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Social Media, Policy Perception, and Welfare Decisions: An Interdisciplinary Review of Contemporary Research

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Abstract

This review examines how social media platforms like Rednote, Wechat, and Instagram shape public attitudes toward welfare policies. These platforms influence policy discussions through mechanisms such as algorithmic content filtering, collective mobilization, and real-time sentiment analysis. Social media's impact on policy discourse is a double-edged sword. It offers significant potential for democratic engagement but also poses challenges related to misinformation and polarization. Drawing on interdisciplinary insights, this review highlights the importance of understanding social media's role in shaping welfare policy outcomes. The review emphasizes the need for better methodologies to capture the influence of social media and offers recommendations for policymakers, platform designers, and researchers. It calls for more transparent and cross-disciplinary research approaches to address these challenges effectively.

Keywords

Social Media; Public Policy; Welfare Decision-Making; Policy Perception.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In recent years, the landscape of public policy communication has been significantly reshaped by social media platforms such as RedNote, WeChat, and Instagram. These platforms have evolved beyond mere tools for information dissemination; they have become vibrant arenas for public deliberation, critique, and mobilization.

RedNote, often compared to Instagram, has seen a surge in popularity, especially as users seek alternative platforms for content sharing and social interaction. This platform, along with WeChat, has become a critical space where the contours of public policy debates, particularly those related to social welfare, are actively constructed and contested. The interactive nature of these platforms allows users to share opinions, challenge official narratives, and shape collective sentiment in real time.

The rise of these platforms has democratized the dissemination of information and empowered citizens to participate more directly in policy discussions. For instance, WeChat's extensive user base in China has made it a significant channel for policy communication, enabling both government agencies and citizens to engage in dialogue.

Similarly, Instagram's visual-centric approach has facilitated the spread of policy-related content through images and videos, making complex issues more accessible to a broader audience.

However, this transformation also brings challenges. The spread of misinformation and the potential for increased polarization are significant concerns. RedNote, for example, has faced scrutiny over content moderation and the potential for misinformation to spread

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rapidly. Additionally, the diverse user bases of these platforms can lead to fragmented discussions and heightened polarization, as users may encounter echo chambers that reinforce their existing views.

Addressing these challenges requires more effective methodologies to capture the influence of social media on public policy perception. It also highlights the need for transparent, cross-disciplinary research approaches that can navigate the evolving media landscape. By understanding how platforms like RedNote, WeChat, and Instagram shape public discourse, we can develop strategies to enhance the quality of policy discussions and support more informed and equitable policy decisions

1.2. Problem Statement

The contemporary digital landscape is particularly fascinating and complex, especially when it comes to understanding how social media impacts public perception of policy. In this new communicative environment, we are confronted with critical questions about the mechanisms through which social media shapes individuals' understanding of welfare-related policies. Specifically, how does exposure to user-generated content, algorithmically curated newsfeeds, or even misinformation influence people's comprehension of these policies? More crucially, how do these perceptions translate into decision-making processes, such as voting behavior, public support for welfare reforms, or participation in policy advocacy? This is a multifaceted issue. On one hand, social media has the potential to democratize information, making it easier for individuals to become more informed and engaged. On the other hand, it also presents significant challenges, such as the spread of misinformation and the potential for polarization. These factors can have profound implications for democratic governance and social equity. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing strategies that can enhance the quality of public discourse and support more informed and equitable policy decisions.

1.3. Research Significance

Although numerous studies have explored these dynamics, existing research is often siloed within individual disciplines. Political science focuses on opinion formation and voting, communication studies examine media framing, sociology investigates social inequalities, while behavioral economics explores decision-making biases. Yet, few attempts have been made to systematically integrate these perspectives. This review addresses that gap by adopting an interdisciplinary approach to map and synthesize recent findings. By doing so, it aims to clarify how social media ecosystems shape welfare-related attitudes and behaviors, and to propose a conceptual foundation for future collaborative research across fields.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Interdisciplinary Perspectives

2.1. Media Effects Theories: Agenda-Setting and Framing

Media effects theories offer crucial insights into understanding the influence of social media on public policy perception. The agenda-setting theory suggests that the prominence of issues in media coverage can shape public priorities, subtly signaling which topics are deemed important. In the context of platforms like RedNote and WeChat, this effect is intensified through trending hashtags, virality, and algorithm-driven exposure.

RedNote, for instance, has become a significant platform for content sharing and social interaction, especially among users seeking an alternative to TikTok. Its algorithm prioritizes user interests over influencer popularity, encouraging diverse and original content creation. This decentralized approach to content curation can significantly shape public priorities by amplifying grassroots discussions and user-driven narratives related to social welfare policies.

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Similarly, WeChat's extensive user base and multifunctional nature make it a critical arena for policy communication. With features like Moments and Articles, users can share and discuss policy-related content in real time, influencing public perception through the prominence given to certain topics. The platform's ability to integrate social interactions with information dissemination creates a dynamic environment where policy priorities can be shaped by both official narratives and user-generated content.

Framing theory also plays a vital role in this context. How information is presented-what is emphasized or omitted-can significantly alter audience interpretation. On RedNote, the visual-centric nature of content, combined with user-generated captions and hashtags, can shape how policy issues are framed and understood. On WeChat, the integration of text, images, and videos allows for nuanced framing of policy issues, which can influence public opinion and support for welfare-related policies.

However, these platforms also present challenges. The spread of misinformation and the potential for increased polarization are significant concerns, especially given the decentralized nature of content creation and curation. Addressing these challenges requires more effective methodologies to capture the influence of social media on public policy perception and transparent, cross-disciplinary research approaches to navigate the evolving media landscape.

2.2. Models of Public Participation in the Policy Process

From a political science perspective, models of public participation emphasize how citizens engage with policy deliberation and influence decision-making. Classical models such as Arnstein's ladder of participation highlight the spectrum from tokenistic consultation to genuine citizen power. In the digital age, social media reconfigures these models by enabling new forms of engagement, including "clicktivism," digital petitions, and viral advocacy campaigns. These mechanisms may increase visibility and inclusivity, but also raise concerns about the depth and representativeness of participation.

2.3. Behavioral Economics: Perception Biases and Choice Architecture

Behavioral economics provides critical insights into how individuals form judgments and make policy-related decisions, particularly in the context of social media platforms like RedNote and WeChat. Concepts such as the availability heuristic, confirmation bias, and loss aversion help explain why social media users may misinterpret or overreact to policy information.

For instance, on RedNote, the platform's emphasis on visual content and user-generated posts can amplify the availability heuristic. Users are more likely to form judgments based on the most memorable or emotionally charged content they encounter, rather than a comprehensive assessment of the facts. This is further exacerbated by RedNote's algorithm, which prioritizes content based on user interests rather than influencer popularity, potentially reinforcing certain perceptions regardless of factual accuracy.

Similarly, WeChat's multifunctional nature, which includes Moments, Articles, and direct messaging, creates an environment where confirmation bias can thrive. Users often engage with content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, especially when information is shared within close-knit social circles. This can lead to a polarized understanding of policy issues, as users are less likely to encounter or engage with opposing viewpoints.

Moreover, the design of these platforms-what behavioral economists call "choice architecture"-plays a significant role in shaping user behavior. For example, emotionally charged content is more likely to be shared and seen on both RedNote and WeChat, reinforcing certain perceptions regardless of factual accuracy. This can lead to a feedback loop where misinformation spreads rapidly, further distorting public perception of policy issues.

Addressing these challenges requires a deeper understanding of how behavioral economics intersects with social media dynamics. By recognizing the cognitive biases and choice

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architectures at play, we can develop more effective strategies to mitigate misinformation and promote more informed and balanced policy discussions on platforms like RedNote and WeChat.

2.4. Sociological Perspectives on Welfare Identity and Public Opinion

Sociology offers a broader understanding of how collective identities and societal narratives shape attitudes toward welfare. Concepts such as deservingness, social solidarity, and stigmatization play crucial roles in influencing how individuals perceive beneficiaries and evaluate policies.

On platforms like RedNote and WeChat, these sociological dynamics are further amplified. RedNote, with its focus on lifestyle and community-driven content, often highlights narratives that reflect societal values and expectations regarding welfare. Users on RedNote can easily share personal stories and opinions, which may reinforce or challenge existing perceptions of welfare policies. For example, posts about personal experiences with social welfare programs can humanize the beneficiaries and foster a sense of social solidarity. Conversely, they may also perpetuate stigmatization if the narratives are framed negatively.

WeChat, with its extensive user base and multifunctional nature, provides a space where users can engage in discussions and share information related to welfare policies through Moments, Articles, and group chats. This platform allows for a more fragmented yet pluralistic policy discourse environment, as users can easily access diverse perspectives. However, it also exposes the tension between universalist welfare ideals and individualistic, merit-based critiques. For instance, discussions in WeChat groups may reflect a wide range of opinions, from those who advocate for more inclusive welfare policies to those who argue for a more merit-based approach.

Moreover, these platforms enable marginalized voices to contest dominant narratives, creating a more diverse policy discourse environment. On RedNote, users from different backgrounds can share their experiences and perspectives, challenging mainstream views and contributing to a more inclusive discussion. Similarly, WeChat's wide reach allows for the amplification of diverse opinions, which can lead to more nuanced and balanced policy debates.

In conclusion, sociology provides valuable insights into how social media platforms like RedNote and WeChat shape public attitudes toward welfare policies. By understanding the interplay of collective identities, societal narratives, and user-generated content, we can better navigate the complex dynamics of policy perception in the digital age.

2.5. Cross-Disciplinary Contributions to a Complex Problem

The interplay between social media, policy perception, and welfare decisions is a complex phenomenon that cannot be adequately captured by a single disciplinary lens. Instead, an interdisciplinary approach is essential to map the full landscape of this issue.

Communication studies provide valuable insights into how messages spread across platforms like RedNote and WeChat. These studies help us understand the dynamics of information dissemination and the role of trending hashtags and viral content in shaping public priorities. Political science, on the other hand, explores institutional responses to policy issues, shedding light on how governments and policymakers interact with and respond to the evolving digital landscape.

Behavioral economics reveals the cognitive mechanisms at play when individuals process and react to policy-related information. Concepts such as the availability heuristic, confirmation bias, and loss aversion help explain why social media users may misinterpret or overreact to policy information. For instance, emotionally charged content is more likely to be shared and seen on platforms like WeChat, reinforcing certain perceptions regardless of factual accuracy.

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Sociology uncovers the cultural and structural dimensions that influence attitudes toward welfare. Concepts such as deservingness, social solidarity, and stigmatization play crucial roles in shaping how individuals perceive beneficiaries and evaluate policies. Social media amplifies these discourses, often exposing the tension between universalist welfare ideals and individualistic, merit-based critiques.

By integrating these perspectives from communication studies, political science, behavioral economics, and sociology, we can develop more holistic explanations and support the development of nuanced, responsive policy interventions in the digital age. This interdisciplinary approach is crucial for navigating the complex dynamics of policy perception and welfare decisions in the context of social media

3. Social Media and Policy Perception

3.1. Platform Mechanics and the Dissemination of Policy Information

The reliance of social media platforms on algorithmic recommendation systems has profound implications for policy perception and welfare decisions. These systems curate users' feeds based on prior behavior, engagement history, and network preferences, creating highly personalized information environments. While this approach can efficiently deliver content that aligns with individual interests, it also tends to foster "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers," limiting users' exposure to opposing viewpoints and reinforcing confirmation bias.

Policy content, such as legislative updates or government guidelines, is thus filtered through these highly individualized digital pathways. This can distort its reception and interpretation, as users are more likely to encounter information that aligns with their existing beliefs and less likely to engage with alternative perspectives. For example, algorithms may prioritize emotionally charged content, which can further entrench users in their pre-existing views.

Moreover, social media platforms like RedNote and WeChat often employ a combination of recommendation algorithms, including content-based filtering and collaborative filtering. These methods use user behavior data to predict and recommend content, which can inadvertently amplify certain narratives while marginalizing others. This selective exposure can have significant consequences for public understanding of welfare policies, as it may lead to a fragmented and polarized discourse.

To address these challenges, it is essential to develop a deeper understanding of how algorithmic recommendation systems shape public perception and policy engagement. This requires interdisciplinary research that combines insights from communication studies, political science, behavioral economics, and sociology. By examining the interplay between these factors, we can better navigate the complexities of policy perception in the digital age and work towards more inclusive and informed policy discussions.

3.2. Misinformation and Misleading Narratives

The decentralized and viral nature of social media creates fertile ground for the spread of misinformation, particularly in the context of policy-related content. Platforms like RedNote and WeChat, which rely on user-generated content and decentralized networks, can inadvertently facilitate the rapid dissemination of false information.

Policy-related falsehoods, emotionally charged narratives, and manipulated statistics can be shared rapidly, often outpacing corrective information. This is especially evident in situations involving urgent government action or controversial welfare reforms, where emotions such as fear, anger, or a sense of injustice can easily be mobilized. In echo chambers and filter bubbles, users are more likely to encounter and share content that aligns with their existing beliefs, further reinforcing confirmation bias and limiting exposure to opposing viewpoints.

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Moreover, influential users or "superspreaders" play a significant role in amplifying misinformation within these networks. Research has shown that a small number of highly connected users can be responsible for a disproportionate amount of misinformation spread. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the emotional nature of the content, as sensational or emotionally charged posts tend to spread faster than neutral or factual information.

Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach, including collaboration with social media platforms to understand and reduce the spread of harmful misinformation. Additionally, it is crucial to develop strategies that promote critical thinking and media literacy among users, helping them navigate the complex information landscape and distinguish between accurate and false content

3.3. Influencing Factors: Political Orientation, Media Literacy, and Network Structure

The extent to which individuals are influenced by policy content on social media is mediated by a combination of cognitive, ideological, and structural factors. In the context of China, platforms like RedNote and WeChat play significant roles in shaping public perception of policies.

Platform-Specific Features and User Characteristics

RedNote:

Platform Features: RedNote is a lifestyle and consumer decision-making platform that combines social networking with e-commerce. It uses machine learning to efficiently match users with relevant content, making it highly personalized. This platform is particularly popular among young and female users, who often share experiences, photos, videos, and product reviews.

User Characteristics: RedNote's user base is highly engaged in content creation and sharing, often driven by personal experiences and recommendations. The platform's emphasis on visual content and user-generated reviews can significantly influence public perception of policies related to lifestyle, health, and consumer protection.

WeChat :

Platform Features: WeChat is a multifunctional platform offering instant messaging, social networking, and payment services. Its key features include Moments, Articles, and payment functions, making it a central hub for both personal and business interactions.

User Characteristics: WeChat users are diverse, including students, white-collar workers, and freelancers. The platform's extensive user base and integrated functions make it a powerful tool for policy dissemination and public engagement.

Key Dynamics and Observed Impact

Policy Area: Public Health and Welfare

Platform(s): WeChat, RedNote

Key Dynamics:

Selective Exposure: Users on both platforms tend to engage with content that aligns with their existing beliefs and social circles. On WeChat, this is evident in the formation of echo chambers through group chats and Moments. On RedNote, users are more likely to trust content from influencers and friends, which can reinforce confirmation bias.

Emotional Content: Both platforms prioritize emotionally charged content, which can lead to rapid dissemination of misinformation. For example, during public health crises, fear and anxiety can drive the spread of unverified information.

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Media Literacy: Users with higher media literacy are more likely to critically evaluate information sources. However, the majority of users may lack the skills to distinguish between factual and misleading content.

Observed Impact:

Policy Compliance: In the context of public health policies, such as COVID-19 measures, users on WeChat and RedNote were more likely to comply with policies if they trusted the information source. However, misinformation and emotional content could lead to skepticism and non-compliance.

Public Perception: Welfare policies are often discussed through personal stories and experiences shared on RedNote, which can shape public opinion and influence policy support.

Table 1. Selected Case Studies on Social Media and Policy Perception

Policy Area	Platform(s)	Key Dynamics	Observed Impact
Public Health	WeChat, RedNote	Selective exposure, emotional content	Increased compliance with health policies, but also higher susceptibility to misinformation
Welfare Reform	RedNote	Influencer-driven narratives, personal stories	Shaped public perception of welfare recipients, influenced policy support
Environmental Policy	WeChat	Hashtag activism, community engagement	Heightened awareness among younger users, but fragmented action

These dynamics highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of how social media platforms influence policy perception in China. Addressing misinformation and promoting media literacy are critical steps in ensuring that social media contributes positively to public policy discussions

3.4. Case Examples of Policy Discourse on Social Media

Building on the above examples, it becomes evident that social media acts not only as a transmission channel for policy information but also as a meaning-making environment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, platforms like WeChat and RedNote served as official guidance, while also amplifying promoting unverified cures. In the case of welfare policies, online narratives on RedNote often oscillate between empathy and discussion, depending on political framing. Environmental policies, by contrast, have seen more mobilization through visual campaigns and influencer-driven content, particularly among younger demographics.

These dynamics highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of how social media platforms influence policy perception in China. Addressing misinformation and promoting media literacy are critical steps in ensuring that social media contributes positively to public policy discussions.

4. Social Media and Welfare Decision-Making

4.1. Collective Mobilization and Policy Advocacy

Forms of Digital Activism

Both RedNote and WeChat have seen various forms of digital activism, including:

Online Petitions: Users can create and share petitions related to welfare policies, gathering support and signatures.

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Coordinated Hashtags: Users can use hashtags to amplify specific issues, making them more visible to a broader audience.

Viral Videos: Short videos sharing personal stories or calling for action can quickly gain traction, influencing public opinion.

Calls for Protest: Users can organize or call for offline actions and protests through these platforms.

Impact on Policy Pressure

These digitally enabled movements often blur the lines between online expression and offline activism, challenging traditional models of interest group advocacy. For example, during the pandemic, WeChat users organized relief fund drives and shared information on how to support those in need. Similarly, RedNote users have used the platform to advocate for better welfare policies by sharing personal experiences and calling for collective action.

Social media platforms like RedNote and WeChat have become essential tools for collective mobilization around welfare-related issues. They empower users to directly engage with policymaking through digital activism, shaping public perception and exerting tangible policy pressures. Understanding the dynamics of these platforms is crucial for policymakers and researchers to develop strategies that harness the positive potential of social media while mitigating its challenges.

4.2. Public Sentiment and Government Policy Adjustments

Governments are increasingly aware of the powerful role social media plays in shaping public sentiment. Real-time feedback loops-through likes, shares, trending topics, and comment floods-offer an informal but potent form of public opinion signaling. Policymakers have responded to these shifts by adjusting or delaying welfare decisions, conducting public consultations online, or even revoking unpopular measures. However, these responses vary significantly across political systems and levels of digital governance readiness.

In China, for example, the state and commercial enterprises use social media platforms like WeChat and RedNote to promote state-led narratives and mobilize public support. These platforms can also serve as arenas for digital activism, where users engage in discussions and mobilize around welfare-related issues. However, while some democratic states use social listening tools to inform decisions, more authoritarian regimes may use the same tools for surveillance or manipulation. This dual nature of social media highlights the importance of understanding its role in shaping public sentiment and policy decisions, while also addressing the potential risks of misinformation and polarization.

4.3. Empowering Marginalized Groups

Social media platforms such as RedNote and WeChat have become crucial channels for marginalized and vulnerable populations to voice their needs, experiences, and frustrations regarding welfare access. These platforms provide a space where individuals who are often excluded from traditional media and political channels can express themselves and mobilize support.

Digital Storytelling and Community Engagement

Digital storytelling through platforms like RedNote and WeChat allows marginalized groups to share their lived experiences. For example, users can document and share stories about housing insecurity, healthcare struggles, or the challenges faced by low-income individuals and migrants. This form of storytelling bypasses traditional media gatekeepers and reaches a broader audience.

Amplifying Voices through Influencer Alliances

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Influencer alliances on platforms like RedNote have played a significant role in amplifying the voices of marginalized communities. Influencers with large followings can share stories and advocate for policy changes, helping to reduce stigma and foster empathy. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many influencers used their platforms to raise awareness about the struggles faced by vulnerable populations and to advocate for better welfare policies.

Policy Impact and Digital Activism

Digital activism on WeChat and RedNote has led to tangible policy pressures. Users have organized online petitions, used coordinated hashtags, and shared viral videos to call for policy changes. For example, during the pandemic, users on WeChat organized relief fund drives and shared information on how to support those in need. These actions not only raised awareness but also pressured policymakers to take action.

Challenges and Limitations

While social media platforms offer opportunities for marginalized groups to be heard, their impact is often uneven and short-lived without policy follow-through. The visibility gained through digital activism can lead to temporary spikes in public attention, but sustained policy change requires ongoing engagement and support. Additionally, digital platforms can sometimes amplify existing inequalities, as those with better digital skills and access to technology are more likely to participate in online activism.

4.4. Policy Listening: How Decision-Makers Interpret Social Media Data

With the growing volume of user-generated content, many governments and NGOs have begun deploying social media analytics tools to detect trends, grievances, and needs within the population. Techniques such as sentiment analysis, topic modeling, and network analysis allow decision-makers to make sense of the digital noise and identify emerging welfare concerns. For example, sentiment analysis can help gauge public opinion on specific welfare policies, while topic modeling can identify key issues that are frequently discussed by users. These insights can be invaluable for policymakers and NGOs to better understand the needs and frustrations of marginalized populations.

However, challenges remain in effectively utilizing social media data for welfare policy-making. Data biases, bot interference, and representational gaps can skew results. For instance, data collection methods may result in biased samples, and the unstructured nature of social media data can make it difficult to accurately interpret user sentiments. Moreover, translating "big data" insights into responsive and equitable welfare policies requires not just technical capacity but also political will and institutional agility.

To address these challenges, it is crucial to use robust social media analytics tools that can handle large volumes of data and provide accurate insights. For example, tools like Brand24 and Brandwatch offer advanced AI technology to analyze social media metrics, track keywords, identify trends, and even compare performance against competitors. These tools can help policymakers and NGOs identify emerging welfare concerns and respond more effectively.

Additionally, ensuring the ethical use of social media data is essential. Predictive analytics, for instance, can be a powerful tool for identifying risks and uncovering patterns, but it must be used carefully to avoid biases and ensure equitable outcomes. Policymakers and NGOs should also be aware of the limitations of social media data and supplement it with other sources of information to gain a more comprehensive understanding of welfare needs.

5. Limitations and Future Research Directions

5.1. Challenges in Data Access and Privacy

One of the most persistent limitations in current research is the restricted access to comprehensive and reliable social media data. Major platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and

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TikTok often limit API access due to user privacy concerns and commercial interests. This restriction makes it difficult for researchers to collect large-scale, representative datasets that include demographic metadata. For example, Facebook's API access is customized based on app usage and has strict rate limits, while Instagram's API primarily serves business accounts. TikTok, although offering a free basic tier for data access, still imposes significant restrictions on the volume and scope of data that can be collected.

Furthermore, ethical concerns surrounding informed consent, user anonymity, and data reidentification remain unresolved. Platforms like Facebook have faced scrutiny over privacy issues, such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which highlighted the potential misuse of user data. Additionally, the unstructured nature of social media data and the influence of bots and marketers can distort the authenticity of conversations. These challenges restrict the depth and validity of policy-related insights that can be drawn from social media studies.

Moreover, translating "big data" insights into responsive and equitable welfare policies requires not just technical capacity but also political will and institutional agility. While social media platforms offer a wealth of information, the inherent biases and limitations of the medium mean that these insights should be interpreted with caution and used in conjunction with other research methods

5.2. Lack of Longitudinal and Causal Research Designs

Many studies in the domain of social media and policy attitudes are cross-sectional, capturing snapshots of sentiment or discourse without tracking changes over time. This limits our understanding of how policy attitudes evolve in response to long-term engagement or sustained exposure to specific types of content. For example, cross-sectional surveys can identify associations between social media use and certain outcomes, such as mental health symptoms in adolescents, but they cannot establish causality or track how attitudes change over time.

Moreover, few studies employ rigorous methods for causal inference, such as natural experiments or panel data analysis. This makes it difficult to isolate the specific influence of social media from other factors, such as economic conditions or mainstream media coverage. Techniques like instrumental variable regressions and network causal inference have been proposed to address some of these challenges. For example, network causal inference can help disentangle social influence from homophily (the tendency of similar individuals to associate with each other) in observational social media data. However, these methods are still evolving and face their own set of limitations and criticisms.

In addition, the unstructured nature of social media data and the presence of bots and inauthentic accounts can further complicate causal inference. For example, during the 2017 French presidential elections, influence operations used bots and coordinated amplifiers to spread narratives, making it difficult to accurately estimate their causal impact. New approaches, such as the network potential outcome model, have been developed to account for narrative propagation over social networks and estimate causal influence. However, these methods require careful application and validation to ensure their reliability and validity.

Overall, while cross-sectional studies and emerging causal inference methods provide valuable insights, more longitudinal and rigorous research designs are needed to fully understand the complex relationship between social media and policy attitudes.

5.3. Limited Cross-Cultural and Multilingual Applicability

Most existing literature on social media's impact on policy attitudes is heavily concentrated in English-speaking contexts, particularly the U.S., U.K., and Canada. This presents a significant gap in understanding how social media influences welfare perception and policymaking in non-Western, multilingual, or low-connectivity environments. Given that digital cultures and

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platform usage vary greatly by region, findings from one context may not generalize to others. This calls for more comparative and culturally sensitive research designs that can account for linguistic, institutional, and technological differences.

For example, the methods and frameworks used to study social media influence in Western contexts, such as causal inference techniques and network analysis, may need to be adapted to fit the unique characteristics of non-Western social media platforms and user behaviors. Additionally, addressing challenges like data biases, bot interference, and representational gaps is crucial for ensuring that insights drawn from social media data are valid and applicable across different regions.

5.4. Promising Methodologies for Future Research

To address the gaps in understanding how social media influences welfare perception and policymaking, especially in non-Western contexts, scholars have proposed several methodological innovations. These innovations aim to overcome the limitations of existing research, which is often cross-sectional and concentrated in English-speaking regions. Below are some recommended approaches:

Methodological Innovations

Mixed-Methods Designs

Combining qualitative and quantitative methods can bridge the gap between in-depth understanding and generalizability. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, can provide rich insights into the nuances of social media use and policy attitudes. Quantitative methods, like surveys and statistical analysis, can then validate these insights across larger populations.

AI-Driven Text Mining

Techniques such as topic modeling, sentiment detection, and neural embedding can process large volumes of unstructured social media data. These methods can help identify emerging trends, grievances, and policy concerns. For example, sentiment analysis can gauge public opinion on welfare policies, while topic modeling can identify key issues discussed by users.

Experimental Designs

Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and other experimental designs can help establish causality. For example, researchers can randomly expose users to different policy narratives or misinformation and observe their reactions. This approach can isolate the specific influence of social media content from other factors. Additionally, field experiments on social media platforms can provide real-world insights into how users respond to different types of content.

Longitudinal Studies

Tracking the same subjects over an extended period allows researchers to observe changes in policy attitudes over time. Longitudinal studies can provide richer, dynamic data compared to cross-sectional studies, which only offer snapshots at a single point in time. This approach is particularly useful for understanding how sustained exposure to specific types of content influences policy attitudes.

Addressing Current Challenges

Data Biases and Representation

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Ensuring that datasets are representative of diverse populations is crucial. Researchers should use stratified sampling and other techniques to mitigate biases and ensure that findings are generalizable.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical concerns, such as informed consent and data privacy, must be addressed. Researchers should adopt reflexive ethical practices, such as debriefing participants, to mitigate potential harms.

Cultural Sensitivity

Research designs should be culturally sensitive and account for regional differences in digital cultures and platform usage. Comparative studies across different regions can help identify how findings from one context translate to others.

Table 2. Methodological Limitations and Suggested Innovations in Social Media Policy Research

Limitation	Description	Suggested Approach
Data Access and Privacy	Restricted API access; lack of demographic context; ethical constraints	Partnerships with platforms; synthetic data models
Lack of Longitudinal Studies	Cross-sectional bias; inability to track changes over time	Panel data; digital ethnography; social media logs
Causal Inference Gaps	Reliance on correlation-based interpretations	Natural experiments; A/B testing; instrumental vars
Limited Cultural Generalizability	Findings dominated by English-language Western contexts	Cross-cultural comparative studies; NLP multilingual tools
Manual and Labor-Intensive Coding	Difficulty in handling big data manually	AI-assisted text analysis; human-in-the-loop systems

5.5. Toward a More Robust Research Agenda

Future research on the impact of social media on welfare perception and policymaking should prioritize designs that are scalable, replicable, and culturally adaptable. Given the complexity of the digital public sphere and the diverse contexts in which social media operates, an interdisciplinary approach is essential. Collaboration between social scientists, computer scientists, and policy practitioners can help tackle the multifaceted questions in this domain effectively.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of Key Findings

This review has explored the intersection of social media, public policy perception, and welfare decision-making. The findings highlight that social media platforms significantly shape the public's understanding of welfare policies by fostering direct engagement, collective mobilization, and real-time feedback loops. While platforms like WeChat and RedNote have democratized access to policy debates, they have also introduced new challenges in terms of misinformation, algorithmic biases, and polarization. Public sentiment and collective mobilization via social media have proven to influence policymakers, who are increasingly responsive to the discourse in the digital public sphere. However, the impacts of these digital interactions remain complex and vary widely across political, cultural, and technological contexts.

6.2. Implications for Policymakers, Social Platforms, and Researchers

For Policymakers

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The review underscores the necessity of engaging with social media as a legitimate source of public feedback. While social media cannot replace traditional forms of policy consultation, its role in shaping the public's attitudes toward welfare policies cannot be ignored. Policymakers must adopt strategies for better listening and responding to the digital public sphere, using both technological tools and human judgment to interpret data effectively.

Recommendations for Policymakers:

Engage with Social Media Platforms: Use social media as a tool for real-time feedback and public consultation. Platforms like WeChat and RedNote offer valuable insights into public sentiment and emerging welfare concerns.

Adopt Technological Tools: Utilize AI-driven text mining and sentiment analysis tools to process large volumes of social media data. These tools can help identify trends, grievances, and policy needs.

Human Judgment and Verification: Combine technological insights with human judgment to ensure accurate interpretation of data. Verify information through multiple sources to avoid acting on misinformation.

Responsive Policymaking: Adjust policies based on real-time feedback from social media. Conduct public consultations online to gather diverse perspectives and improve policy responsiveness.

For Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms have a responsibility to mitigate the spread of misinformation and improve transparency in algorithmic content distribution. Platforms should consider incorporating features that allow users to easily verify the credibility of policy-related content and engage in more constructive discourse.

Recommendations for Social Media Platforms:

Combat Misinformation: Implement measures to detect and flag false information. Use fact-checking tools and partnerships with credible organizations to verify policy-related content.

Algorithmic Transparency: Increase transparency in how content is curated and distributed. Provide users with insights into why they see certain posts and how algorithms prioritize content.

Promote Constructive Discourse: Encourage respectful and constructive discussions. Implement features that allow users to report and flag inappropriate content, and provide resources for verified information.

User Education: Educate users on how to identify credible sources and verify information. Offer guidelines and tools to help users navigate complex policy discussions.

For Researchers

This review suggests the need for interdisciplinary collaboration to address the multifaceted nature of the issue. The combination of social sciences, computational tools, and policy analysis will be essential for a holistic understanding of how social media influences welfare-related decision-making. Moreover, future studies should explore culturally diverse contexts and adopt longitudinal research designs to draw more robust, causal conclusions.

6.3. The Need for Coordinated Research on Social Media and Welfare Policy

The Impact of Social Media on Welfare Policy

The rapidly evolving nature of social media has profound implications for welfare policy. On one hand, social media platforms have democratized access to information and policy debates, empowering individuals to voice their needs and mobilize collective action. For example,

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platforms like WeChat and RedNote have become vital spaces for sharing experiences, advocating for policy changes, and providing support during crises. On the other hand, social media also presents significant challenges, including misinformation, algorithmic biases, and the potential for increased polarization. These challenges complicate the policy-making process and require careful consideration.

The Necessity of Interdisciplinary Collaboration

To better understand and address the complex dynamics between social media and welfare policy, a more coordinated research effort across disciplines is essential. Scholars from political science, sociology, media studies, economics, and data science must collaborate more systematically to develop comprehensive frameworks for analyzing social media's role in policymaking. Interdisciplinary collaboration allows for the integration of diverse theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches, leading to more robust and nuanced insights.

Advocating for Transparency and Ethical Standards

Researchers must advocate for transparency in data usage, ethical standards in data collection, and clearer guidelines on informed consent and privacy concerns. The federal data strategy's data ethics framework emphasizes the importance of honesty, transparency, and responsibility in data use. This includes accurately reporting information, disclosing data limitations and known biases, and ensuring that data users are accountable to data providers.

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