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# Being all ears to netizens: Information disclosure in Chinese police notifications on Weibo

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on Discourse Information Theory (Du, 2014) and Rhizomatic Theory (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), this study investigates how may Chinese police departments better respond to netizens' queries when issuing notifications on Weibo (a Chinese social media platform combining functions of microblogging, social networking, and news media). Three research questions guide this inquiry: a) What are the information features of police notifications? b) What types of information do netizens expect from police notifications? c) How could police departments improve police notifications by addressing netizens' queries? To answer these questions,

a corpus of 30 influential police notifications and their ensuing comments on Weibo was collected and analyzed. This study concludes that in the digital age, the effectiveness of law is contingent upon its integration into interconnected legal and social practices. Law enforcement officers and netizens jointly shape the legal discourse, thereby influencing how information is shared and developed. This collaborative dynamic underscores the importance of transparent and responsive communication in fostering public trust and effective law enforcement.

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## KEYWORDS

police notifications, social media, Discourse Information Theory, interconnectedness, information disclosure

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## 1. Introduction

On June 10, 2022, a violent assault in Tangshan, a northern Chinese city, garnered nationwide attention following the widespread circulation of surveillance footage on social media. The footage captured a harrowing scene in which several men assaulted women at a barbecue restaurant. The male perpetrator allegedly harassed a female customer, and upon her resistance, he brutally attacked her. His accomplices subsequently joined in, beating the woman and her female companions. The victims were seen

being thrown to the ground, hit, and stomped on before the assailants fled the scene.

The initial police notification regarding the incident on Weibo failed to meet public expectations for detailed case-related information. It was criticized for its vague wording and lack of transparency, which further amplified public outrage online. This widespread criticism, stemming from inadequate communication in the police notification, prompted the local police department to revise its approach. In response, it improved its communication strategy in the follow-up notifications and provided detailed updates on the case.

However, not all cases involve follow-up notifications, which could otherwise provide opportunities for police departments to engage with netizens and restore their public image. For example, in 2022, the dragging incident in which a woman and her daughter were dragged away by the woman's ex-husband also sparked widespread dissatisfaction among netizens after the local police department issued a police notification. The dissatisfaction suggests that the traditional linear approach to information disclosure in police notifications—characterized by a one-way, top-down communication style—fails to meet netizens' expectations for the timely release of accurate and comprehensive case-related information.

The rapid development of social media has significantly enhanced public participation in public events and the exercise of supervisory rights. Media platforms have evolved from traditional communication channels into dynamic and interactive digital media (Surette, 2015), reshaping how police departments craft their communication strategies to engage with the public and address their concerns. The assault incident and the dragging incident mentioned above underscore the importance of transparency, responsiveness, and trust-building in fostering effective public discourse. The dynamic interaction between the local police department and netizens highlights the challenges and opportunities of police communication in the age of social media. The incidents also reflect the complex interplay between social media, netizens, and police departments in contemporary China. Therefore, it is necessary to explore what netizens expect from police notifications and how could the police departments incorporate netizens' concerns in the police notifications on Weibo.

The process of issuing police notifications is a process of information disclosure (Li, 2022). Drawing on the Discourse Information Theory (short

for DIT) (Du, 2014) and the Rhizomatic Theory (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), this study investigates how may Chinese police departments better respond to netizens' queries when issuing notifications on Weibo. To this end, three research questions are addressed: a) What are the information features of police notifications? b) What types of information do netizens expect from police notifications? c) How could police departments improve police notifications by addressing netizens' queries?

Section 2 reviews previous studies on police notifications and the DIT and Rhizomatic Theory. Section 3 introduces the methodology of this study. Section 4 presents the findings of the data analysis. Section 5 offers a brief discussion, and Section 6 concludes the paper by listing the implications and limitations of this study.

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## **2. Literature Review**

This section reviews existing studies on social media policing, police notifications in China, and the theoretical frameworks underpinning this research, providing a comprehensive foundation for the analysis.

### **2.1. Social media policing**

Social media among contemporary police departments worldwide has become increasingly prevalent (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015). The integration of platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Sina Weibo into police communication strategies has introduced transformative opportunities for crime prevention, public engagement, and organizational transparency. However, these developments also present significant challenges, particularly in balancing public expectations with the operational limitations of social media.

Globally, the functions of social media policing extend beyond traditional communication. Social media allows law enforcement agencies to disseminate timely information, respond to public concerns, and enhance their organizational image (Mayes, 2017; O'Connor & Zaidi, 2021). Platforms like Twitter and Facebook also enable interactive communication, fostering closer relationships with communities and improving the public's perception

of police legitimacy (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015). Heverin and Zach (2010) illustrate how police departments use social media to share critical information, ranging from crime prevention tips to emergency updates. This immediacy is particularly effective in engaging citizens during crises, where quick and reliable information can mitigate public anxiety and prevent the spread of misinformation.

Despite these benefits, challenges remain. One critical issue is the fragmented and often inconsistent implementation of social media strategies across jurisdictions. Meijer and Thaens (2013) highlight variations in how police departments in North America approach social media, with some prioritizing transparency and interaction, while others focus on one-way information dissemination. Additionally, Crump (2011) points out that many police organizations struggle to integrate social media effectively into their workflows, often treating it as an afterthought rather than a core communication tool.

The dynamic nature of social media also complicates police departments' efforts to manage public discourse. Marwich (2012) emphasizes the concept of "social surveillance," where the public monitors and critiques police activity, shaping the narrative surrounding law enforcement actions. This increased scrutiny, while beneficial for transparency, can also expose law enforcement agencies to criticism when their communication is perceived as insufficient or inauthentic. Surette (2015) further notes that the portrayal of police in media, including social media, influences public perceptions of legitimacy and trust, underscoring the importance of strategic image management.

To address these challenges, scholars worldwide propose several strategies. Mayes (2017) emphasizes the importance of organizational image construction on social media, advocating for a consistent, transparent, and audience-centered approach. Liu (2019) suggests that police notifications should balance legal precision with emotional resonance, using language that bridges the gap between institutional authority and public empathy. Additionally, Williams et al. (2013) highlight the potential of advanced technologies, such as network analysis and sentiment monitoring, to enhance law enforcement's ability to respond to public discourse in real-time.

## 2.2 Police notifications in China

Chinese police departments are active in social media policing. As early as 2010, Foshan Public Security Bureau in Guangdong Province launched the first public security Weibo account on Sina Weibo. This initiative marked the beginning of widespread adoption of social media platforms, such as Weibo and WeChat, by police departments in China to disseminate information, serve the public, and improve communication between law enforcement and netizens (Chen, 2023). Police departments across the country now have more than 50,000 social media accounts (Li, 2022).

Police notifications, known as *Jingqing Tongbao* (警情通报), *Jingfang Tongbao* (警方通报), *Qingkuang Tongbao* (情况通报), *Anqing Tongbao* (案情通报), and *Anqing Xubao* (案情续报) in Chinese, are generally categorized as “official notifications” (Li, 2022) and form a key component of the government’s information disclosure system (Chen, 2023). Police information disclosure is inherently a reflection of the police’s ability to manage issues and significantly impacts the public’s perception of the police (Li, 2022).

Social media policing in China reflects global trends while remaining deeply rooted in local cultural and institutional contexts. Platforms like Sina Weibo play a vital role in fostering direct communication between police departments and citizens, effectively addressing public concerns and combating misinformation (Chen, 2023). In the current online environment, where the truth is often elusive, police notifications have become not only an authoritative voice to address public concerns and debunk rumors but also a primary source of case information for netizens (Yao & Wang, 2020).

However, scholars such as Li, Y.Q. (2019) and Li, G.C. (2019) have pointed out several limitations in the effectiveness of police notifications. Common issues include delays in release, vague or ambiguous language, and a discourse hegemony that prioritizes official narratives over public concerns. These shortcomings often result in reactive, rather than proactive, communication, especially during crises, which undermines public trust.

To overcome these challenges, scholars have proposed various strategies. At the macro level, Peng (2005) advocated for the formalization of the police notification system, suggesting clearer delineation of rights and responsibilities, improvement of spokesperson systems, and legal codification of the notification process. Li, B. (2019) emphasized the importance of fostering intersubjective communication between authorities and the public,

highlighting the need for inclusivity, mutual understanding, and cooperation in government notifications. Additionally, scholars have urged adherence to the Regulations on the Disclosure of Government Information (Yuan & Peng, 2010; Chen, 2023). Li, G.C. (2019) further suggested that police notifications should balance legal rigor with empathetic language to enhance the public's trust in law enforcement.

In terms of content, Chen (2023) underscored the principles of “accuracy” and “legality” in police notifications. Zhao (2017) recommended that notifications include both start and end times for incidents to allow the public to gauge response efficiency. Specific location details, such as store names or building numbers, should be omitted to avoid unnecessary complications. Moreover, speculative language, non-standard terms, and omission of key elements should be avoided. Liu (2019) highlighted the importance of conceptual, interpersonal, and discourse functions in drafting police notifications. Techniques such as using interjections, modal verbs, and adverbs can help humanize notifications and strengthen the connection between law enforcement and the public. Additionally, commands and imperatives can serve as tools for providing guidance, making appeals, or issuing warnings.

While some scholars have conducted content analyses of police notifications posted on social media (Zhao, 2017; Li, B., 2019; Yao & Wang, 2020; Liu, 2019; Li, 2022; Yang, 2022), these pioneering studies primarily offer descriptive information necessary for foundational research. However, the interplay between discourse information features, public interpretations, and social media dynamics remains limited. Police notifications in China exemplify the dual nature of social media policing: a significant opportunity to enhance transparency and public trust, but also a challenge due to operational and communicative complexities. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that considers the social, cultural, and technological factors shaping police-public interactions in the digital age.

To bridge this gap, this paper adopts DIT and integrates Rhizomatic Theory as an analytical framework to examine police notifications.

### **2.3. Theoretical Basis**

This study draws upon two theories—DIT and Rhizomatic Theory—to explore the characteristics of information disclosure in Chinese

police notifications and the dynamics of police-public interactions on social media.

### 2.3.1. Discourse Information Theory

The Discourse Information Theory (short for the DIT) proposed by Prof. Jinbang Du of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in 2007 defines discourse information as a proposition with a relatively independent, complete structure that constitutes the smallest meaningful unit for communication (Du, 2014). Information acts as a bridge between language and cognition, representing knowledge. Participants use, process, and share information, organizing each information unit into a hierarchical structure referred to as a tree information structure.

The tree information structure is a fundamental theoretical model of DIT. In this model (see Figure 1), discourse information is organized into a hierarchical structure consisting of a kernel proposition (KN) and its underlying information. Each discourse contains multiple information units, each comprising a proposition. These units are independent but closely related, with their relationships represented by 15 types of information knots, symbolized by abbreviations<sup>1</sup>.

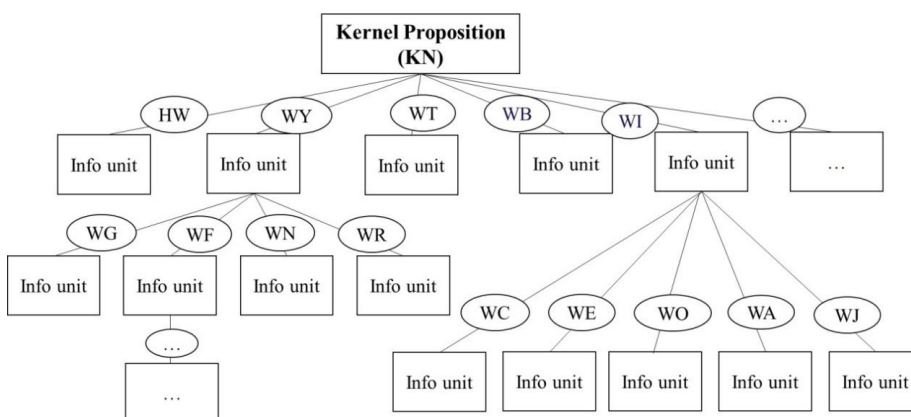


Figure 1 Tree information structure of discourse (Du, 2007)

<sup>1</sup> The full names of the 15 abbreviations are: What thing (WT); What basis (WB); What fact (WF); What inference (WI); What disposal (WP); Who (WO); When (WN); Where (WR); How (HW); Why (WY); What effect (WE); What condition (WC); What attitude (WA); What change (WG); What judgment (WJ) (Du, 2014).

The DIT classifies these 15 types of information knots into three categories: state, process, and attitude<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the DIT views propositions as processes centered on predicates, with involved objects as entities, all occurring under specific conditions. Process, entity, and condition are the three main elements of information, essential for identifying specific content and features. Each type of information element has several subclasses<sup>3</sup>.

In this context, the predicate represents the process, the entity refers to the participants, and the condition provides the circumstances in which the process occurs. Analyzing these elements allows for a detailed examination of the information features within the discourse of police notifications.

As a specialized research method in forensic linguistics, DIT focuses on the overall structure of discourse information, its specific elements, and their arrangement across various texts (Du, 2009). DIT has been further developed by many scholars and applied to various fields, including courtroom discourse analysis, legal translation, authorship identification, speaker identification, and English teaching (Yuan et al., 2024a; Yuan et al., 2024b). DIT offers a powerful framework for analyzing the characteristics of written discourse, providing a robust theoretical basis for examining the discourse features of police notifications.

### 2.3.2. Rhizomatic Theory

The discourse information theory takes the discourse as the starting point, examining the relationship between language, information, and cognition from the level of discourse, and emphasizing the social properties of information (Xu, 2016), which can meet the needs of studying the discourse information features of the police notification within itself. Meanwhile, rhizomatic theory, emphasizing decentralization, interconnect-

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<sup>2</sup> The state category describes situations, including WT, WF, WO, WN, and WR; The process category explains how things develop and change, including HW, WY, WE, WC, and WG; The attitude category expresses values, attitudes, and perspectives, including WB, WI, WP, WA, and WJ (Du, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Symbols of the information elements: Process (P) including State (PS), Quality (PQ), Appear (PA), Relation (PR), Behavior (PB), Cause (PC), Turn (PT), and Negation (PN); entity (e) including agent (1), dative (2), patient (3), factitive (4), and attribute (5); condition (c) including instrument (i), location (l), source (s), goal (g), comitative (c), time (t), affected (a), with (w), situation (o), basis (b), manner (m), and elaboration (e) (Du, 2014).

edness, and adaptability, provides a novel lens for understanding the non-linear, dynamic interaction between police notifications and netizen comments.

The Rhizomatic Theory is a philosophical concept introduced in Deleuze and Guattari's book *"A Thousand Plateaus"* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) as part of their broader work on "schizoanalysis." The key concepts of Rhizomatic Theory are as follows: First, non-hierarchical structure: Unlike a tree, which has a clear root and branches, a rhizome has no central point. It spreads in all directions without a clear beginning or end. Second, multiplicity: A rhizome comprises diverse elements and connections, embracing complexity and rejecting the idea of a single, unified order. Third, decentralization: Power, knowledge, and meaning in a rhizome are distributed across various nodes, avoiding centralization. Fourth, nomadism: Rhizomes support a "nomadic" movement of thought and being, allowing for freedom, fluidity, and adaptability rather than being confined to rigid structures.

The rhizomatic analysis is a spatialized analysis based on the transition from the Archive to the Diagram through cartography (Peters & Taglietti, 2019) and it has been applied in various fields such as education, cultural studies, and digital networks. In education, it serves as a model for learner-centered education, where students explore knowledge through self-directed, non-linear pathways. In cultural studies, it is applied to analyze culture as a complex, interconnected network of influences and practices rather than a singular, dominant narrative (O'Sullivan, 2022).

Overall, the Rhizomatic Theory challenges traditional ways of thinking and organizing knowledge, advocating for a more flexible, interconnected, and dynamic approach. The Internet and social media can be seen as rhizomatic structures, where information spreads rapidly and unpredictably without central control (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). It mirrors the fluid, decentralized nature of online interactions, allowing for a deeper exploration of how information flows and adapts in response to user engagement.

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### **3. Methodology**

This study adopts a data-based qualitative and quantitative approach to explore the characteristics of information disclosure in Chinese police notifications and the dynamics of public engagement on Weibo. Discourse

information analysis (DIA) and rhizomatic analysis are adopted in the discourse analysis. The dataset includes the written content of 30 police notifications and the corresponding comments from netizens. The analysis focuses on identifying patterns and interactions within the data through discourse analysis.

### 3.1. Data

The data analyzed here are collected from Sina Weibo. Police notifications are initially published by the respective police departments on their official Weibo accounts and then forwarded by other Weibo accounts, triggering intense discussions among netizens. Among these accounts, “@China News Network (中国新闻网)” is particularly influential. As of the time of corpus collection, “@China News Network” has over 80 million followers and more than 700 million comments, underscoring its significant influence on Weibo. Due to the varying levels of influence among the accounts that initially publish police notifications on Weibo, this study selected notifications forwarded by “@China News Network” as the source of its corpus to minimize confounding variables.

Thirty police notifications, each corresponding to a separate case that had garnered significant public attention and discussion on Weibo between May 31, 2022, and May 31, 2023 were selected, based on the number of comments and likes they received (see Table 1).

Table 1: Information of the 30 Police Notifications

No.	Time of the Case	Time of Releasing	Agencies	No. of Comments	No. of Likes	Nature of the case
1	2022/9/2	2022/9/4	Loudi City PSB <sup>4</sup> TPB <sup>5</sup> ,Hunan Province	18000	382000	criminal
2	2022/7/6	2022/7/12	Laiyang City PSB, Shandong Province	16000	614000	criminal
3	N/A	2022/7/10	Xuchang City PSB, Henan Province	9737	95000	criminal

<sup>4</sup> PSB: Police Security Brigade

<sup>5</sup> TPB: Traffic Police Bureau

No.	Time of the Case	Time of Releasing	Agencies	No. of Comments	No. of Likes	Nature of the case
4	2022/7/26	2022/7/30	Leshan City PSB, Sichuan Province	9400	148000	criminal
5	2023/2/22	2023/4/5	Deyang City PSB Luojiang District Branch, Sichuan Province	6800	288000	criminal
6	2022/10/14	2023/1/29	Jiangxi Province, City and County Joint PSB	6198	88000	criminal
7	2022/7/16	2022/7/17	Shenyang City PSB, Liaoning Province	5720	147000	administrative
8	2022/7/16	2022/7/20	Zhongmu County PSB, Henan Province	5143	122000	criminal
9	2022/6/28	2022/7/2	Junlian County PSB, Sichuan Province	4721	89000	criminal
10	2022/6/19	2022/6/19	Huizhou City PSB Huicheng District Branch, Guangdong Province	4167	68000	administrative
11	2022/7/12	2022/8/22	Shanghai City PSB Pudong District Branch	4138	11000	criminal
12	2022/11/15	2022/11/15	Taian City PSB Taishan District Branch	3973	48000	criminal
13	2022/7/17	2022/7/20	Xinchang County PSB, Zhejiang Province	3338	90000	criminal
14	2023/3/24	2023/3/25	Wugong County PSB, Shanxi Province	3081	66000	administrative
15	2022/11/19	2022/11/20	Fuzhou City PSB Cangshan District Branch, Fujian Province	2699	30000	criminal
16	2023/2/15	2023/2/16	Xianju County PSB, Zhejiang Province	2629	28000	criminal
17	2023/3/15	2023/3/16	Guangzhou City PSBPTB <sup>6</sup>	2481	28000	administrative
18	2022/6/6	2022/6/6	Bayan County PSB, Heilongjiang Province	2252	27000	criminal
19	2022/6/10	2022/6/21	Hebei Provincial PSD <sup>7</sup>	2133	23000	criminal

<sup>6</sup> PTB: Public Transport Branch

<sup>7</sup> PSD: Public Security Department

No.	Time of the Case	Time of Releasing	Agencies	No. of Comments	No. of Likes	Nature of the case
20	2023/5/15	2023/5/17	Beijing City PSB Tongzhou District Branch	1915	54000	criminal
21	2022/7/2	2022/7/6	Anyi County PSBTPB, Jiangxi Province	1672	31000	criminal
22	2022/8/17	2022/8/19	Dongcheng District PSB, Beijing City	1660	38000	administrative
23	2023/3/31	2023/4/5	Wenzhou City PSB, Zhejiang province	1357	23000	criminal
24	2023/3/22	2023/3/26	Guangzhou City PSB Yuexiu District Branch, Guangdong Province	1266	15000	administrative
25	2023/2/4	2023/2/5	Hunan Provincial Highway Traffic Police Station	1261	4618	criminal
26	2022/10/14	2023/1/7	Jiangxi Province, City and County Joint PSB	1228	9427	criminal
27	2022/8/25	2022/8/26	Qingdao Railway PSB, Shandong Province	1217	9187	administrative
28	N/A	2022/6/12	Tangshan City PSB Fengnan District Branch, Hebei Province	1086	11000	criminal
29	2022/5/27	2022/6/3	Tonghua City PSB Dongchang District Branch, Jilin Province	1029	18000	criminal
30	2023/5/2	2023/5/10	Chengdu City Railway PSB, Sichuan Province	1024	7749	administrative

The dataset comprises 30 police notifications with over 1,000 comments each, ranked by comment count. These notifications primarily involve criminal cases and were issued by police agencies across 12 provinces, 16 cities, and 7 counties. Most notifications originate from public security bureaus, highlighting diverse regional contexts.

When collecting the data, comments unrelated to the research were excluded, and those related to the public's perception of police departments were collected. These comments include criticism, suggestions and praise of police notifications and police departments. The final corpus included police notifications totaling 14,213 characters and netizens' comments totaling 80,384 characters.

## 3.2. Data analysis

Firstly, discourse information analysis (DIA) is adopted here to get the features of information disclosed in police notifications. DIA is a new approach to discourse analysis, which focuses on the content, structure and relationship of information in a discourse (Du, 2011; Xu, 2014). The DIT takes propositions as the basic carrier of information, making information stratifiable and measurable, and laying the foundation for macro and micro analysis of information (Xu, 2016). According to the DIT, information knots and information elements were annotated and counted using BFSU Qualitative Coder annotation. To reduce subjectivity and improve accuracy, this tagging is performed jointly by the author and two other graduate students. Then, the frequency of information element combinations were figured out on AntConc and the tree structure of each police notification was mapped using XMind.

Secondly, netizens' comments were segmented using Gooseeker, a Chinese word segmentation tool. High-frequency keywords directly related to netizens' concerns were selected in collaboration with two other graduate students, and a word cloud was generated to summarize netizens' expectations for police notifications.

Besides, rhizomatic analysis is applied to explore the decentralized and adaptive nature of the relationship between the information disclosure in police notifications and public interactions, so as to conclude the implications for the strategies of releasing police notifications.

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## 4. Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, focusing on the key features of information disclosed in police notifications and netizens' primary expectations regarding such disclosures.

### 4.1. Features of information disclosed in police notifications

Statistics on police notifications reveal that the framework for information disclosure has evolved into a relatively fixed pattern.

#### 4.1.1. Four-word mode of the kernel

An analysis of the number of characters in the kernels of 30 police notifications reveals a predominant four-character format.

Specifically, the contents and frequency of these kernels show that the term “警情通报” (Notification of Police Affairs) is used as the kernel in 20 notifications, “情况通报” (Notification of Circumstances) in six, and “警方通报” (Police Report) in one. The information disclosed in these three types of kernels is largely similar, with none providing detailed information about the cases. In addition to these 27 police notifications, the titles of the other three police notifications contain 31, 21 and 18 characters respectively. The three titles are “关于陈某志等涉嫌寻衅滋事、暴力殴打他人等案件侦办进展情况的通报” (Notification on the Progress of the Investigation into the Case Involving Chen Mouzhi and Others Suspected of Provoking Trouble and Violent Assault), “许广高速公路望城段发生多起多车追尾交通事故” (Multiple Multi-Vehicle Rear-End Traffic Accidents on the Wangcheng Section of the Xuguang Expressway), and “关于胡某宇失踪事件调查进展情况的通报” (Notification on the Progress of the Investigation into the Disappearance of Hu Mouyu). The results of the correlation analysis reveal a moderate positive association between title length and overall text length (Pearson  $r = 0.431$ ; Spearman's  $\rho = 0.440$ ). This finding suggests that title length can to some extent be indicative of the overall length of a text, though it does not function as a determining factor. In other words, while title length demonstrates a certain degree of predictive potential with respect to total text length, the latter is more substantially shaped by variables such as genre or content type, communicative purpose, and information density.

#### 4.1.2. Greatly varied information development

The information development and structure in police notifications can be shown vividly in the information tree structure of the DIT.

After drawing the tree structures of 30 police notifications, it can be found that there are ten notifications featuring five information knots at the first level, while others are range from 3-8. This suggests that the framework for information disclosure in police notifications is largely standardized. While there is a general framework, the depth and direction

of information development are shaped by the specific context of each case. And the information development of police notifications can be divided into the following three categories (See Figure 2).

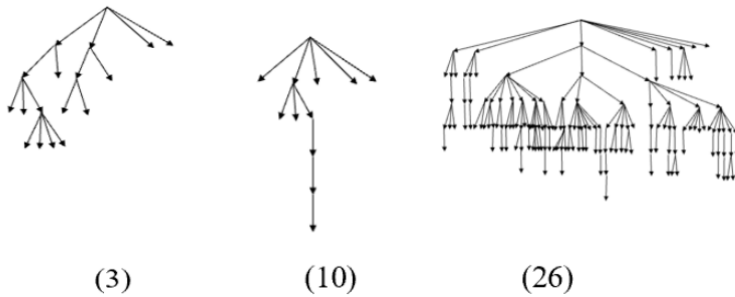


Figure 2 Information structures of case No. 3, 10, and 26

According to the DIT, a greater number of information levels and branches at each level indicates deeper information development, while fewer levels and branches suggest a more concise discourse. By comparison, it can be seen from the figure that the development of case No. 26 has the most in-depth information development, reaching the 7th level, while the information development of Case 3 is not in-depth enough, only reaching the 4th level. Although the information development of Case 10 is relatively in-depth, in the first level, only one item of information has been fully developed which indicates an imbalance of information arrangement. The information development in Case 26 is relatively in-depth and balanced.

Case 26, from Jiangxi police, details the investigation into Hu's disappearance. Hu had been missing for over two months before the police department issued the notification. Rumors proliferated after November 15, 2022, leading to a surge in public opinion. The police department responded on January 7, 2023, by issuing a detailed notification about the investigation. Another lengthy notification, consisting of 2,496 characters, was from Sichuan police, reporting a death in a student dormitory. Similar to the previous case, this notification was prompted by the rapid spread of rumors online, prompting the police department to provide detailed investigation information. It is evident that the more attention a case receives on Weibo, the more information is disclosed in police notifications.

### 4.1.3. Behavior-oriented information disclosure

Data analysis reveals that all of the eight process information elements were identified, with 758 behavior (PB) elements being the most dominant, accounting for 60.7%, taking a leading position among all process information elements. Moreover, PB appears in every police notification. The prevalence of PB shows that they are essential information elements in police notifications and there is a behavior-oriented information disclosure in police notifications.

The importance of behavior-oriented information disclosure could be further seen from the frequency of entity and process information element combinations. Data analysis shows that there are five high-frequency combination, three of which are combined with behavior, accounting for 80.2% in total. Among them, ‘behavior + patient’ accounted for about 34.7%; ‘agent + behavior’ accounted for about 27.3%; ‘behavior + dative’ accounted for about 18.2%. The higher frequency of ‘behavior + patient’ compared to ‘agent + behavior’ indicates that police departments are more inclined to detail the actions of an agent.

Extract 1 Case 1

.....肖某某(女, 28岁)驾驶湘K牌照小型轿车在娄星区吉星路株山公园东门地段由南往北行驶时[1eBe3lsgt], 与前方谢某(女, 36岁)驾驶的二轮电动车追尾相撞[l1eB3cmT], 谢某衣裤被卡入轿车左前角[e3SeI]. 肖某某驾车逃离现场[1B3BI], 致使谢某被车辆拖行[a2iB], 后被执勤交警截停[t1T]. 执勤交警随即迅速控制肖某某[1tmB2], 将谢某立即送医救治[2tgB], 同时开展现场调查勘验[cBI3].....	.....Xiao (female, 28 years old) was driving a small car with Xiang K license plate from south to north at the east gate of Zhushan Park, Jixing Road, Louxing District, when he rear-ended a two-wheel electric car driven by Xie (female, 36 years old) in front of her. Xie's clothes were stuck into the left front corner of the car. Xiao drove away from the scene, causing Xie to be towed by the vehicle and then stopped by the traffic police. Traffic police immediately controlled Xiao X and sent Xie immediately to the hospital for treatment while carrying out the on-site investigation.
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Extract 1 is from Case 1 concerning information about a car incident in Loudi. In this extract, many process elements appear (e.g., PB, PS, and PT), but by contrast, behavior elements (PB) appear most frequently. Eight behavior information elements are used to describe the actions of Xiao (a party to the case), and there are four kinds of combinations. The combinations of ‘agent + behavior’, for example, ‘Xiao... + drive (驾驶)’ and ‘police... + control (控制)’ talk about the actions of the party and the police,

so as to informing the public the cause of the case and the measures taken by the police departments. To explain the case information clearly, the police department must explain Xiao’s behavior clearly, as Xiao is the main actor leading to the occurrence of the case. Moreover, the combinations such as “behavior + dative,” (scontrol Xiao (控制肖某某)) and “behavior + patient,”(carry out the on-site investigation (开展现场调查勘验)) of the police department who is the agent, inform netizens of police departments’ actions in solving the case.

## 4.2. Netizens’ major expectations

After conducting word segmentation, high-frequency keywords from netizens’ comments were selected, and a word cloud was generated. And the top 20 keywords by frequency are presented in the table below (see Table 2).

Table 2 Top 20 keywords in word frequency

No.	Keywords	English	Freq.	No.	Keywords	English	Freq.
1	警察	Police	337	11	犯罪	Crime	74
2	通报	Notification	298	12	真相	Truth	66
3	严惩	Severely punish	263	13	处罚	Punishment	64
4	强奸	Rape	194	14	关系	Relationship	61
5	死刑	Death penalty	174	15	结果	Result	59
6	详细	Detailed	136	16	故意	Intentional	58
7	希望	Hope	109	17	视频	Video	57
8	轻伤	Minor injury	80	18	相信	Trust	56
9	问题	Issue	78	19	处理	Handle	56
10	法律	Law	76	20	杀人	Kill	55

As illustrated in Table 2, the most frequent keywords, No.3, 5, 13, 15 and 19 suggest that netizens are highly concerned with how does the police dispose of the case. Keywords such as No. 6, 10 and 12 reflect netizens’ focus on the details and basis of the case. In summary, the comments reveal that netizens have significant expectations about both the WP (what process) and WB (what basis) information of police notifications.

The demand for WP information may stem from the fact that some police notifications conclude with statements like, “The suspect has been detained, and the case is under further investigation”. Such statements are often necessitated by the need for time to investigate the case thoroughly. Therefore, in the early stages of an investigation, police departments can

only release limited WP information, with further details being disclosed after the investigation progresses. Some notifications also reflect the police departments' stance by stating, "Police departments will inform the community promptly about the follow-up progress of the case investigation." However, netizens do not accept this temporality—they push for continuous updates, actively questioning the pause in the flow of information.

Moreover, netizens express significant concern regarding the authenticity of police notifications, which is supported by WB information (see Table 3):

Table 3 Netizen' comments

No.	Netizens' name	Comments	English
1	@筱璃筱璃我爱你	2个月了, 还没个结果? (Case 1)	It's been two months, still no result?
2	@鸡排没肉不好吃	所以怎么判了? (Case 9)	So what was the verdict?
3	@霉国是肮脏的代言	这岂止是致富啊, 这是创造神话(Case 7)	This isn't just getting rich; it's creating a legend. Does anyone believe that he is
4	@童话镇里起风了	月薪三千, 拼死拼活的辅警信吗? (Case 7)	an auxiliary police officer risking his life with a monthly salary of 3,000?
5	@好莱坞肖像摄影师	谁能够给解释一下, 二级轻伤是个什么概念, 属于一个什么级别 (Case 19)	Can someone explain what exactly a second-degree minor injury means? What level is that?
6	@清澈里_Cc	及时赶到? 搞笑呢? 不嫌丢人(Case 27)	"Arrived promptly"? Is this a joke? Aren't you ashamed?

Comments 1 and 2 are from case 1 and 9 respectively. Case 1 is about a traffic accident with a bad impact, and case 9 is about the indecent sexual assault of five minors, both of which have received widespread attention, and the notification ends with "the case is under investigation." Netizens' comments indicate that they pay great attention to the follow-up information or the result of the punishment. Actually, similar comments were made in almost every police notification that drew widespread attention but failed to report the outcome of the case which shows that post-truth police notifications often convey an attitude but lack substantive content, leading to incomplete communication about the case. As a result, whenever a particularly egregious case arises, netizens are eager for "follow-up" notifications that disclose the final outcomes or the updates on previous cases. When these follow-up updates or WP information fail to appear or lack substantial content, netizens grow increasingly frustrated. This dissatisfaction is not

only about the delay but about the perceived withholding of information, where silence or incomplete disclosure functions as a form of control that disrupts the flow of knowledge.

Comments 3 and 4 are from Case 7 concerning the result of an investigation into an Internet celebrity suspected of taking photos with a police helicopter. However, netizens' comments indicate that they do not accept the police department's explanation of the celebrity's wealth, suspecting potential misconduct by her father. The information knots data of this case shows that no WB information knot exists in this police notification. Moreover, Comment 5 is from Case 19 concerning the progress of investigation on the beating case in Tangshan, which reveals that the concept of "slight injury" is not widely understood. During the dissemination of such sensitive cases, netizens tend to focus on the victim's well-being and the perpetrator's punishment. The term "slight injury" may lead some netizens to perceive the judgment as lenient toward the perpetrator, causing dissatisfaction. This reflects an information gap between police departments and netizens regarding the term "slight injury."

Sometimes, police departments used the phrase "promptly" (及时) to modify the verb "arrive" (赶到), indicating that they treated the case seriously and arrived promptly to stop the altercation. However, without a specific time point as basis, netizens may question this explanation with comments like "Is this a joke? Aren't you ashamed?" like Comment 6. Such reactions suggest that netizens doubt police departments' authenticity.

To sum up, if the police notification lacks WB information to support the stated information, they may fail to meet netizens' expectations, potentially undermining the credibility of the notifications.

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## 5. Discussion

Data analysis shows that police notifications function not merely as authoritative announcements but as part of a broader, interactive network of information exchange, where the information is influenced by the decentralized forces of public opinion and social media discourse. The police departments' engagement with netizens goes beyond a simple exchange of top-down notifications; it involves understanding the diverse needs and expectations that emerge from the dispersed voices within the public sphere

(Li, 2019). This decentralized interaction reflects the principles of rhizomatic communication.

For example, although there is a rough pattern when writing police notifications, the information development in a police notification seems to correlate with the level of public attention a case receives on Weibo, suggesting a responsive, rhizomatic pattern in the way police departments interact with public discourse. The more the case resonates with netizens, the more branches of information are produced and shared, echoing the rhizomatic idea of multiplicity and openness. Within this ever-expanding network of social interaction, police notifications serve as a node, playing the role of addressing public concerns, dispelling rumors, and providing case information to the public.

According to Li, M. (2022), police departments need to explain to the audience the cause of the case and the measures taken by the police departments when releasing police notifications on Weibo. Therefore, when describing the case, it is necessary to emphasize the behavior of the parties and explain the development of the matter; After responding to the police, it is necessary to highlight the conduct of the police departments, reassure the public and accept supervision. The dominance of behavior-oriented elements reflects a narrative strategy that fosters the understanding of events, focusing on actions and their consequences within the broader social landscape (Du, 2014).

Netizens' demands for WP and WB information knots further demonstrate the networked nature of information consumption. These demands reveal a need for precision and authenticity, with netizens expressing high expectations for the accuracy and integrity of the information in police notifications. The absence of key content reduces the accuracy of police notifications, allowing public opinion to ferment (Chen, 2023). To improve notifications, police departments should recognize the multiplicity of voices and to adopt a more flexible, open approach to communication, one that acknowledges the shifting, interconnected nature of public interaction.

By addressing public's needs and incorporating feedback, police departments can increase public satisfaction, and ensure that the dynamic relationship with the public continues to evolve within the legal framework. In doing so, the following strategies can be employed.

Firstly, police departments should work to supplement the information gaps as stated in chapter 4 by supplementing WP and WB information

knots, which serves to create multiple entry points for understanding, enhancing the overall informational network.

Due to the working departments of the investigation and trial of the case may be different, the responsible subjects of the disclosure of information should bear the corresponding responsibilities, and use the influence of the Weibo account of government affairs to apply hot search topics to remind netizens (Chen, 2023). In other words, no matter whether the case is still hot or not, police departments should disclose follow-up WP information to netizens promptly. What’s more, since insufficient WB information knots may make police notifications not convincing or trustworthy, police departments should pay attention to enriching WB information knots to improve the persuasiveness of information. For instance:

Extract 2 Case 30

<p>...&lt;WB&gt;依据《中华人民共和国治安管理处罚法》第四十三条第一款之规定, &lt;WP&gt;公安机关对杨某某处500元罚款...</p>	<p>...Pursuant to Article 43, Paragraph 1 of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Penalties for Administration of Public Security, the Public Security Bureau has imposed a fine of 500 yuan on Yang...</p>
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This extract is from Case 30 concerning the handling of the fight on the high-speed train. In this notification, a WB information knot containing specific laws is employed to support the WP information knot, which can help to increase the credibility and rationality of police notifications to a certain extent.

Secondly, since vague information, for example “promptly”, disrupt the flow of knowledge, leading to fragmentation and disconnection, police departments should try to apply more specific information to make the notification become a more robust node in the informational web, contributing to the creation of a transparent and trustworthy network.

To be specific, police departments should be transparent, inform netizens with the exact time of cases and police departments’ work, accept the supervision and evaluation of netizens. For example:

Extract 3 Case 5

<p><b>8时02分</b>, 值班老师拨打110报警 [t1Bb3]。 <b>8时09分</b>, 辖区派出所民警抵达学校 [ts1B1]...</p>	<p>At <b>8:02 AM</b>, the duty teacher dialed 110 to report the incident. By <b>8:09 AM</b>, police officers from the local precinct had arrived at the school...</p>
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This extract is from Case 5 concerning the results of an investigation into a death in a student dormitory. In this extract, the police department released specific time points to the public (e.g., 8:02 AM, 8:09 AM) instead of the vague manner information element, for example “promptly” to describe their behaviors. It is clear that the police officers responded in seven minutes, fully demonstrating the working speed of police departments. Netizens’ comments of Case 5 help to prove it (See Table 4):

Table 4 Netizen’ comments of Case 5

No.	Netizens’ name	Comments	English
1	@可惜你就是水瓶座	为罗江警方点赞 这个才是详细逻辑清晰的通报	Thumbs up for Luojiang police. This is a detailed and logical notification.
2	@一只鱼908	这警情通报太详细了[大拇指]	This police notification is so detailed. [Thumbs up]
3	@浪迹天涯艾小欣	这才是让人信服的官方通报	This is a convincing official briefing.

As shown in Table 4, many netizens gave complimentary comments to the police notification of Case 5 for its details and clarity. Although it may not be the only reason, using specific information elements instead of general information elements is more helpful to convince netizens because this kind of information is sincere and integrity.

All in all, in the digital age, law does not exist in isolation but is interwoven with social practices in a continuous flow of information. Police departments are encouraged to be all ears to the public and supplement and improve their notifications within the confines of legal norms while embracing the flexibility of rhizomatic dissemination. By employing the Rhizomatic Theory, the flexible disclosure strategies help a lot to improve police departments’ service and public satisfaction in response to public engagement.

## 6. Conclusion

This study highlights the complexities and opportunities associated with adapting police notifications to the decentralized and interactive nature of social media. By integrating Discourse Information Theory (DIT) and Rhizomatic Theory, this study underscores the necessity for a communication approach that is both transparent and responsive. Through

data analysis, practical recommendations including enhancing information disclosure, ensuring timely updates, and fostering public trust through clarity and accountability are put forward.

As a preliminary study of police notifications in China, this study hopefully contributes to the growing literature. From a practical standpoint, this study provides valuable insights into the informational characteristics of police notifications, offering a framework to understand netizens' demands for transparency and clarity. It also presents actionable strategies for addressing public inquiries and concerns, thereby enhancing the quality of public service. These efforts have the potential to improve public satisfaction, contribute to a harmonious online environment, and promote social stability—objectives that align with the broader goal of fostering a more just and transparent communication process between the police and the public.

On a theoretical level, this study extends the application of DIT and Rhizomatic Theory to the context of police discourse on social media. It highlights the utility of rhizomatic frameworks in analyzing the decentralized, fluid, and interconnected nature of digital public communication, offering a novel lens through which to examine the evolving dynamics of police-public interactions.

Future research could build on this study by employing corpus-based methods to analyze the discourse of police notifications on Weibo, thereby identifying more reliable patterns and linguistic rules from larger datasets. Additionally, developing emotional dictionaries based on netizens' comments could enhance the responsiveness of police notifications, enabling law enforcement agencies to better align their messaging with public concerns. Such advancements would further refine the interactive processes between the police and the public, contributing to more effective communication and fostering trust in law enforcement services.

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