to public feelings and guide discussion. Comments show how the public understood and reacted to these official messages. Through the analysis of emotional expression in two major crisis events, this study links three aspects: message content, platform structure, and communication strategy. It helps explain how emotions appear, spread, and are managed on social media and offers useful ideas for improving crisis communication in practice.

Results and discussion

Emotionalization and Crisis Communication Strategies on Social Media. In the age of social media, the emotionalization of crisis communication manifests in two key aspects: emotionally charged content by communicators and emotionally driven interpretation by audiences. From the communicator's perspective, emotionalization in news refers to the use of emotional language and individual-level psychological narratives within the text. In crisis communication, emotional expression becomes increasingly granular, characterized by the strategic use of emotive punctuation, affective vocabulary, and poignant imagery. Furthermore, specialized hashtagging strategies are employed to amplify audience engagement and heighten situational awareness. Unlike traditional news narratives that emphasize factual reporting and neutrality, emotional expression reflects the direct articulation of psycho-

logical states triggered by external events. It often includes linguistic markers such as exclamations, rhetorical questions, mood particles, and intensifiers.

Four dominant emotions commonly observed in crisis communication are anger, sadness, fear, and anxiety. However, in today's digital environment, these negative emotions no longer fully capture the emotional landscape of online crisis discourse. Positive emotional types – like "inspirational" and "gratitude-oriented" moods – are no less significant. Such emotion, which is mainly collective, gives priority to optimism and resilience among community members, thereby enabling them to overcome fear and inaction during difficult situations. The negativity associated with anxiety, grief, and outrage will only be highlighted by government actors and the media groups in the initial stages of a crisis, while the positive narrative highlighting community reliability and motivational group thinking will be promoted. By this means, the collective framing of one's emotional experience enables cultivating public trust and driving the society to make it through tough times.

For example, following the January events in Kazakhstan, media channels tapped on such themes as holding together in times when the unrest is over. This crisis communication was, to a great extent, organized by using imperative and appreciative statements. Among the terms frequently used for motivational expressions were "solidarity," "stability," and "triumphing over", while for appreciation the terms "gratitude," "care," and "people on board" were in abundance.

From the perspective of the audience, "emotionalization" refers to the fact that during the process of crisis communication, the public is more likely to understand the news content with emotions and personal feelings. This way of understanding is marked by a distinct emotional tendency and represents a genuine response of people to crisis communication strategies. When we are confronted with information related to crises, we often do not analyze it calmly but first feel scared, angry, sad or anxious. The changes in emotions can directly reflect whether the communication strategy has reached the public's psychology. If everyone experiences intense emotions, it indicates that the information has indeed drawn attention and evoked emotional resonance. Meanwhile, the emotional responses left by the public on social media are not merely emotions themselves; they are also expressions of stance. Take some popular comment sections as an example. Us-

ers who support or oppose a certain statement often gather together to form a unified voice. This similarity in stance will make it easier for people to develop psychological identification with each other, further shorten the distance between them, and create an atmosphere of “aggregation”.

Crisis Event Overview.

According to the Crisis Lifecycle Model, crises following a development routine that include various stages, including development, development, maturity, and resolution. Each level has its own distinctive traits. Based on this framework, Fink divides the prodromal (potential) stage, the acute (outbreak), the chronic (continuation) stage, and the resolution (recovery) stage into four periods. These stages provide information into the active development of crises development and communication strategies over time.

This study adopts Fink’s model as its primary theoretical framework and categorizes the two crisis cases under investigation—the Zhengzhou flood and the Kazakhstan January protests—into four stages: prodromal, outbreak, continuation, and recovery.

In the case of Kazakhstan, the January 2022 crisis was triggered by a government announcement on January 2 that liquid petroleum gas (LPG) prices would increase, which sparked nationwide protests. Therefore, this study focuses on social media content posted between January 2 and January 19, 2022, with an emphasis on Instagram and other platforms. A textual analysis is conducted on crisis-related posts, including emotionally charged language and visual elements such as images and videos that carry affective connotations. The study examines the proportion, strategies, and functions of emotional expression across the three key crisis stages to understand how emotionalized communication operated within news and social media discourse during the crisis.

In comparison, the Zhengzhou “7.20” flood was caused by an extreme weather event that struck Zhengzhou on July 20, 2021, resulting in severe flooding of Metro Line 5 and leaving many people trapped underground. The incident quickly became a national media focus. This study analyzes content disseminated between July 20 and July 31, 2021, across platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and major state media outlets like People’s Daily and Xinhua News Agency. The analysis focuses on emotional language, visual representation, and affective tendencies, examining how different emotional expressions and narrative strategies were employed during various stages of the crisis

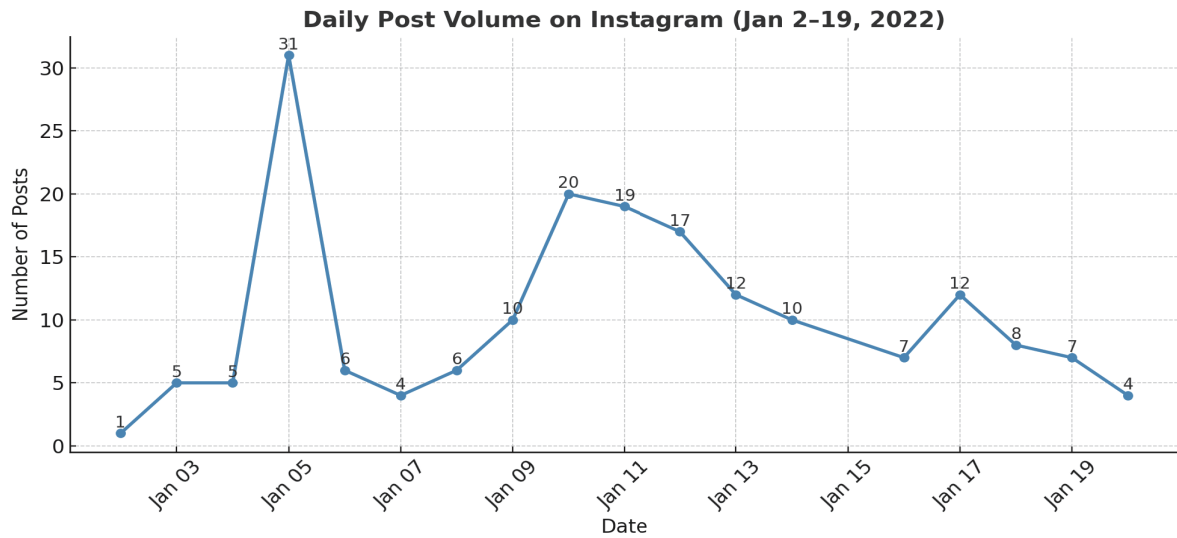
The January Events in Kazakhstan. Prodromal Stage (January 2, 2022). Social Tensions and Policy Shift. On January 2, 2022, protests initially broke out in the western Kazakh city of Zhanaozen, triggered by a sudden surge in the price of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). The government’s decision to liberalize LPG pricing significantly affected residents and transportation sectors in the western regions, which are heavily dependent on LPG, fueling widespread public discontent. According to collected data, there were 3 relevant posts on Instagram on January 2 (accounting for approximately 6.2% of the total sample), mainly originating from regional news accounts and user-generated video content. The initial signs of street protests, which were generally depicted in the images and videos, were longer lines at gas stations, long queues at petrol stations, and early indications of demonstrations. The government’s anxiety was heightened by stories like “residents covering up for energy” and “fuel rates too high”, which helped lay the groundwork for the coming storm of public discourse.

Media and Social Platform Dissemination.

Social media emerged as the primary channel of communication for protesters. Public discontent regarding the fuel price hike escalated rapidly across platforms such as Instagram and Telegram. The president’s inability to respond quickly heightened public view, causing the second wave of an info boom. Between January 2 and January 3, the number of posts almost tripled, as shown in Figure 1, indicating a quick move from passive to effective personal appearance. The fast expansion of social media’s influence on the development of open mind and open discussion in the early stages of the issue is exemplified by this wave.

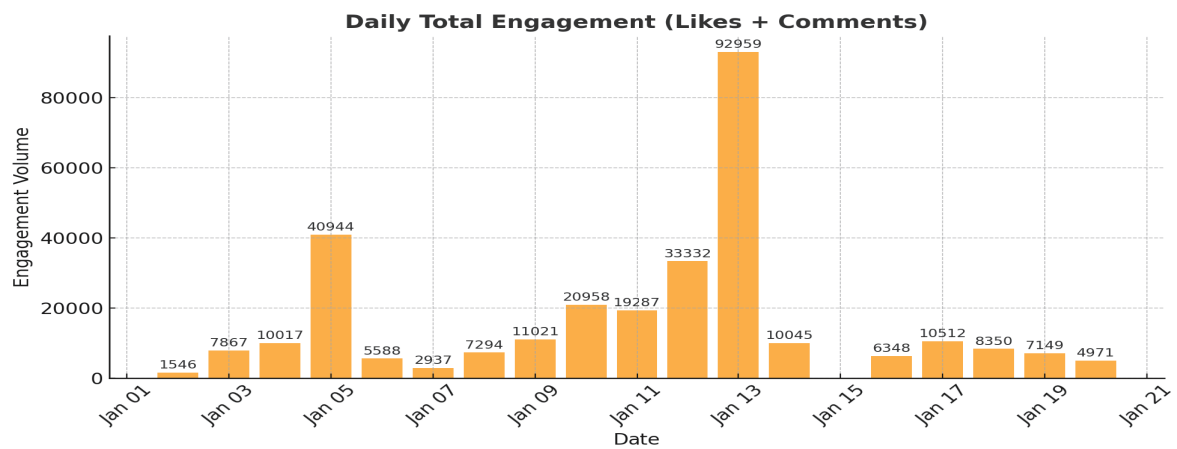
Outbreak Stage (January 3 – 5, 2022). Initial Government Response. On January 3, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev made his first public statement regarding the unrest. Via Twitter, he instructed the government to assess the situation in Mangystau Region “taking into account legal and economic feasibility,” and called on demonstrators to maintain public order, encouraging citizens to express their concerns through lawful means. According to Instagram interaction data, there were 9 posts related to the government response between January 3 and 5, featuring video clips of the president’s statement, official press conferences, and news segments. On January 5, the total engagement (likes + comments) reached a peak of approximately 102, 000 interactions (see Figure 2).

Figure 1
Daily Number of Instagram Posts During the Kazakhstan “January Events” (Jan 2–19, 2022)



Source: Compiled by the authors

Figure 2
Daily Total Engagement (Likes and Comments) for the “January Events” in Kazakhstan



Source: Compiled by the authors

Widening Scope of Protests. By January 4, protests had reached big cities like Aktobe, Astana, and Almaty. Almaty and the Mangystau Region both declared states of emergency. The opposition movement gained more common aid as the information flowed more swiftly both on social media and the major. The president’s press reply, however, lagged behind the events and failed to properly affect the community, adding to the growing unease. In addition, provoking information started to appear on

social media, creating more upheaval. Images like “protest scenes”, “night- day road gatherings”, and “burning tires” seem often in post metadata from this time. What can be said about interactive personal narratives was reinforced by the pairing of personal background music and initial- person perspectives in numerous videos. Post metadata from this period indicates frequent appearance of imagery such as “protest scenes,” “night-time street gatherings,” and “burning tires.” Many videos were paired

with emotional background music and first-person perspectives, reinforcing what can be described as participatory emotional narratives.

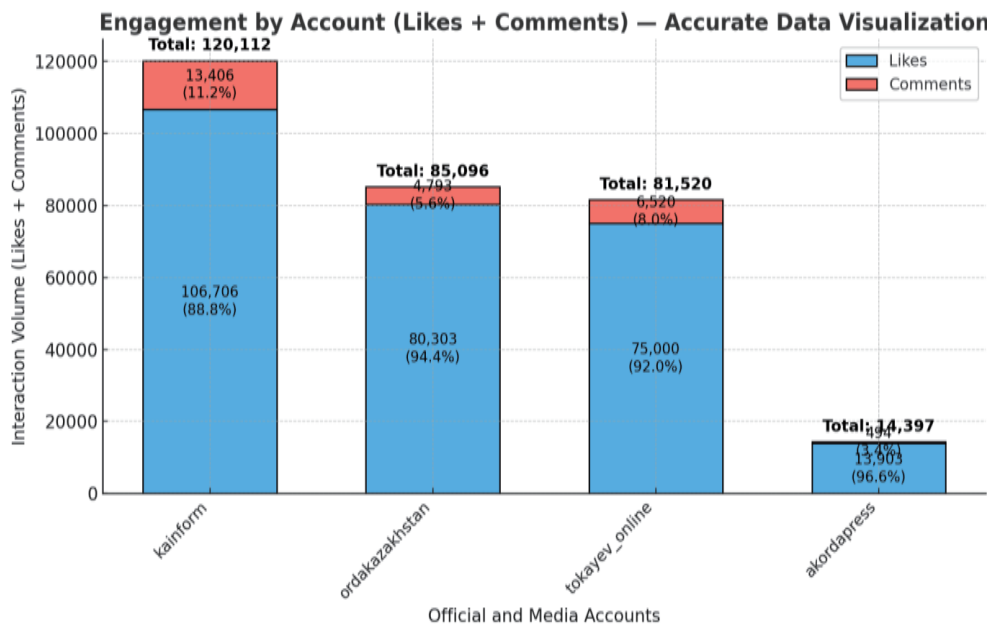
State of Emergency and CSTO Involvement. On January 5, President Tokayev accepted the government's resignation and declared a nationwide state of emergency. He also requested assistance from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to help restore order. The government attempted to disseminate stabilizing messages through national television and official news agencies. Notwithstanding that, the social media propaganda gave a voice to the anti-government (putschist) propaganda. It kept on portraying the weak side of the official report and continued to distort public opinion. The firm media controls that our governments have kept on implementing further served to deteriorate public trust more and contributed to a more fractal information environment. It was during this time that the most involved post was, without a doubt, the "Visit to Almaty" video showing up on the @tokayev_online account, which had 75k likes and 6,520 comments. The brief employed an austere style, observing a grim music score. It provided an example of the traditional government messaging that is both credible and soothing for emotions.

Continuation Stage (January 6 – 11, 2022). Information Blackout and Communication Restrictions. Starting January 6, a nationwide internet shut-down was imposed in Kazakhstan to limit the spread of information and disrupt communication among protestors. Internet monitoring group NetBlocks reported significant connectivity disruptions, severely affecting mobile services and effectively cutting off channels for political expression. However, the shut-down created a lack of knowledge, which caused stress, debate, and the spread of gossips immediately. According to research on crisis communication, full information suppression often generates global outcry and encourages the general public to avoid restrictions through VPNs and other means, more compromising the legitimacy of the government.

According to statistics, the number of posts between January 6 and 11 declined sharply, with an average daily drop of around 70%. Nonetheless, official media accounts such as @kainform and @ordakazakhstan continued to post actively and maintained high engagement levels. These two accounts recorded a combined total of 120,112 and 85,096 interactions, respectively, during this period (see Figure 3), representing approximately 65% of all sample engagement.

Figure 3

Comparative Engagement Performance of Key Official and Media Accounts (Total Likes and Comments)



Source: Compiled by the authors

Government Efforts to Shape Public Opinion

On January 7, President Tokayev announced that constitutional order had been restored in most regions. The statement was intended to reaffirm government legitimacy and signal that the situation was under control to both domestic and international audiences. Yet, because social media restrictions were still in place, public trust in official information remained limited, which reduced the impact of the government's message. Posts from that day mostly showed soldiers helping civilians and restoring order in the streets. Captions frequently used emotional terms such as "unity," "stability," and "order," reflecting an effort to calm the public and reassure citizens during the middle phase of the crisis.

National Image Building.

On January 9, former Minister of Education Askarbek Kussainov published an article through the Kazakh International News Agency calling for national unity. He urged Kazakhs to remember their heritage and to act as descendants of a proud nation in a difficult moment. Government representatives and public figures used national identity and historical memory to rebuild social cohesion and guide public opinion toward stability.

Data from the official account @akordapress show that during this period its posts received 13,903 likes and 494 comments. Many posts featured national symbols—the flag, traditional clothing, and imagery of ethnic unity—creating a clear emotionally driven narrative aimed at strengthening national pride and collective resilience.

Recovery Stage (January 10 – 19, 2022). Easing Public Sentiment.

On January 10, the government declared a National Day of Mourning for those who died in the unrest. The gesture sought to ease tension and redirect attention from criticism of the government's crisis response. Still, earlier information blackouts and the state's strict measures left parts of the public doubtful about official motives. During this phase, communication efforts focused on restoring the government's image and regaining public confidence, though the results were modest.

As shown in Figure 2, total engagement on January 10 reached approximately 78,000 interactions. Posts during this period frequently utilized black-and-white imagery, candles, and prayer emojis—symbols that suggest a shift in public emotion from anger toward compassion.

International Public Relations.

On January 11, President Tokayev announced that CSTO peacekeeping troops would begin leav-

ing within two days and complete their withdrawal in ten. The move was widely seen as an attempt to reassure foreign audiences that the situation was stable. Government media also emphasized its ability to manage the crisis while downplaying criticism of the security response. However, earlier communication shutdowns and confrontational rhetoric continued to undermine credibility.

During this time, official posts adopted a noticeably softer tone. Many focused on themes such as "restoring order" and "peaceful transition," aiming to project calm and unity as the key emotional direction in state communication.

Crisis Management and Trust Repair.

On January 19, the nationwide state of emergency was officially lifted. The government began to relax controls on social media and allowed limited reporting by media outlets. Crisis communication strategies shifted into a post-crisis management phase, which included improving transparency, adjusting economic policies, and engaging with the international community to mitigate the crisis's long-term reputational impact. Nonetheless, due to the lack of effective communication in the early stages, public and international trust in the government remained fragile and would require sustained efforts to rebuild.

According to the aggregated data, the interaction counts for the three primary accounts—@kazinform, @ordakazakhstan, and @tokayev_online—reached 120,112, 85,096, and 81,520, respectively. These figures underscore the critical role of official media outlets and authoritative accounts in stabilizing public sentiment and guiding the discourse throughout the crisis.

The Zhengzhou Flooding Incident in China. Prodromal Stage (July 18 – 19, 2021).

Many weather alerts failed to raise much public attention to the potential risk. Red alerts for heavy snowfall were issued for two consecutive days starting on July 18 in accordance with information from the Zhengzhou Meteorological Observatory, stating the possibility of serious rain. However, the majority of the media and provincial authorities waited too long to answer and showed little strategic concern for possible problems with industrial flooding or delays in public transport. A dozen impartial weather bloggers posted cautions for "imminent serious conditions" on platforms like Weibo and urged people to be cautious about the flood. However, these warnings had a lower level of user proposal, and open outcry was mostly caused by regular indifference or informal dismissal. On platforms such as Weibo, a

few independent meteorological bloggers warned of “upcoming extreme weather” and urged citizens to remain vigilant against flooding. Yet, these warnings attracted minimal user engagement, and public reactions were largely characterized by habitual indifference or casual dismissal.

Public confidence in urban infrastructure also shaped emotional responses during this stage. Many residents expressed faith in Zhengzhou’s drainage systems, often remarking that “as a national central city, Zhengzhou can handle heavy rain.” Social media posts from this period frequently carried a lighthearted tone. Short videos showing early street flooding were accompanied by captions like “it’s sea-watching season again” or “time to sail the streets,” reflecting an overall mood of amusement and denial rather than precaution.

In contrast, public perceptions of established danger were distorted due to the absence of official risk communication. No concrete health recommendations were distributed through state firms or media outlets. Some people, as a result, did not take precautionary measures. Although the majority of people’s emotions were hostile, the popular estimate of risk and a lack of course stoked the development of anxiety and outrage that may follow.

Outbreak Stage (July 20, 2021).

A big urban crisis resulted from the onset of serious weather. A history-breaking storm struck Zhengzhou on July 20, 2021, with rain exceeding 600 mm for the entire 24-hour period. Many train stations, sidewalks, and tunnels are submerged in the frequent heavy rains, trapping a large number of people. The incident on Metro Line 5, where passengers were stranded inside flooded carriages, quickly captured nationwide attention and marked the turning point from an underestimated natural event to a full-blown public crisis.

Emotional Outburst on Social Platforms.

Weibo, Douyin, and other social media platforms became the primary spaces for citizens to seek help and express fear. Many distress videos featured intense emotional audio—sobbing, gasping, and urgent pleas—accompanied by texts such as “The subway is flooding and no one is helping” or “We’re suffocating,” which spread rapidly online, fueling anxiety and public empathy. While official media outlets like People’s Daily and Xinhua News Agency began issuing statements later that evening, the initial delay in updates led many users to turn to citizen bloggers and on-the-ground videos for real-time information. This shift marked the formation of

an emotion-driven information dissemination path.

Continuation Stage (July 21–24, 2021). State advertising and government programs offer emotional support. Mainstream media coverage prioritized the reporting of rescue operations, highlighted on July 21 through headlines such as “Armed Police Pump Water Overnight” and “Soldiers Carry the Elderly to Safety.” These narratives emphasized the cohesion between state forces and the public. On Weibo, engagement levels for keywords like #HeroesInAction and #ZhengzhouSubwayRescue surged rapidly. Official government accounts utilized these “touching moments” to channel the heightened public mood toward admiration, gratitude, and social resilience.

Emotional Communication in Visual Storytelling

Media and volunteers posted rescue footage enhanced with emotional background music (e.g., Our States and Peace) on small video platforms (e.g., Take Care and The Common Road), warm-colored filters, sluggish-motion effects, and subtitles. This visual and auditory therapy transformed a government’s concern into gratitude and respect. The high-speed customer feedback, such as “I cried seeing this,” “So moved,” and “This is the strength of China,” represent the social discourse’s emotional frequency and replication. High-frequency user comments included “I cried watching this,” “So moved,” and “This is the power of China,” illustrating the emotional resonance and amplification within social discourse.

Social Media as a Space for Collective Emotional Construction.

On Douyin, numerous videos by volunteers emerged – such as “van driver distributing water for free” or “pop-up roadside rescue points” – with user-added hashtags like Hope, Persistence, and OneFamily. These grassroots emotional expressions contributed to shaping the crisis narrative and, in turn, influenced official media to adopt a warmer, more human-centered tone. A positive feedback loop was thus established between users, platforms, and media institutions.

Recovery Stage (July 25 – 31, 2021). Shift Toward Comfort and Reconstruction.

As floodwaters receded and rescue operations wound down, official communications transitioned to focus on post-disaster recovery. Official contacts changed to focusing on the article- disaster recovery as the floodwaters receded and recovery procedures resumed. Matters like “Metro service restarting” and “Reform of emergency response methods” are

starting to appear in public discussion. Mainstream media reinforced an image of stability and development with stories about assurance, rebuilding, and lessons learned.

Consolation and Resonance are the transitions in the feeling of appearance.

Weibo and Douyin's comment sections featured phrases like "We're in this together", "Thank you", and "Stay strong, Henan", all of which suggested a strong sense of belonging and cohesion. Many commemorative short video honouring victims were broadly circulated, creating thought and emotional identification. The voice of the general public changed to a more pleasant voice.

Media as a Social Emotional Outlet.

A particular model of People's Daily on Weibo, entitled "Zhengzhou: 72 Times", provides a comprehensive account of how normal people responded to the crisis. The transition from actual-time crisis reporting to the public's personal healing process saw a shift in media narratives from a focus on rescue operations to the portrayal of social heroism. Media narratives moved from a focus on rescue operations to the portrayal of collective heroism, completing the shift from real-time crisis reporting to the emotional healing process of the public.

The emotional communication surrounding the Zhengzhou flood on social media followed a distinct phase-based trajectory – from neglect to panic, then admiration, and finally consolation. Platform mechanisms, user behaviors, and official discourse dynamically interacted throughout the process. Emotion functioned not only as a reactive expression but also as a driving force for collective action and narrative construction.

In comparison, the emotional communication pathway during Kazakhstan's "January Events" followed a multi-layered dynamic that progressed from accumulated grievance to anger, distrust, and eventually recovery and reconstruction. Data shows that between the policy announcement on January 2 and the outbreak stage on January 5, the number of related Instagram posts increased from 3 to 9, with daily engagement averaging around 100,000 interactions – indicating a concentrated release of public emotion and a surge in expressive participation.

During the continuation phase (January 6–11), despite a nationwide internet shutdown that re-

duced content volume by approximately 70%, official accounts such as @kainform and @ordakazakhstan maintained a strong presence. Their total engagement reached 120,112 and 85,096 interactions, respectively, helping sustain channels of public communication within a restricted information environment. In the recovery stage (January 10–19), engagement declined to about 78,000, and public sentiment gradually shifted from anger to reflection and compassion. Accounts like @tokayev_online employed emotionally restorative language – emphasizing mourning, unity, and rebuilding – to promote social cohesion and emotional reassurance.

These figures suggest that the emotional trajectory of the January Events underwent a transformation from public dissatisfaction to rational reconciliation. In the context of crisis governance, state-affiliated media and authoritative social accounts served not only as conduits of information but also as active agents attempting to rebuild public trust and stabilize collective psychological expectations through emotional discourse.

Compared to the Zhengzhou flood case, while the two crises differ in their causes, media infrastructures, and political contexts, both reveal the decisive role emotional communication plays in shaping crisis narratives. Emotional expression is not just a means of release; it is also a key tool for social inclusion, the formation of common consensus, and the development of post-crisis resilience, whether in the form of empathy and reverence during natural disasters or understanding and reconciliation in times of unrest.

Emotional Expression Across Crisis Stages: Comparative Dynamics.

This section presents a comparative study of the two incidents, the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan and the July 2021 Zhengzhou flood in China, to provide a clearer understanding of how thoughts change over the course of a crisis conversation. Four crucial phases: Prodromal, Outbreak, Continuation, and Recovery are identified in the aftermath of Fink's Crisis Lifecycle Model (1986) and Papacharissi's (2015) affective publics framework.

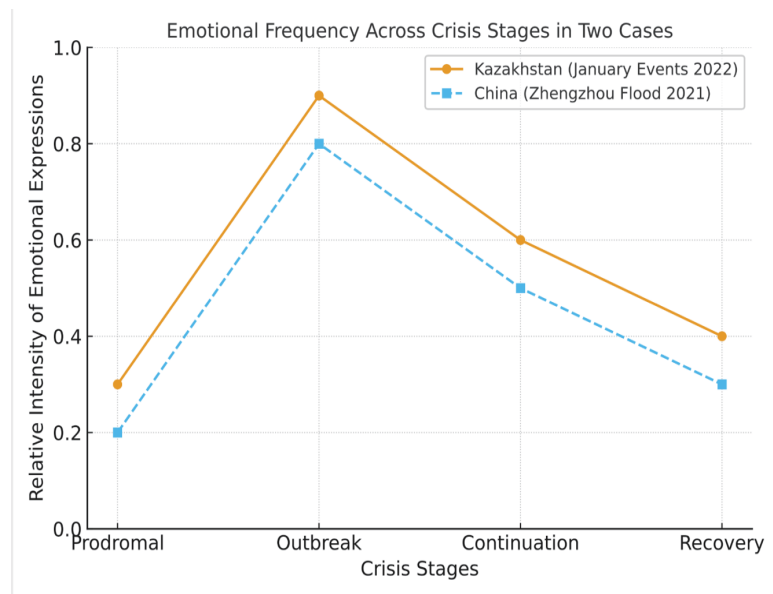
Each step demonstrates how program activities, communication methods, and emotive intensity interact with one another.

Table 1
Comparative Emotional Dynamics of Crisis Communication on Social Media

Crisis Stage	Kazakhstan: “January Events” (2022)	China: Zhengzhou Flood (2021)	Dominant Emotions	Communication Strategies	Observed Social Outcomes
Prodromal (pre-Crisis)	Local frustration over LPG price liberalization; first Instagram posts express injustice and neglect; early emotional cues remain localized	Repeated rainfall alerts but weak media response; humorous framing of risk (“sea-watching season”)	Mild anger, anxiety, denial, complacency	Absence of proactive framing; weak institutional voice	Emotional underestimation of risk; latent tension accumulation; weak official credibility
Outbreak	Rapid protest escalation via Telegram and Instagram; anger and outrage dominate public discourse	Panic and fear triggered by subway flooding videos; viral distress messages spread nationwide	Anger, fear, panic, Urgency, frustration, helplessness	User-driven communication; delayed government response	Emotional contagion; weakening of trust in official channels
Continuation (Peak)	Nationwide internet blackout; fragmented emotional flow; government promotes “unity” and “stability” frames	Official media amplify “heroes in action,” “China speed” narratives to steer emotion	Anxiety, distrust→ pride, gratitude, admiration	Emotional steering and narrative reframing	Emotional convergence; stabilization of discourse
Recovery	National Day of Mourning; emotional tone shifts toward compassion and solidarity	Focus on reconstruction and collective healing; comfort messages dominate online discourse	Mourning, compassion, unity, Consolation, hope	Symbolic reassurance, national identity reinforcement	Gradual emotional reconciliation; trust restoration

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Figure 4
Emotional frequency across crisis stages in the Kazakhstan (January 2022) and China (Zhengzhou 2021) cases. Source: Author’s content analysis, 2021–2022



Source: Compiled by the authors

Figure 4 illustrates the dynamic fluctuation of emotional intensity across four crisis stages – Prodromal, Outbreak, Continuation, and Recovery – in the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan and the July 2021 Zhengzhou flood in China.

At the Prodromal stage, emotional engagement on social media remained low: Kazakh users expressed mild frustration over fuel prices, while Chinese audiences treated weather alerts with indifference or humor.

During the Outbreak stage, both cases show a sharp emotional surge. Anger and protest dominated Kazakhstan’s digital sphere, whereas fear and panic spread rapidly in China as flood footage circulated online.

In the Continuation stage, emotional trajectories diverged. In Kazakhstan, the internet shutdown fragmented discourse, and the government sought to channel emotions toward “unity” and “stability.” In China, emotional intensity gradually softened, transforming into admiration and gratitude through official “heroic” narratives.

Finally, the Recovery stage reflects emotional normalization. Public discourse in both contexts shifted toward compassion, solidarity, and reconstruction.

Overall, the figure shows a shared affective rhythm – early peaks of negative emotion followed by a gradual transition toward empathy and collective healing. Yet the pace and direction of emotional change differ: Kazakhstan’s trajectory reveals constrained emotional governance, while China’s indicates coordinated affective modulation through institutional narratives.

Conclusion

Strategic Communication Behind Emotional Expression

It’s not just about the distribution of details; it’s also about the restoration of social order and personal administration. The development of crisis narratives depends not only on factual precision but also, perhaps more importantly, on personal frame, which aids in shaping public perception and the construction of public discussion within various administrative frameworks and media ecologies. In his Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Coombs (2007) categorizes crisis response strategies into four primary groups: bolstering, denial, diminishment, and rebuilding. To maintain trust and repair reputational damage, he emphasizes that practitioners must tailor their approaches to the pub-

lic’s perceptions of responsibility and the perceived severity of the crisis.

In the case of the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan, what began as a protest against rising LPG prices quickly escalated into a nationwide socio-political crisis. Due to the politically sensitive nature of the event, the diversity of protest demands, and its prolonged duration, the Kazakhstani government adopted a cautious and measured communication strategy – leaning primarily on bolstering and rebuilding approaches. Rather than responding to international criticism over its crackdown with denial, the government deepened its rebuilding strategy by constructing an emotionally unified national narrative. Official social media accounts and state-run media repeatedly invoked emotive phrases such as “the Kazakh people stand united,” “we face this challenge together,” and “the nation cannot be divided.” These emotional messages were deeply embedded in historical references and cultural symbols, appealing to collective memory and national identity. By activating these shared values, the government sought to transform public frustration into emotional support for unity and state continuity – an approach that aligns with what scholars’ term emotional governance.

However, unlike in open media environments, Kazakhstan’s tightly controlled digital sphere – marked by internet shutdowns and strict platform regulation–limited the interactive capacity of its emotional strategy. While Instagram allowed for message dissemination on a technical level, its ability to shape emotion was constrained by a fragmented and contested discursive space. Independent media outlets and foreign-based channels offered more critical, emotionally charged counter-narratives that diluted the impact of official messaging. This multi-nodal communication ecology limited the coherence of the government’s emotional narrative and weakened its role in guiding collective sentiment.

By contrast, the 2021 Zhengzhou flood in China occurred in a markedly different media and political context. Although sudden and extreme in nature, the cause of the disaster was clear, and public attribution of blame toward the government was relatively limited, framing it as a classic natural disaster. In this context, both state media and official digital platforms primarily adopted bolstering strategies in the early phase, emphasizing emotionally resonant stories such as “soldiers rushing into danger,” “volunteers working day and night,” and “immediate government response.” These narratives were wide-

ly circulated through emotive visuals and commendatory language, especially on platforms like Douyin and Weibo, where rescue footage and expressions of public gratitude formed strong emotional links between citizens and institutions.

As public attention shifted – particularly toward the entrapment incident on Metro Line 5 and questions regarding the city’s drainage infrastructure – critical commentary began to rise. During this period, some media outlets and government accounts employed diminishment strategies, using scientific or technocratic language such as “record-breaking rainfall,” “unprecedented meteorological event,” and “weather beyond human control” to reframe public expectations. This rhetorical shift marked a move toward depersonalizing the crisis and steering sentiment from anger and fear toward understanding and rational acceptance. Language choices in this phase were notably de-emotionalized and logic-driven, balancing professionalism with authority to moderate emotional reactions.

In the recovery stage, official communication quickly pivoted toward rebuilding. The narrative emphasized themes such as “accelerated post-disaster reconstruction,” “restoration of urban services,” and “psychological support initiatives underway.” Emotionally symbolic slogans – “we carry this together,” “stay strong, Henan,” “after the storm comes the rainbow” – were widely adopted to reinforce a sense of collective resilience. On a discursive level, visuals, captions, and comment sections revealed a clear emotional progression from hope to gratitude to renewed trust, forming a cyclical emotional logic that exemplifies a more mature and coordinated model of emotional communication.

Emotional Trajectories Across Crisis Stages.

Emotional expression in social media crisis communication shows a dynamic evolution that closely follows the rhythm of the unfolding event, shifts in public sentiment, and the logic of platform algorithms. In the case of Kazakhstan’s January Events, the emotional discourse progressed along a distinct trajectory: emotional aggregation → emotional outburst → emotional fragmentation → emotional reintegration. During the prodromal stage, platforms like Instagram saw early discussions about rising LPG prices. Emotions such as confusion, resentment, and a sense of deprivation were subtly embedded in user content, expressed through screenshots, on-site photos, and data comparisons. These built a preliminary sense of shared frustration. As the crisis moved into the outbreak stage, emotional expression became highly visible and intensified, dominated by anger, calls to action, and defiance. Users employed excla-

mation marks, all-caps text, and multimedia formats to create visual and linguistic impact. Protest slogans, livestream clips, and direct criticism of government inaction appeared frequently on independent journalists’ accounts. At this point, emotional expression was not only a way for users to release frustration – it became a tool for mobilization and a marker of group identity.

In the continuation stage, following internet shutdowns and the intensification of state-led security discourse, public emotional flow shifted from open expression to fragmented and more covert forms. Some users bypassed restrictions using VPNs and continued posting, with emotional tones evolving from direct resistance to cautious doubt or symbolic resistance – for example, using euphemisms such as “silence is wisdom” to avoid censorship. Meanwhile, official platforms introduced more conciliatory and motivational rhetoric. Presidential speeches included phrases like “the nation will overcome this challenge” and “we will walk through this together,” signaling a strategic intervention aimed at emotional stabilization. During the recovery stage, official Instagram accounts and local journalists began publishing content centered on mourning, rebuilding, and international solidarity. The emotional tone shifted to resilient sadness and restoring trust. Although divisions remained regarding the state’s crisis response, user discourse started to include language like “we must move forward” and “the nation needs a fresh start,” reflecting an emerging collective vision and emotional integration.

In contrast, in the Zhengzhou flood event, personal appearance followed a more horizontal style: disrespect for frequent repair. Severe weather warnings were widely circulated in the days leading up to the flood. Early online reactions were often marked by humor or indifference; phrases like “it’s ocean-viewing season again” or “no need for paddles yet” masked a false sense of security and a failure to recognize the true extent of the risk. The emotional voice immediately changed to stress and severe stress as the crisis progressed. Assist-seeking content and grief videos from train passengers flooded Weibo and Douyin. Messages like “help us,” “no signal”, and “I’m crying” conveyed fresh, deeply personal sentiment, which immediately sparked an emotional wave.

Standard media and official government account eventually took control of the tale as the story progressed, shaping views of good participation. Social media was filled with statements like “heroes who walk against the current”, “China rate”, and “most wonderful figures”, which reinforced a sense of

shared identification and national pride. People, programs, and the internet shared a high degree of emotional Resonance, with repeating phrases like “I’m in tears”, “welcome to you”, and “we’re in this together”. Official conversation switched to elements of quiet, logic, and constructiveness during the recuperation stage. Reports emphasised administrative Reform, system improvements, and post-crisis reconstruction, which serve as a launching point for personal support for restoring social and political trust. A tale of “everyday courage” was supported by little, documentary-type clips and featurettes about victims and rescue personnel, slowly easing and resolving conflicted emotions.

Despite differences in crisis type, media environment, and political structure, both cases reveal a common trajectory: a shift from fragmented individual emotions to collective emotional narratives. In these moments, emotion is no longer a spontaneous, individual reaction – it becomes a socially constructed and platform-amplified resource, shaped by technical architectures, communication strategies, and institutional power. Each crisis stage not only determines the content and intensity of emotional expression, but also defines its organizing power and governance potential within the broader sphere of public discourse.

The Role of Emotional Expression and Crisis Communication.

Emotion has slowly evolved from being simply an individual reply to a problem into a fundamental resource within the crisis communication process in the modern communication environment. Feeling plays a major role in creating event narratives and reproducing energy relations, especially in the cultural media-dominated public circle, which also facilitates the participation of collective attention and promotes problem diffusion. The emotionalized nature of public conversation during crises is exemplified by two distinct cases: the events in Kazakhstan and the Zhengzhou flood in China. Both instances reflect how emotions shape the discourse surrounding such issues, notwithstanding their contextual differences.

In the case of Kazakhstan’s January Events, emotional dissemination initially centered on anger, anxiety, and unease among protesters, spreading rapidly via Telegram and other encrypted messaging platforms, which triggered nationwide social mobilization. Independent journalists, local news channels, and ordinary citizens contributed through images, short videos, and real-time updates, reinforcing the visual impact and immersive presence of the event. This led to the swift accumulation and

amplification of negative emotions. At this stage, emotional expression exhibited a non-institutional and decentralized character, representing a spontaneous release of collective sentiment.

However, it is important to note that the government was not entirely silent. During the escalation of the crisis, the Kazakh government actively used its official Instagram channel, as well as the social media accounts of the Presidential Office, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and National Security Committee, to issue continuous statements covering situation assessments, stability maintenance deployments, definitions of destructive behavior, and appeals to innocent civilians. The emotional tone shifted from initially emphasizing “maintaining order” to themes of “unity” and “peaceful dialogue,” gradually steering public opinion back toward stability. On the emotional level, official discourse adopted a combination of calming and rational persuasion strategies, seeking public understanding and rebuilding trust through messages such as “unity is the strength of the nation” and “we will listen to the voice of the people.”

As internet services gradually resumed, the government accelerated its external communication pace and attempted to respond to outside concerns with a strategy of “controlled transparency.” For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Presidential Press Office released illustrated explanations in multiple languages, including Kazakh and Russian, via Instagram – both reaffirming the government’s opposition to violence and expressing firm confidence in a peaceful resolution. These measures show that, in the later stages of the crisis, government communication departments consciously used social media to construct a narrative chain of “crisis responsibility – signals of recovery – national unity,” enhancing the emotional appeal and communicative power of government messaging, thereby promoting emotional rebalancing and the restoration of order.

In comparison, the emotional dissemination path in the Zhengzhou flood displayed more typical characteristics of a natural disaster context. From the initial fear and sorrow during the outbreak, to admiration and empathy during the continuation phase, and finally to comfort and hope during recovery, the emotional trajectory followed a distinct, phased progression. During the recovery phase, emotional political slogans released by government platforms – such as “we carry this together” and “stay strong, Henan” – became important carriers of emotional consolidation and memory-making. At this point, emotion was no longer just a reactive re-

lease, but actively embedded in policy communication and media strategy, becoming a communicative tool for sustaining social resilience and institutional legitimacy.

A comparative view of the two cases shows that, whether in response to institutional protests or natural disasters, emotional expression has increasingly become an irreplaceable constructive tool in crisis communication. In the Kazakhstan case, the government sought from the outset to seize the emotional narrative high ground, implementing a strategic structure of “gradual appeasement – call for unity – signals of stability” through social media, reflecting a governance consciousness centered on emotional guidance in political crises. In contrast, in the Zhengzhou case, the emotional interaction between authorities and users followed more of an emotional logic of “compassionate empathy – collective healing,” highlighting the spontaneity of social emotion and the collaborative nature of governance response in the context of a natural disaster. Thus, emotion is no longer an accessory to communication, but a critical node in the crisis discourse system that constructs meaning, mobilizes behavior, and reshapes relationships. From social psychology to the political economy of media, emotionalized expression has become a key dimension for understanding the complexity of crisis communication and the strategic intent of communicative actors.

This study, taking Kazakhstan’s “January Events” and China’s “Zhengzhou Flooding” as comparative cases, reveals the strategic and structural characteristics of emotional expression in crisis communication on social media. The findings show that emotion in crisis communication is no longer merely a spontaneous public reaction, but has become an institutionalized and strategically utilized communicative resource that participates in shaping the public sphere and influences the reproduction of social order.

In Kazakhstan’s political crisis context, under the dual pressure of online opinion and social protest, the government gradually shifted from defensive responses to emotionally driven rebuilding strategies. Through official Instagram accounts and state media, it promoted a discursive logic of “appeasement – unity – reconstruction.” Although informa-

tion blockades limited interaction, government communication departments used emotionally charged keywords such as “unity” “trust” “rebirth”, along with multilingual information releases and symbolic visual expressions, to foster emotional identification with the national community. This demonstrated the state’s proactive engagement in “emotional governance” and its adaptive practices within a highly sensitive socio-political environment.

By contrast, the Zhengzhou flooding case, as a natural disaster scenario, reflected the openness of social media discourse and the self-organizing nature of public emotion. Platforms such as Weibo and Douyin formed a multi-centered network of emotional diffusion, where users, through videos, comments, and reposts, collectively generated an emotional chain of “compassion – empathy – healing – trust”. The supportive, diminishing and rebuilding strategies employed by government and media interacted constructively, guiding public emotions from panic toward comfort and transforming individual experiences into collective memory. This emotionally coordinated process, shaped by multiple actors, reflect the affective regulation mechanisms of social systems in the digital media environment and illustrates the complex interplay between media technology, algorithmic recommendation and social psychology.

The comparison of the two cases demonstrates that within a communication ecology where digitalization and emotionality coexist, emotion has become a central variable and a key governance element in crisis communication systems. In political crises, emotional communication tends to follow a “top-down” logic of structured control, focusing on maintaining order and reconstructing political legitimacy. In contrast, emotional expression during natural disasters is characterized by “bottom-up” emotional co-construction, highlighting the society’s capacity for self-healing and collective integration.

Author Contributions

Kairat Aina – Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Visualization.

Buyenbayeva Zarina – Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

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