

How Do People Make Sharing Decision in Social Media? A Study on Notre-Dame de Paris Fire in Sina Weibo

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we propose that people's decision of sharing information about a social event can be affected by their feeling of ambiguity and truth judgments on the related information. Specifically, whether people share an event-related news would depend on their subjective feelings. Also, people's likelihood of reposting a message would rely on their judgments of truth, given the related information. To address these research questions, we investigate how people respond to the information posted in Sina Weibo, regarding Notre-Dame de Paris Fire occurred in April, 2019. Our results demonstrate that: 1) people's feelings could directly affect their decision to share information, and 2) people's judgments of truth could affect their forwarding decision. Finally, based on our results we provide some important theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords: Information Sharing, Feelings, Judgments of Truth, Sina Weibo

1. INTRODUCTION

Today people tend to rely on social media to exchange information, especially in a critical situation. When an event suddenly occurs, information becomes overwhelming, which makes it difficult for people to gather the related information particularly in their need.

For ease of information exchange, social media provides convenient platforms for people to consume information that helps them make sense of a real world situation. Given the growing use of social media during massive social events, such as Sichuan Earthquake in 2008, London riots in 2011, and Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, we are interested to research how people perceive event-related information and make sharing decision in a recent event (Glasgow & Fink, 2013; Holman et al., 2014; Li & Rao, 2010; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2014; Qu et al. 2009; Starbird et al., 2014).

Particularly, in this study we examine how people decide to forward the information related to Notre-Dame de Paris Fire occurred in Paris, France on April 15, 2019. The work reported here addresses two main research questions. First, would feelings affect people's decision to share the related information? Second, would people follow their judgments of truth to decide if or not to share? By using a questionnaire based on three actual posts collected from Sina Weibo, empirical data is gathered and analyzed to answer these questions.

The current work extends existing theories regarding people's judgment and decision making when engaging in social media communication. Although past research has claimed that people go through different psychological mechanisms to make a decision, it is not clear how they respond to social media content, especially during emergencies (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Epstein et al., 1996; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Zeelenberg et al., 2008).

When people decide to forward a message, would they depend on subjective feelings or belief of truth? This research not only addresses the interesting questions stated above, but also provides valuable insights for practitioners to manage emergencies. For example, if people tend to be subjective when perceiving and responding to the related information, then the information about a current event should be more carefully prepared and strategically broadcast, in order to avoid potential problems that can be triggered by certain emotional cues embedded in a message. Meanwhile, if people depend on their judgments of truth to forward the news about an event, then the quality of information should be more thoroughly censored, in attempts to reduce the negative impact of widespread misinformation. In sum, this study aims to answer our questions, extend existing literature, and offer recommendations for future research and practices.

1.1 Feelings-as-Information

In social media communication, a message can induce people's feelings. For example, when the Notre Dame Cathedral was engulfed in flames on April 15, 2019, simply reading the news on mainstream media channels such as CNN and BBC makes a person emotional. Although emergency responders immediately entered the cathedral to preserve the famed landmark from destruction, emotional responses increasingly emerged and spread among people all over the world (BBC, 2019; Haddad & John, 2019). Like those who witnessed

the fire on site, many people from faraway received the related messages through social media and felt heartbroken.

Since people become emotional when they read news about the Notre-Dame fire, we wonder if they are more likely to be affected by their feelings when engaging in the related content. Accordingly, our first question is whether people use their feelings to make a forwarding decision. Schwarz proposes feelings-as-information theory to emphasize the significant effect of people's feelings on their judgments (Schwarz, 2011; Schwarz & Clore, 1983; Schwarz & Clore, 2003). Along this line of research, many past studies have tested this theory and empirically examined the effects of feelings on various types of judgments, including life satisfaction, opinion popularity, and risk perception (Schwarz et al., 1987; Song & Schwarz, 2009; Weaver et al., 2007). Specifically, during a critical event rumors can emerge and spread due to information ambiguity (Oh et al., 2013; Stieglitz & Linh, 2013). We think that feelings, such as feeling of ambiguity, can drive people's sharing decision. Accordingly, we propose that people's feelings, based on the content they are exposed to, are likely to affect their decision to forward a crisis-related message. A research question is addressed as follows.

RQ1: Do people use feelings to make information-sharing decision?

1.2 Judgments of Truth

Although people's judgments of truth can be unavoidably subjective, at least to some extent, a true or false judgment of a person is usually associated with some fact-based information. By judging if a message about a social event is believable and credible, people make their decision to forward it or not. Rather than solely relying on feelings, with judgments of truth people tend to be more objective based on their prior knowledge and experiences. Thus, our next question becomes whether people refer to their perception of information truthfulness to make sharing decision.

Researchers have studied the trustworthiness of information in social media for a long time. In particular, this line of research has become increasingly meaningful, as people's truth judgments relate to their consequent decisions, such as information sharing in social media communication. Past researchers have found that people are less willing to share false statements (Abdullah et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2014). Also, researchers have claimed that people prefer to spread information perceived as more believable and trustworthy (Ha & Ahn, 2011; Tapia et al., 2011). To extend this discussion, a past study has reported that in a disaster situation only local residents are more inclined to trust highly credible information, but those in distant locations do not differentiate low- or high-credibility information (Thomson et al., 2012). Consequently, we propose that people's judgments of truth are related to their decision to share information. A research question is stated below.

RQ2: Do people use judgments of truth to make information-sharing decision?

Not only our curiosity about the effects of feelings and truth judgments on information sharing motivates this study, but also the link between feelings and perceptions of truth makes this study interesting. A past study suggests that feelings can play an important role in truth judgments (Koch & Forgas, 2012). The researchers state that certain information makes people feel easy and becomes more likely to be shared, while other information makes people feel difficult and becomes less likely to be passed along. Meanwhile, researchers also claim that positive feelings are more likely to affect truth judgments, as compared to negative feelings (Bless et al., 2006). Therefore, our third research question is whether feelings are related to truth judgments and in turn affect information sharing, as claimed below.

RQ3: Do people use feelings to judge information truthfulness?

To highlight the three research questions proposed earlier, we present a research model as shown in Figure 1.

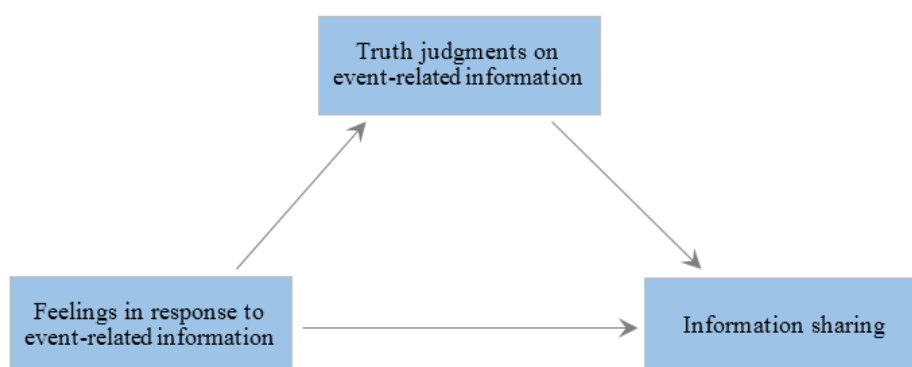


Figure 1. A research model proposing the relationships between feelings, truth judgments, and sharing of event-related information

1.3 Event of Study

On April 15, 2019, fire broke out in the Notre-Dame cathedral at 18:18 local time in Paris, France. The fire advanced quickly and soon the roof and the spire of the cathedral were destroyed and some sections of the vault collapsed, which in turn fell and hit the marble floor in cathedral. As Notre-Dame de Paris is one of the most famous landmarks on earth, this event broke the hearts of millions of people all over the world. Obviously, people's emotions during such a shocking event would be intensive. Until now the causes of this fire remain unclear, not to mention how ambiguous people would have felt about the disastrous event at the time of occurrence. In other words, it would be very likely that

people hold different opinions about certain information posted online. For example, after reading a message about the fire in Notre-Dame cathedral, some would rate the information as highly credible while others would not.

Furthermore, as the fire broke out in April, 2019 and a questionnaire for this study was distributed and completed in August, 2019, we believed that the event remained fresh in people's minds. Since this event was severe and caused massive damage to the most famous historical site, it has worldwide impact from many aspects. As a result, now people are still concerned about this event and many would engage in a message discussing the related issues. Thus, we were convinced to select Notre-Dame de Paris fire as a significant event. We used this event to define the context in which the related information was perceived and potentially exchanged among Sina Weibo users.

2. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Based on the related work discussed and research model presented above, we develop three hypotheses for empirical test.

H1: Feeling of ambiguity (vs. certainty) will reduce the likelihood of sharing the event-related information.

H2: High (vs. low) ratings of truth will increase the likelihood of sharing the event-related information.

H3: Feeling of ambiguity (vs. certainty) will reduce the ratings of truth of the event-related information.

3. METHOD

In this study, we designed a questionnaire to capture people's perceptions of the information about Notre-Dame de Paris fire, regarding feeling of ambiguity, judgments of truth, and intention of sharing the related information in a social media environment.

3.1 Subjects

Two hundred thirty-three subjects provided their responses to three Weibo posts selected from a large sample. Of these subjects, two hundred and three subjects with valid responses remained in a data set that we prepared for further analyses. Our subjects were 126 women and 77 men, with an average age of 21 years old. The questionnaire was created and posted on a survey platform named "Wen Juan Xing" (www.wjx.com). Subjects accessed and completed the questionnaire on PC or mobile device individually.

3.2 Materials

We used three actual Weibo posts, which were selected from 11,944 posts retrieved from Sina Weibo (www.weibo.com) on June 3, 2019, in a time frame between April 15 and June 3, 2019. During a critical event, people would feel ambiguous about the real situation, especially when they see overwhelming information present online. We were intended to select a post that was somewhat vague and difficult to verify, so that we could catch the variation in people's truth judgments. Two experienced researchers initially selected 43 candidate posts with medium to high level of ambiguity of contained information, and then 3 of them were randomly sampled. Finally, we designed a questionnaire involving the three posts that would possibly make people suspect if these statements were true or false. A sample post is shown in Figure 2, which is originally written in Chinese and translated to English for international audience. As our subjects are all native Chinese speakers and fluent in English, only the original post in Chinese was presented to subjects while all questions and the instructions in the questionnaire were written in English.

巴黎圣母院前首席建筑师针对官方声称的起火原因提出质疑，他说自己在圣母院工作多年，退休前对圣母院电路系统做了超前改进，绝无短路可能。而且圣母院内的项目坚硬粗壮，很难将其点燃。(Translation: The former chief architect of Notre Dame de Paris questioned the official alleged cause of the fire. He said that he had worked in Notre Dame for many years and made advance improvements to the Notre Dame circuit system before his retirement. There was no short circuit. And the projects in the Notre Dame are hard and strong, and it is difficult to ignite them.)

Figure 2. A sample post about Notre-Dame de Paris fire used in the questionnaire

3.3 Procedure

Subjects completed the questionnaire on a survey platform (www.wjx.com), by reading three posts and answering several questions. First, subjects read a message and described their feelings in response to the message. Second, subjects rated how likely the statement was true (7 = definitely true, 1 = definitely not true), in one condition, or false (7 = definitely false, 1 = definitely not false), in another condition. Then, subjects reported how likely they would share the message on Weibo (7 = very likely, 1 = not likely at all). The procedure of completing the questionnaire on the second and third messages is identical. A note on how we asked about true/false judgments: we randomly assigned a question for ratings of truth or falseness to a subject after a message was presented. Besides, for each subject there was one of the three messages randomly assigned to come along with both truth and falseness questions. By doing so, we were able to check if a subject paid attention to our questions, specifying true and false respectively, and if he or she processed the information in a logical way. For example, a rating of 2 as being true

and a rating of 2 as being false indicate that the subject did not carefully go through or fully understand the questions. To clarify, to be consistent with a truth rating of 2, one's rating of falseness should be close to 6 on a 7-point scale. As a result, the responses considered as invalid were eliminated from our data set for further analyses. Finally, we asked subjects to provide demographic information, including gender, age, and frequency of Weibo use.

4. RESULTS

Before we report the results of the analyses, a note on how we prepared data. Since feelings were self-reported, subjects described different feelings. For analysis purposes, only feelings frequently mentioned by subjects would remain in our data, resulting in a subset of 149 subjects with 272 responses. Those eliminated from the data set were either missing or data with feelings that were uncommon (frequency < 10) or hard to interpret (e.g., I don't know).

4.1 Feeling of Ambiguity and Sharing

The feelings remained in our analyses include: angry ($n = 10$), confused ($n = 31$), doubtful ($n = 52$), regretful ($n = 38$), sad ($n = 79$), shocked ($n = 36$), and unbelievable ($n = 26$). The frequency distribution of feelings about the three posts is shown in Figure 3, and the frequency distribution of sharing of the event-related information is shown in Figure 4.

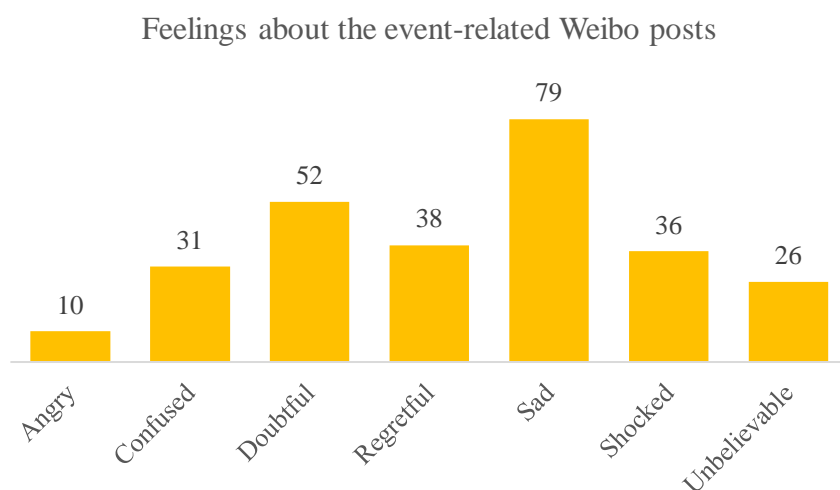


Figure 3. Frequency distribution of feelings

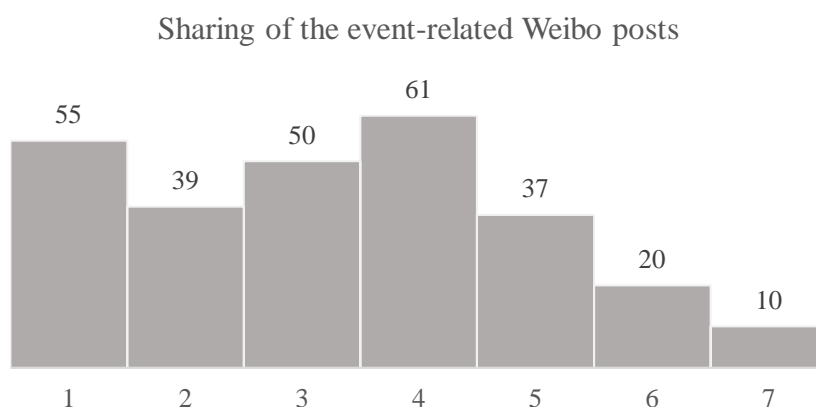


Figure 4. Frequency distribution of sharing

We were interested in feeling of ambiguity, so we divided sharing responses regarding low vs. high ambiguity reported by subjects. It is supposed that, angry, regretful, sad, and shocked are associated with low ambiguity, while confused, doubtful, and unbelievable are related to high ambiguity. Then, we compared the mean score of sharing between low vs. high ambiguity and found significant difference in sharing likelihood (3.564 vs. 2.945, $p < .01$). The results indicate that when people have strong feeling of ambiguity or uncertainty they are less likely to share the related information, supporting **H1**.

H1: Feeling of ambiguity (vs. certainty) will reduce the likelihood of sharing the event-related information. (Supported)

4.2 Truth Judgments and Sharing

It seems to be common sense that true or correct information is more likely to be shared than false or incorrect information. To address this concern, we divided sharing responses regarding low vs. high ratings of truth. Past research shows that truth ratings of statements used in experiments previously ranges from 4.28 to 4.54 on a 7-point scale (Brown & Nix, 1996). Similarly, the average ratings of truth is 4.176 in the current work. So, we are confident to define the ratings of truth higher than 4 out of 7 as more likely to be true while the truth ratings less than or equal to 4 as more likely to be false. The frequency distribution of truth ratings is shown in Figure 5.

Then, we compared the mean score of sharing between low vs. high ratings of truth and found significant difference in sharing likelihood (3.135 vs. 3.560, $p = .04$). The results suggest that when people perceive the related information as more likely to be true they are willing to share it, supporting **H2**.

H2: High (vs. low) ratings of truth will increase the likelihood of sharing the event-related information. (Supported)

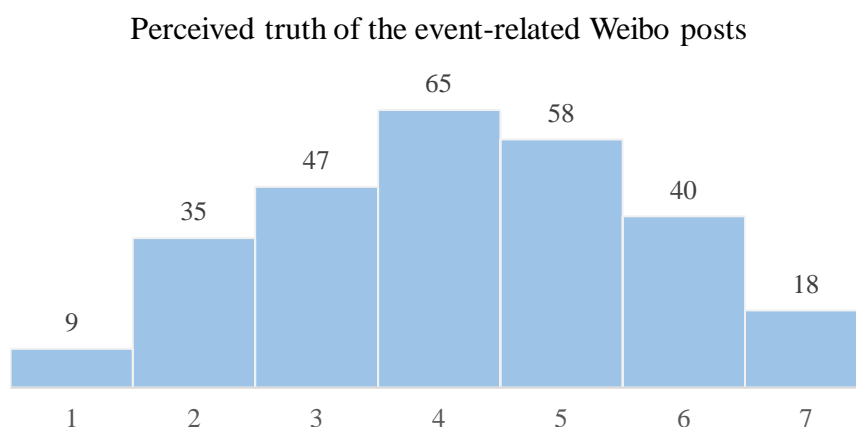


Figure 5. Frequency distribution of truth ratings

4.3 Feeling of Ambiguity and Truth Judgments

Next, we tested the relation of feelings to truth judgments on the event-related information. For this test, we divided truth ratings regarding low vs. high feeling of ambiguity rated by subjects. It is proposed that strong feeling of ambiguity are associated with low ratings of truth. We compared the mean truth ratings between low vs. high ambiguity and found significant difference (5.655 vs. 3.077, $p < .001$). The results indicate that when people have strong feeling of ambiguity they are more likely to consider the related information as false, supporting **H3**.

H3: Feeling of ambiguity (vs. certainty) will reduce the ratings of truth of the event-related information. (Supported)

4.4 Feeling of Ambiguity, Truth Judgments, and Sharing

About the analysis of mean comparison discussed above, we should admit that this approach has several limitations. First, rather than using the original data involving a 7-point scale of truth ratings, in the previous analysis we used data by treating feeling of ambiguity as a categorical variable, specifically low vs. high ambiguity. Since we divided sharing responses into only two groups for comparison, we experienced loss of information. Second, in the real world we rarely focus on the effect of a single factor on an outcome variable. Instead of testing the relationship between one factor variable (e.g., feelings) and one response variable (e.g., sharing), we can run a comprehensive analysis involving all the variables together.

We then employed ANCOVA analysis, by considering ratings of truth as covariate variable, feelings as factor variable, and sharing as response variable. Here sharing is a single dependent variable while truth judgments and feelings are the two independent

variables. We found the significant effect of feelings on sharing ($F = 3.186, p < .01$), as well as the significant effect of the interaction between feelings and truth judgments on sharing ($F = 2.464, p = .02$). But, our confidence about the effect of truth ratings on sharing was weak, not quite consistent with our previous findings in a t -test ($F = 2.56, p = .1$). The effects of feeling of ambiguity and truth judgments on sharing are shown in Figure 6 and Figure 7, respectively.

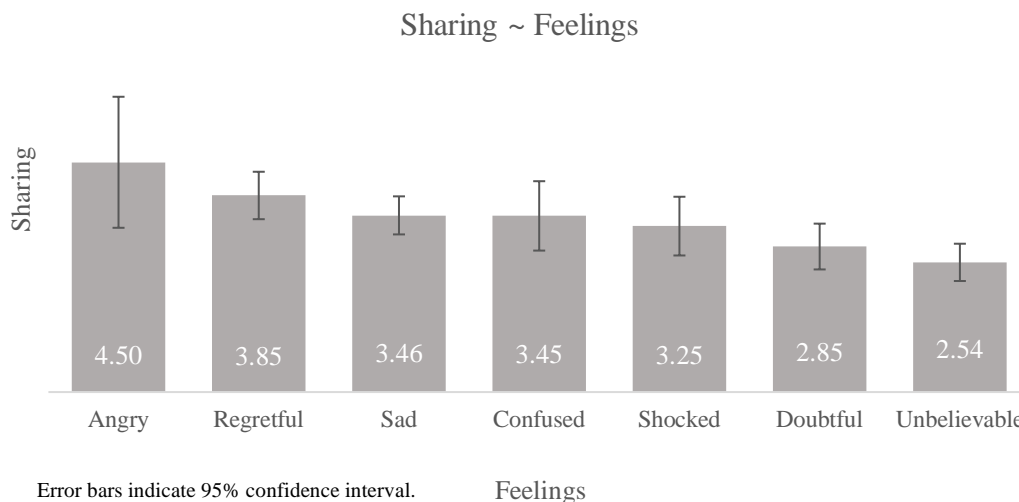


Figure 6. Frequency distribution of feelings

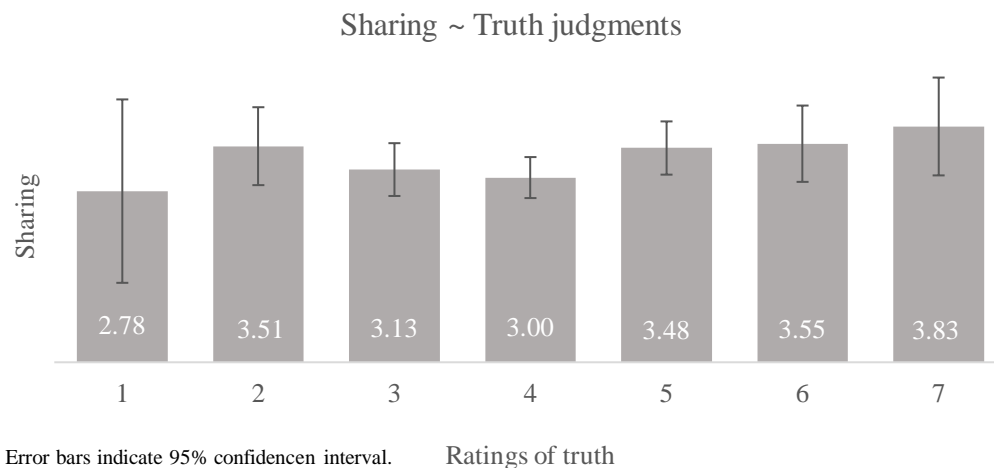


Figure 7. Frequency distribution of feelings

As shown in Figure 8, we explain the interaction effect of feelings and truth judgments on sharing. By comparing the mean score of sharing between low and high ambiguity, when the related information was perceived as true, we found no significant difference (3.675 vs. 3.306, $p > .1$). Furthermore, by comparing the mean score of sharing between low and high ambiguity, when the related information was perceived as false, we found significant difference (3.458 vs. 2.767, $p < .001$). The results indicate that, when people perceive a statement about the event as true they are equally likely to share the

information, regardless feeling of ambiguity. However, when they consider the statement as false they are more likely to share the information with low ambiguity.

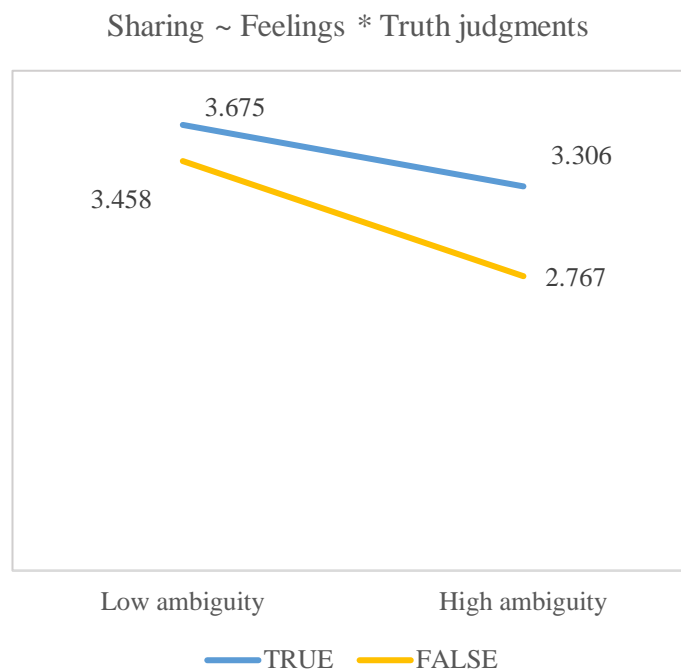


Figure 8. Interaction effect of feelings and truth judgments on sharing

5. DISCUSSION

The main results of this study, based on a questionnaire using three Weibo posts about Notre-Dame de Paris fire, suggested that people’s feeling of ambiguity and truth judgments can affect their decision to share the related information. Moreover, people’s feeling of ambiguity can affect their truth judgments. In this study, ANCOVA analysis was further used to test a comprehensive model that we proposed earlier, regarding the relationships between feelings, truth judgments, and information sharing. The results indicate that feeling of ambiguity can affect people’s sharing decision and its interaction with truth judgments can also affect people’s decision to share information. Although our analyses presented mixed findings about the relationship between truth judgments and information sharing, we suppose that more reliable results can be achieved if a larger sample is used. Based on part of our results and existing literature, we still think it is promising that truth judgments can affect people’s decision to share information through social media, for which future studies are highly encouraged.

This study extends the discussion on feelings being used as information for decision making. Similar to previous findings, we found that feeling of ambiguity is an important concern when people are making a decision to share information about social events.

Although past studies have long been discussing the role of information ambiguity in communication, it is not clear how people go through the psychological processes to make the decision of information sharing in social media (Erev et al., 1991; Szulanski et al., 2004). A classic work has defined that ambiguity is associated with insufficient or conflicting information (Rokeach, 1973). Furthermore, ambiguity can occur either because of lack of information about the meaning of an event, or due to inadequacy of information to find the correct interpretations of an event (Ball-Rokeach & DeFluer, 1973). By confirming the significant effect of feeling of ambiguity, we would like to suggest that feeling-as-information theory can help explain how people think about the event-related information and make sharing decision consequently. Future researchers interested in social media communication can further investigate how feeling of ambiguity shapes the decision of information sharing in a different context.

For practitioners, this study provides several implications. According to past research, for marketing purposes users and customers play important roles in product and service development (Saaskilahti & Hebda, 2013). Accordingly, in this work we take the perspective of social media users to study online communication about an emerging event. Further, we claim that at an early stage of a sudden event breaking news broadcast by verified sources should be highly recommended through social media platforms. With limited knowledge about the event, people are more likely to share information of high credibility rather than unverified, as demonstrated in our results. In addition, during a critical event rumors should be immediately detected and wisely tackled by using advanced social media technologies. As rumors are harmful and usually contain ambiguous information to cause anxiety and panic, it is important for system developers to design a next generation social media platform, in order to handle rumors that often emerge during crises.

There are several limitations we should address. First, in this study we only examine feeling of ambiguity. Our data containing distinct feelings reported by subjects, such as anger, fear, and disappointment, can be further analyzed by using established lexicon to fully investigate the association between various feelings and information sharing. Second, a larger sample of people's responses to the event-related information can help us get in-depth understanding of the roles of feelings and truth judgments in information sharing decision. Third, we think sharing decision can be measured in a different way, by using yes (for sharing) vs. no (for not sharing). By doing so, a logistic regression can be employed to test the relationships between feelings, truth judgments, and sharing. As for truth ratings, past studies have used both binary variable (true vs. false) and continuous variable using Likert scale. It is possible for future researchers to measure truth of statements as correct vs. incorrect. Taking this attempt, truth ratings can be used as categorical variable and ANOVA analysis can be used to test the effect of truth ratings on sharing. Finally, different events can be selected as a specific context of social media communication for research. We are hoping to see if the results reported in the current work can be further replicated and generalized in future studies.

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