

Emotional Reactivation in Online Public Opinion on Social Media: A Case Study of the Viral “Malfoy” Phenomenon During the 2026 Spring Festival

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Abstract

Social media has become the core field for the generation and dissemination of online public opinion. The emotional reactivation phenomenon behind the classic film and television symbols transcending time to trigger the online public opinion boom is the core research object of this study. This study takes the popular content related to the character “Malfoy” in the *Harry Potter* series during the Spring Festival of 2026 as a case. Focusing on the reasons and characteristics of the classic film and television symbols that trigger the emotional reactivation of online public opinion in the context of social media, based on the theory of emotional projection and the perspective of collective memory, it explains the two-way relationship between emotional reactivation and collective memory activation. The research adopts the text analysis method, and the core data comes from the text data of relevant topics on the Weibo platform.

Keywords

online public opinion, emotional reactivation, social media, collective memory, emotional projection

1. Introduction

In recent years, social media has gradually become an important field of online public opinion. The phenomenon that classic cultural texts cross time and re-enter the field of public opinion through secondary creation, derivation and other forms can be seen frequently.

Among them, the explosion of Draco Malfoy, the classic villain in *Harry Potter* during the Spring Festival in 2026, is a typical case of the re-evocation of online public opinion emotions in the context of social media. The *Harry Potter* series, to which the character belongs, has completed many complete dissemination cycles since it was first released in the mainland in 2002. Draco Malfoy’s name comes from the evil dragons and snakes in Western culture, and he is also a notorious villain in the film (Qian & Shen, 2010). However, in the Spring Festival of 2026, he became the “mascot of the Year of the Horse” only by users’ spontaneous fan creation, meme creation, playful reinterpretation, and other participatory practices. He triggered a large-scale discussion with a positive image. With the rise of the topic, the phenomenon has attracted the attention of many foreign media. Tom Felton, a British actor who played Malfoy, responded by posting a photo with a

handwritten Spring Festival couplet on overseas social platforms. The post was rapidly reposted across Chinese social media platforms, further promoting the popularity of the topic to the peak, confirming its typicality as a case.

This study focuses on the emotional expression of classic film and television symbols in the public opinion field under the premise of no IP official new content output. Through the case of the “Malfoy” Spring Festival in 2026, from the awakening of individual nostalgia, to the activation of collective memory, to the process of large-scale public opinion generation, we explore the triggers behind the social media context and the triggering of online public opinion. Further explore the discourse characteristics of the re-aroused emotional expression, so as to deeply explore the two-way relationship between emotional reactivation and collective memory, and provide reference for the cross-time public opinion dissemination law of classic cultural symbols in the context of social media.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Main Theoretical Vision Evoked by Online Public Opinion Emotions

The core theoretical basis of emotional arousal and emotional reactivation is the theory of empathetic communication in the intersection of communication and psychology. Existing studies divide the concept of empathy into two dimensions: cognition and emotion. Cognitive empathy refers to the ability to think from another’s perspective. Affective empathy is the ability to indirectly feel the emotions of others (Fikkers & Piotrowski, 2020). On the basis of affective empathy, empathetic communication is defined as a kind of conversational communication. The core is to build similarity and reciprocity between communication subjects through emotional expression and value recognition, and to realize empathetic communication (Lövheim, 2013). Empathetic communication can be divided into three stages: emotional empathy, cognitive empathetic and associative empathy (Shen, 2010). The core mechanism of associative empathy is emotional projection. The audience externalizes the emotions, experiences, etc. that are aroused to him, so as to realize the reinterpretation of meaning (Assmann, 2007). Emotional projection breaks through cultural barriers in communication, which is the key link for audiences across time and space to generate emotional resonance (Wei & Liu, 2026).

In the existing research on the law and evolution cycle of online public opinion, a three-stage mechanism of emotional drive has been put forward: anchoring–mediation–representation. Individual emotions evolve into shared group memory in this process (Yu & Fang, 2025). Some studies have suggested that after the information is disseminated for the first time, the “re-dissemination” behavior generated through user forwarding, comments, etc. is one of the mainstream forms of communication in the social media era (Fu et al., 2021).

Based on the existing research, this article defines the concept of emotional reactivation: When a symbol or text goes through a complete dissemination cycle, it re-enters the public opinion field under the trigger of specific factors, and realizes re-dissemination through the path of empathetic communication, triggering a new round of emotional arousal arousing of the audience.

Emotional reactivation is not only the core driving force for classic cultural symbols to continuously activate the audience’s emotional resonance in the context of social media, but also the core trigger factor for it to break through the public opinion communication cycle to realize cross-time and space communication.

2.2 Cross-time Dissemination of Classical Cultural Symbols from the Perspective of Collective Memory

Collective memory is the core analytical perspective of interpreting the cross-time propagation of classical cultural symbols. Halbwachs put forward the concept of “collective memory” for the first time in *The Social Framework of Memory*. He defines collective memory as “the social reconstruction of the past in combination with the present” (Halbwachs, 1992). Personal memory cannot be separated from collective memory, and the medium is an important carrier for building and disseminating collective memory (Chen, 2016). The popularity of social media provides a new memory building platform, Classic cultural symbols can enter a wider public eye through social media (Birkner & Donk, 2020). In the context of social media, the media has strong

inclusiveness and richness. Each user can find the content they are interested in and have space to interact with other users (Yu, 2026). Instead of the official authoritative media, users take the initiative to decide what they pay attention to (Adriaansen & Smit, 2025). Ordinary people can express their views on the content as a supplement, substitute or confrontation of official memory, and can be selectively recognized or adopted by the official, becoming a bottom-up collective memory generation method (Zhang, 2024).

Specific cultural symbols awaken the audience's individual emotions and memory connection to film and television texts, and gather individual memories into collective memories (Zhu & Yin, 2023). By forming a system of meaning, the situations or history that happened in the past are pulled into the framework of the "present" and discussed again, thus forming the cohesion of cultural memory (Assmann, 2007). The memification of classical cultural symbols in online public opinion is also one of the important ways for collective memory to be reactivated. Meme is a cultural communication unit, which is virally spread through users' fan creation, forwarding and other behaviors. Constantly awaken the shared memory of the group, and at the same time, memes will be derived and mutated in the process of dissemination, which can reconstruct and update collective memories (Ma, 2021). In the process of dissemination, the boundaries of the concept have been broadened, and the content of cultural symbols has been expanded and reinterpreted (Yu, 2026).

Collective memory is the core theoretical perspective of the re-dissemination of classical cultural symbols. Social media has broken the official monopoly on collective memory, and users have mastered the right to construct collective memory from the bottom up. The process of dissemination of classical cultural symbols is not only the process of emotional reactivation, but also the process of updating and reconstructing collective memory.

2.3 The Consensus and Expandable Space Evoked by Online Public Opinion Emotions

Existing research has built a core theoretical framework for the spread of empathy to collective memory. Sort out the emotions and then evoke the inner psychology and communication path. Explain the key role of emotional projection in public opinion breaking through cultural barriers across time and space, and once again arousing the audience's emotional process. It reflects the important factors of the spontaneous communication behavior of ordinary users as the main body in the context of social media for the re-dissemination of public opinion, and the driving force of the operation of collective memory in the context of social media to evoke emotions.

However, there is still room for expansion in research. The existing research mostly focuses on cross-time re-dissemination on the basis of official content and publicity. There is a lack of targeted research on the phenomenon of re-dissemination and re-evocation of a certain cultural symbol caused by the spontaneous fan creation, comment and other behaviors of users. Most of the existing studies focus on the one-way driving role of collective memory on the re-evocation of social media public opinion emotions, while the reverse impact of updating, expanding, and even reconstructing the phenomenon of reactivated online public opinion emotions has not been deeply explained and analyzed.

The *Harry Potter* film series is precisely aimed at teenagers. At present, Generation Z teenagers, as "digital aborigines", use social media platforms to share their discussions on various topics about this classic IP, so that they maintain popularity in the public opinion field (Li, 2025). Against this background, this study will be based on the typical phenomenon that the "Malfoy" character symbol derived from the *Harry Potter* series became popular during the Spring Festival in 2026. Supplementary research is carried out on the reasons and characteristics behind the user's independent public opinion, as well as the re-evocation of this emotion on the reconstruction of collective memory.

3. Research and Design

3.1 Research Questions

This article takes Weibo with high activity of users to share, disseminate and obtain information as an observation platform (Cheng, 2026). Weibo provides a rich and timely source of user-generated discourse. Through the content of posts on topics related to the "Malfoy" explosion of the 2026 Spring Festival, the following research questions are explored and analyzed:

Q1: What factors triggered the emotional reactivation of online public opinion within the social media sphere during the viral “Malfoy” phenomenon of the 2026 Spring Festival?

Q2: What discursive characteristics were exhibited by the emotionally reactivated online public opinion on social media platforms?

Q3: What is the relationship between the emotional reactivation of online public opinion and collective memory?

3.2 Research Methods

This article adopts the research method of text analysis. On the Weibo platform, use “Malfoy” as the keyword for topic search, and at the same time limit the event-related keywords such as “horse year mascot” and “lucky character”. Screen out the relevant topics related to the “2026 ‘Malfoy’ Spring Festival Hot” event with more than 100,000 views (Table 1). Time follows the evolution cycle of public opinion, from February 4, 2026, when the relevant topic first appeared, to February 27, 2026, when the reading volume of the relevant topic was zero. Take the content of the post under the topic as the initial data source. For the convenience of analysis, this article crawls 428 relevant topic texts through the Octopus web crawler to collect the relevant Weibo blogger’s nicknames, release time, blog content, retweets, comments and likes. The collected data were cleaned using Python. Duplicate entries, advertisements and texts unrelated to the research topic were removed, resulting in a final dataset of 200 valid texts.

Refer to the above relevant literature on online public opinion emotional research and collective memory research. This article manually codes the text from the three dimensions of emotional tendency, position expression and rhetoric, and analyzes the text content in detail. Emotional dimensions are divided into nostalgia, affection, pleasure, surprise, doubt and calmness. The position dimensions are divided into positive, neutral and negative. Rhetoric is divided into emotional, reminiscence, meme, evaluation and descriptive. In the process of specific coding, the content of a single blog post is classified according to the most important emotional expression of the text. When a text contains multiple emotions at the same time, it is classified according to the dominant emotion. The position is judged according to the attitude of the text towards the relevant events, and the rhetorical dimension is distinguished according to the expression form of the text.

After completing the coding, sort out the distribution of text emotions, positions and rhetoric, and analyze the overall discourse characteristics. Conduct an in-depth analysis of the typical text and explore the triggering causes of online public opinion emotions in the field of social media. Reveal the interaction between emotions and collective memory.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Reactivation of Public Opinion Dominated by Positive Emotions

Judging from the coding results, the public opinion text of this incident shows the emotional characteristics dominated by positive emotions. “affection” (32%) and “pleasure” (27%) two positive emotions constitute the main body of the re-evoked emotions of public opinion. The “pleasure” text is mostly about the interaction of meme-making interactions and the interesting discussion of this incident. The audience projected their New Year's blessings and preferences for classic film symbols on “Malfoy”, which aroused the positive emotions of the audience. The “affection” text is mainly the recognition of Malfoy Spring Festival couplets, badges and other peripherals, as well as the actors themselves participating in the topics. Form a positive impression of Malfoy's character symbols, and promote individual emotional awakening to upgrade to group emotional resonance. “Calm” text (22.5%) allows different groups to quickly understand the whole picture of the event through factual content, providing an information anchor for the expansion of the scope of emotional reactivation.

“Surprise” text (10.5%) and “Nostalgia” text (6.5%) play a strengthening role in emotional reactivation. The emotion of surprise mostly comes from the audience's surprise about the extent of the event. It amplifies the dramatic effect of the event and enhances the intensity of emotional arousal. Nostalgia comes from the audience's collective memory of the *Harry Potter* series, combining past movie-watching memories with current events, providing memory support and strengthening the depth of emotional re-evoked.

Table 1: Examples of Different Emotional Texts

Emotion Type	Typical Examples
Affection	<i>"Some Malfoy-related images online—there are a few I really want to buy."</i>
	<i>"Celebrities who are so down-to-earth and funny are really rare; it's impossible not to like them."</i>
Pleasure	<i>"Blessings in the Year of the Horse! May you be full of luck! May all your wishes come true!"</i>
	<i>"I wonder if Malfoy privately also 'scans the Five Blessings' for himself hahaha."</i>
Calm	<i>"Recently, many netizens turned photos of Draco Malfoy into the character 'Fu', interpreting it as 'You have blessings in the Year of the Horse.' On February 4, Malfoy actor Tom Felton reposted related news on social media."</i>
Surprise	<i>"I never expected that the first viral sensation of the Year of the Horse would be 'Malfoy'."</i>
Nostalgia	<i>"Fans from the past decade are literally dying of laughter..."</i>
Doubt	<i>"Isn't this copyright infringement?"</i>

4.2 Public Opinion Consensus on a Positive Position

The public opinion text of this incident shows a high degree of positive consensus, forming a stable and low-conflict public opinion environment. The text with a positive position (93%) constitutes the main body of the public opinion attitude. It is mainly the content of public opinion formed spontaneously by users. The audience generally approves of the behavior that gives "Malfoy" an auspicious meaning. Accept the localization meaning given by Malfoy's character symbol in this incident, and affirm the value of the cross-cultural positive communication effect triggered by this creative interpretation. Neither the neutral position (5.5%) nor the negative position (1.5%) have formed a large-scale discussion in the field of public opinion.

Domestic media such as Yangzi Evening News, Global Times, etc. systematically sorted out the complete vein of the "Malfoy" hot incident on Weibo and published many positive reports. Many overseas media such as CNN and BBC also reported the incident with a positive attitude, affirming the communication value of "Malfoy". However, the participation of the media does not dominate the trend of public opinion, but mostly takes the presentation of facts and value interpretation as a supplement to the user's discussion, which provides objective support for the emotional re-arousing of public opinion and provides a stable space for the development of public opinion.

4.3 The Public Opinion Carrier of Emotion and Memory Rhetoric

The audience discussion has formed a discourse system mainly based on emotional rhetoric and supplemented by collective memory rhetoric. Based on the essence of emotionally reactivated empathetic communication, emotional expression (22.5%) is the direct expression of affective empathy. The evaluation expression (32.5%) corresponds to the dimension of cognitive empathy, which is the external embodiment of the audience's emotional resonance with the classic film and television symbols; Based on the perspective of collective memory theory, reminiscence expression (4.5%) is a direct expression of individual memory entering the collective field. Meme-based expression (16.5%) is the meme-based dissemination of classical cultural symbols, which is the embodiment of the audience's collective memory awakening and reconstruction; As a re-dissemination of symbols and public opinion, descriptive expression is an important carrier for emotional reactivation from the individual to the collective.

Judging from the specific text of the code, emotional expression and evaluation expression constitute the main body of this public opinion discourse. Emotional expressions mostly use straightforward and fragmented words to express emotions, which do not need other logical content to pave the way, and have strong communication power. The evaluation text is mainly based on the subjective attitude of the audience, reflecting the audience's support for the event itself, meme, fan creation and other behaviors, as well as the personalized interpretation of the value of event communication.

Although expressions of reminiscence and meme-based discourse accounted for a smaller proportion than the two emotional categories mentioned above, they demonstrated clear characteristics of collective memory association and reconstruction. The memorial expression connects the audience's growth memory of the *Harry Potter* series with the classic character symbols in this event, completing the process of gathering individual memories in the field of public opinion to achieve collective awakening. Meme-based expressions constructed a localized association between "Malfoy" and the phrase "In the Year of the Horse, you are blessed." In the process of reproducing and adapting this meme, audiences endowed Malfoy, originally portrayed as an

antagonistic character, with auspicious connotations. The connotation of the original character symbol has been expanded and the collective memory has been updated.

Table 2: Examples of Different Rhetorical Texts

Rhetorical Mode	Typical Examples
Emotional	<i>“Sweet Tom, (a cute nickname for Tom Felton) you’re just too cute hahahaha.”</i> <i>“Ahahaha I can’t handle this.”</i>
Evaluation	<i>“Not only did Malfoy like it, even the BBC started reporting it; netizens really took the meme to a whole new level this time!”</i> <i>“I didn’t expect that Malfoy himself would know about the 'Fu upside down' meme—this cross-cultural exchange really deserves high praise.”</i>
Meme	<i>“Be careful, young master might go tell his dad.”</i> <i>“'Malfoy' as a homophonic pun: hilarity 100%; Malfoy himself (Tom Felton) reposting it: hilarity 1,000,000%.”</i>
Reminiscence	<i>“Suddenly remembered that back then I saw a version of Harry Potter online where this character’s name was translated as 'horse dung'; since then I can never look at this character the same way.”</i> <i>“Happy New Year~” (No 'Fu' character spell here, had to use Muggle tape to Photoshop it; PS: I’m actually in Ravenclaw).”</i>
Descriptive	<i>“As the Lunar Year of the Horse approaches, a seemingly unlikely magical character unexpectedly becomes a symbol of good fortune during the Chinese Spring Festival.”</i>

5. Discussion

5.1 Triggering Factors Behind the Emotional Reactivation of Online Public Opinion

The re-arousal of classical cultural symbols across time in the social media field is the result of the joint role of context and audience.

The adaptability of a text to the current social context is a prerequisite for the re-evocation of online public opinion emotions. On the basis of the public’s perception of Harry Potter, a classic film IP, the Chinese translation of “Malfoy” fits China's zodiac culture and the time node of the Spring Festival. Therefore, it is creatively interpreted as “In the Year of the Horse, you are blessed. “, Break down cultural barriers and complete the translation of localized meanings, so that “Malfoy” can quickly arouse the emotional resonance of the audience. With the participation of the actors themselves, we will promote the development process of this event, continue to expand the influence, so that the scope of emotional re-arousing will continue to expand, and finally form a “explosive” pattern. When a text that has completed the dissemination cycle can fit hot social topics, time nodes or public emotions, only then can we change from a silent state to a new hot topic. The fit between the classic text and the current context can provide a focus for the reactivation of the audience's emotions, which is an important factor in triggering public opinion again.

The audience's bottom-up emotional projection is the core driving force for the emotional re-arousing of online public opinion. The audience projected their good expectations for the New Year on the symbol “Malfoy”. Break its original villain label, give it a new meaning of “Mascot of the Year of the Horse”, spread scattered personal emotions to the group, and form emotional resonance. In the context of social media, everyone can speak out, and the audience is no longer a passive recipient of information. By projecting their own emotional appeals, value pursuits and life experiences on the classic text, they can become the active constructors of symbolic meaning and realize the leap from individual emotional awakening to group emotional awakening.

5.2 Discourse Characteristics of Emotions Re-evoked Public Opinion

Online public opinion generated by emotions has three characteristics: high consensus, low participation threshold and bottom-up.

Public opinion shows a high consensus. The phenomenon of emotional reactivation comes from the audience's positive emotions and collective memory of the classic text. The audience's discussion mainly revolves around emotional expression and emotional resonance. There are fewer opinions and debates, and

there is little conflict in the public opinion environment. It is dominated by many positive or neutral public opinions, dominated by positive emotions. A stable and inclusive environment will also further attract more audiences to participate in the discussion and realize the rapid spread of public opinion.

Public opinion presents a low participation threshold. The fast-paced characteristics of social media enable the audience to express their emotions in simple and straightforward forms such as playing with jokes and expressing emotions. The audience does not need to have professional creative ability, and the threshold for participating in the discussion is low. The emotions that are evoked again can be copied and adapted in a short time, so as to achieve viral spread, from the creative creation of a few people to the collective expression that everyone can participate in.

Public opinion is bottom-up. The main body of the discourse evoked by online public opinion is the spontaneous creative expression of ordinary users, not the guidance of mainstream media or institutions. From content creation, forwarding and dissemination to value interpretation, the audience takes the initiative in the whole process. Even if there are media reports, it is mainly a factual summary supplement. The process of building public opinion from the bottom up is a unique feature of the social media era.

5.3 The Two-way Influence of Emotional Reactivation and Collective Memory

The re-arousing of online emotions in the context of social media is not a one-way relationship with collective memory, but a two-way interaction relationship.

Collective memory is the core support for emotional reactivation. The spread of the *Harry Potter* series for more than 20 years has formed a wide-ranging and impressive collective memory among the public, which is the premise for the development of the Malfoy incident to become popular. There is no new content officially released by IP, but with the classic text, it can quickly awaken the audience's growth experience and quickly awaken the audience's emotional connection. In the discussion of public opinion, individual memory converges into collective memory, triggering a wide range of emotional resonance and realizing emotional re-awake.

Emotions are re-evoked and also reconstruct and update collective memory. In the "Malfoy" phenomenon, users transformed the symbolic meaning of the "mascot of the Year of the Horse" into a new constitutive element of Malfoy's character through meme creation, reposting, and other interactive practices. By integrating the cultural meanings of traditional Chinese festivals into the collective memory of the *Harry Potter* series, they expanded both the connotations and significance of collective memory.

Social media prompts the audience to spontaneously reconstruct and update the meaning of classic texts across time without official guidance, combined with the characteristics of different times.

6. Conclusion

After completing the complete dissemination cycle, the classic cultural text is in line with the discussion of new social topics. In the context of social media, through the emotional projection of the audience, the emotional reactivation process of online public opinion is realized. The public opinion evoked by emotions presents a high consensus as a whole, dominated by positive emotions; The threshold for the audience to participate in the discussion is low, and the diffusion speed is extremely fast; Public opinion is created, disseminated and interpreted by ordinary users from the bottom up. Collective memory provides the basis for the occurrence of emotional reactivation, and the audience's spontaneous emotional expression also reconstructs and updates collective memory.

In combination with the specific case of "Malfoy's Spring Festival Explosion", this study conducts a targeted study on the phenomenon of users spontaneously creating and commenting on a classic cultural symbol to achieve re-dissemination and re-evocation. This study combines the perspective of collective memory to analyze the two-way influence relationship between online public opinion and collective memory. It provides new thinking and inspiration for the study of online public opinion in the context of social media, and provides empirical reference for understanding the characteristics and social impact of the phenomenon of emotional reactivation of online public opinion. There are still some limitations and shortcomings in this research. There are limitations in research samples and platforms, and there is still room for expansion of case diversity. In the future, the scope of research can be expanded to more platforms such as TikTok and

Xiaohongshu. At the same time, the number of samples can be expanded to cover more levels of user interactive text. Conduct a study on the differences in emotional reactivation of different characteristic audiences, and deeply analyze the two-way relationship between collective memory and emotional reactivation.

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