Characteristics of "Cyber Nationalism" in China: A Case Study of Comments on Nongfu Spring on Weibo

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Abstract. This study examines the influence of consumer nationalism on corporate reputation as well as consumer behaviour in China, with a particular focus on Nongfu Spring and its CEO Zhong Shanshan. Through sentiment and textual analyses of social media discourse, this study examines how nationalistic sentiments and perceptions of patriotism influence public opinion, especially when corporate behaviour or affiliations appear to conflict with national interests. The study finds that what Chinese nationalists perceive as unpatriotic behaviour or affiliation with foreign elements may cause significant backlash. This is illustrated by the negative reaction to Nongfu Spring's suspected Japanese cultural elements in the brand and the CEO's son's US citizenship. The findings highlight the complexity of consumer nationalism in China, where economic behaviour is heavily politicised and closely linked to notions of national loyalty. In a market environment where nationalism is prevalent, this study contributes to an understanding of the intricate relationship within nationalism, corporate reputation, and consumer behaviour.

Keywords: Consumer nationalism, nationalism, social media analysis, patriotism.

1. Introduction

Consumer nationalism emphasises the intertwining of consumer behaviour with national identity. Consumer nationalism is characterised by a preference for domestically produced goods and a rejection of foreign products, often expressed as a boycott of products and brands from foreign countries [1]. Consumer nationalism argues that there is an intricate relationship between consumption and nationalism, and that consumption is a powerful tool for political expression and social identity. States and market actors use consumer culture to promote national interests and national identity, and consumption choices become politically and culturally significant behaviours [2]. Consumer nationalism engages with aspects of consumer behaviour driven by nationalistic faith, whereby consumer behaviour may serve as a tool to express a person's sense of nationality belonging, rejection of foreignness, and other purposes [3]. In China, nationalistic sentiments drive people to boycott foreign products and foreign brands from time to time. Such as the boycott of Starbucks for moving into the Forbidden City in Beijing and the boycott of Carrefour for its perceived anti-Chinese behaviour in France; consumerism has been an important channel for creating the concept of both political citizenship and nationhood in modern China [4].

The CEO of Nongfu Spring, China's richest man, Zhong Shanshan, has faced fierce attacks from Chinese nationalists who accuse him of a lack of patriotism. The criticism was prompted by the death at the end of February 2024 of Zong Qinghou, the founder of the Wahaha conglomerate, one of Nongfu Spring's biggest competitors. Zong was an active nationalist. His death triggered negative comments about Zhong, which grew into attacks on various aspects of the company, from the perceived Japanese elements in the packaging of Nongfu Spring's products to the American citizenship of Zhong's son, who is a non-executive director of Nongfu Spring and a potential successor in the takeover of Nongfu Spring. The campaign led to a fall in the share price of Zhong's drinks company.

This study investigates the impact of consumer nationalism on corporate reputation and consumer behaviour in China, with a special focus on Nongfu Spring and its CEO Zhong Shanshan. This study aims to understand how nationalistic sentiments and notions of patriotism affect Chinese businesses and their managers, especially when their behaviours or affiliations are perceived as contradictory to

national interests. By adopting sentiment analysis as well as textual analysis of social media discourse, this study explores the complexity of consumer nationalism and its impact on firms operating in an increasingly nationalistic market environment. In China's changing socio-political environment, this survey contributes to understanding the link among nationalism, firm reputation as well as consumer behaviour.

2. Methods

The media as a form of communication is inherently abstract, and the one-to-many communication promotes the core idea of nationalism [5]. Media content in the digital age continues to show substantial evidence of the spread of the concept of nationhood online. The research proves that contrary to previous academic predictions, the concept of the nation thrives on the Internet media contribute to the development of a sense of cultural integration and social cohesion [6]. China is a unique case when examining the Internet and nationalism, where the Internet is far from being a democratization project; rather, it is managed by the party-state in conjunction with large Chinese online companies. The country maintains strict rules on what internet users are allowed to see and what they are not allowed to see. As a result, certain particular search phrases are blocked, while other search phrases are regulated carefully [7]. At the same time, contrary to the views of Western netizens, Chinese netizens do not see the Internet as a tool to promote democracy as well as freedom of expression [8]. Chinese state-regulated commercial organisations provide Chinese versions of alternatives to all mainstream US platforms, and Sina Weibo is the favourite Twitter-type service in China [9].

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to analyse the impact of consumer nationalism on corporate reputation and consumer behaviour in China, focusing on Nongfu Spring and its CEO Zhong. The research methodology includes sentiment analysis and textual analysis of social media comments to capture public sentiment and discourse. The study collected comments from the company's Weibo, focusing on reactions directly related to the CEO and the company. This approach was used to quantify the extent of positive, neutral and negative sentiments expressed by the public. The textual analysis section of this study explores the discourse on Weibo surrounding Nongfu Spring and its CEO, Zhong. By systematically examining the language, themes and rhetoric used in the comments, the analysis in this paper aims to reveal the underlying sentiments and narratives that influence public perceptions, with a focus on exploring recurring patterns and key utterances that reflect consumer nationalism and revealing the socio-political dynamics involved. Through this research, the paper seeks to understand how public discourse on digital platforms reflects broader nationalist ideologies and has implications for corporate reputation and consumer behaviour in China.

In the face of overwhelming criticism from netizens, Zhong furtively has been trying to quell the anger on the Internet. For this reason, on the 3rd of March, he posted a post in a personal tone on the Weibo of the Nongfu Spring brand remembering his friendship with Zong. There is no doubt that this microblogging post got the attention of numerous Weibo users. This paper collects the comments in Zhong Shanshan's Weibo. The posts were considered irrelevant to the event if the following existed within the comments: (a) the central aspect of the subject matter was not related to Nongfu Spring, even though the exact words were included in the post; (b) the comments contained not only Nongfu Spring's content, but also other information not related to the event; and (c) the comments were duplicated. After data cleaning, 203 tweets remained. In this study, the content of Weibo comments was sentiment analysed using the ROST Content Mining System 6.0. The ROST Emotion Analysis Tool dictionary consists of two files: a positive vocabulary list and a negative vocabulary list, in it, all terms are assigned corresponding sentiment levels according to the psychological classification [10]. Firstly, the tool identifies the keywords in each sentence, and second, each keyword was attributed a sentiment level based on a self-coded dictionary. Lastly, the sentiment value of each sentence is calculated.

3. Results

Table 1 provides a detailed sentiment analysis of the comments on Nongfu Spring's Weibo account, focusing on the public's emotional response to the company and its CEO. The table categorises the comments into three main types of sentiment: positive, neutral and negative. Negative sentiment accounts for more than half of the number of tweets analysed by sentiment analysis on Nongfu Spring's Weibo.

Table 1. Sentiment analysis of the comment section of Nongfu Spring

Type of emotion	Number of Posts	percentage
Positive emotions (5, +∞)	43	21.29%
Neutral mood [5,5]	5	2.48%
Negative emotions (-∞,5)	154	76.24%
Positive mood segment statistics		
general	24	11.88%
medium	7	3.47%
high level	12	5.94%
Negative mood segmentation statistics		
general	45	22.28%
medium	7	3.47%
high level	8	3.96%

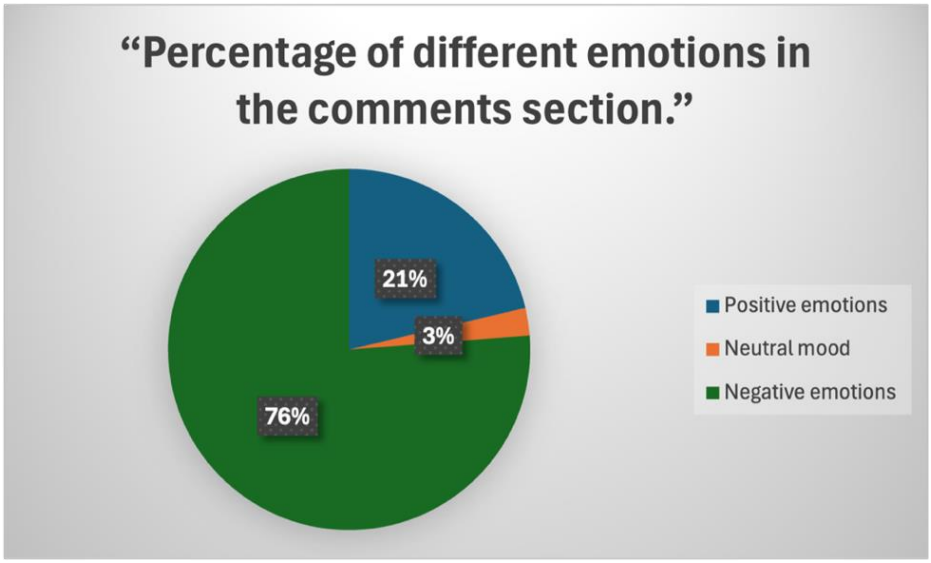


Fig. 1 Visualization of the percentage of emotions in the comment section

Figure 1 shows that most of the comments were categorised as negative sentiments, expressing strong dissatisfaction or criticism towards Nongfu Springs or its CEO. There were 154 negative comments, accounting for 76.24% of the total number of comments. Overall, it reveals that the majority of public sentiments in the Weibo comments were negative, with only a small percentage expressing positive or neutral sentiments. This distribution suggests a prevalence of negative perceptions amongst commenters, driven by issues related to nationalism and perceptions of CEO and company behaviour.

Figure 2 illustrates the complex network of associations and emotions surrounding the Chinese beverage company Nongfu Spring and its CEO Zhong Shanshan. Nongfu Spring' and "Zhong Shanshan" are the core nodes in the network, indicating that most of the discussion revolves around the company and its CEO. These nodes are closely linked to other keywords, indicating their importance in the discussion.' The keywords 'China,' 'Chinese,' and 'nationality' are closely linked, suggesting that nationalism and cultural identity are a strong theme. This suggests that discussions

about nongovernmental organisations often involve issues of national loyalty and cultural pride.' The terms America,' "United States citizenship," "American," and "son" are linked together, highlighting the concern for the American citizenship of Chung's family. The linkage points to a major controversy in which the foreign citizenship of the CEO's son was seen as conflicting with national loyalties.' Keywords such as 'boycott,' 'never buy,' 'never drink,' and 'consumption' indicate strong emotions that influence consumer behaviour. These terms suggest that nationalistic sentiments and a sense of foreign belonging to Nongfu Spring led to calls for a boycott of Nongfu Spring and a change in purchasing behaviour.' Nodes such as sadness,' "despised," and "invective," express strong emotional reactions in tweets.

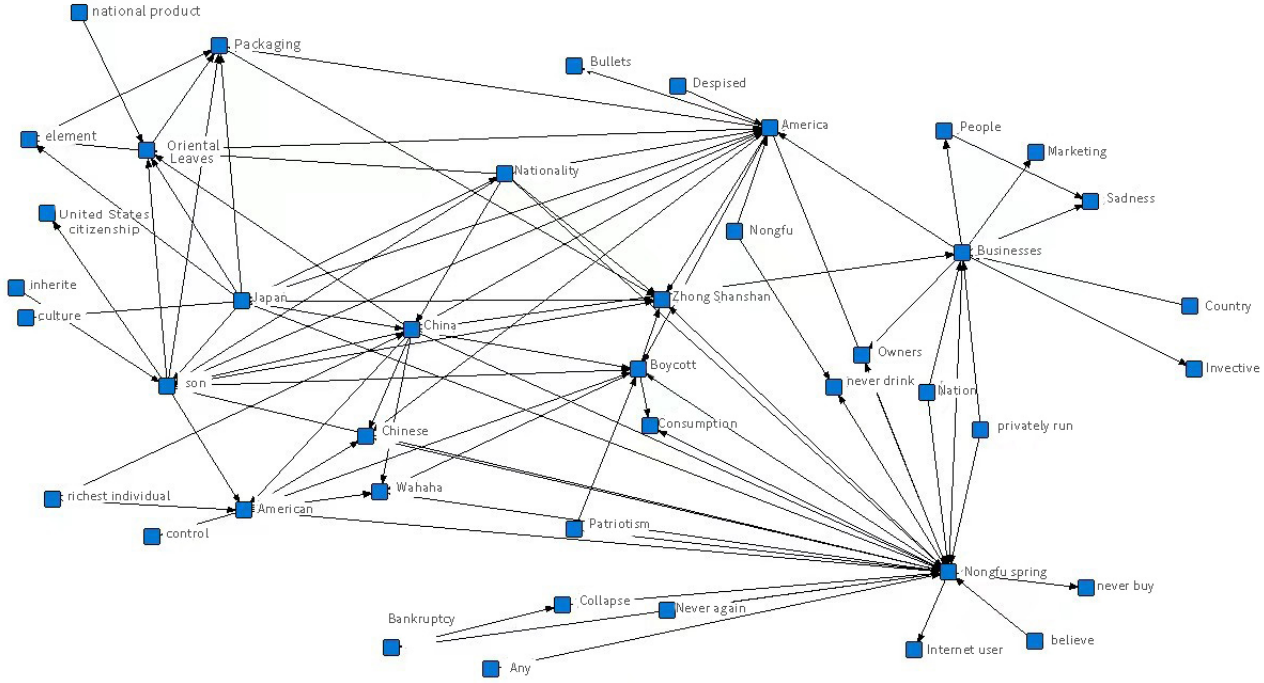


Fig. 2 Co-word matrix of Twitter comments

Online political discourse can shed light on issues related to identity, power, and ideology [11]. In this study, several comments that received a large number of endorsements on Weibo were selected for analysis. The comment questioning the nationality of Zhong's son in Nongfu Spring's March 3 post received a total of more than 8,000 likes and sparked a heated discussion related to the incident. Among them, some comments focused on nationalism and consumer behaviour:

Delete my comment? Can't you admit your son is an American Citizen? (Shiyuanchunchunya)

Is the son really a US citizen now? Or is the whole family now? I will not buy it from now on. (Zhaixingbuyanghua)

Do you make money in China and spend it in America? (Jingshiwuwang)

Speaking so much, summed up one sentence: Wahaha is the Chinese people's Wahaha, Nongfu spring is the Americans' Nongfu spring. (Luzhenwui)

Nongfu will be an American company; we are Chinese, and we look down on you. (Laoshishuochuzhaobietaixuan)

Chairman Zhong, please reply to us, why is your son an American citizen? Are you looking down on us Chinese nationals? (Jinxiaodada)

Critics questioned Zhong's family's loyalty to China by suggesting that they held foreign citizenship. Their criticism centred on the US citizenship of Zhong's son as a betrayal of national loyalty. These comments viewed the possession of foreign citizenship, particularly U.S. citizenship, by immediate family members as placing allegiance to a foreign country above China's national interests. The backlash reflects a broader trend of consumer nationalism in China, where public figures and companies are increasingly scrutinised for aligning or not aligning with national interests.

Online comments accuse CEOs and their families of profiting from China while having ties to foreign countries. The phenomenon of Chinese entrepreneurs profiting from China while maintaining strong ties to foreign countries, particularly the United States, is seen as unacceptable by Chinese nationalist netizens.

Other comments reveal strong nationalistic sentiments and a tendency to view economic activities through the lens of patriotism and national security:

Every cent given to the Nongfu becomes a bullet for the US to hit on China. (Longlintianxia_Rong)

Friendly reminder: the successor of the Nongfu Spring Company is a U.S. citizen; U.S. citizenship is to pay U.S. taxes; you buy Nongfu Spring, and it will become a bullet in our Chinese people. (Mengmianxiaofeixiachengzi)

So, all the money we've spent over the years has gone to the US, and the US has our money on the weapons aimed at us! (Yuejiannianwu)

These comments reflect a narrative in which economic behaviour is heavily politicised. At the same time, they use metaphorical language to present the purchase of Nongfu Spring as an act of betrayal against China. This view reflects a broader consumer nationalist sentiment in which economic behaviour is seen as an expression of loyalty or disloyalty to the state, especially in the context of geopolitical tensions between the United States and China.

Furthermore, some other comments reflect the rejection of foreign, particularly Japanese, cultural influences by Chinese nationalist sentiment.

Nongfu Spring's product graphics are all about Japanese elements. Do you love Japan that much? (Erliangxiaomian_Jiadan)

Goodness, after all these years of drinking Nongfu spring, it turns out that the founder likes Japanese elements. (Guairenhenmei)

Suddenly I realise that a lot of your brand promotes Japanese culture, and I won't be buying any more of your drinks. (Zhiyuyulyka)

After drinking so much Oriental Leaf, I now realise that there are so many Japanese elements! The reason I stopped drinking Suntory in the first place was because of the Japanese nuclear wastewater. Bad luck! (StockHuanqiuzhilv)

The use of negative terms demonstrates how cultural affiliation directly affects brand reputation and consumer loyalty within the content of nationalism. This analysis emphasizes the complexity of Chinese consumer nationalism.

4. Discussion

This study highlights the significant impact of consumer nationalism on corporate reputation and consumer behaviour in China. The findings suggest that nationalistic sentiments strongly influence public perceptions, especially when the behaviour of firms or their leaders is perceived to be contrary to the national interest. For example, the 2017 boycott of Lotte demonstrated the multilateral relationship between nationalism and the individual consumer, the corporate entity and the state underpinned by the digital platform Weibo [12]. These elements were evident in the case of Nongfu Spring, where the company's CEO's perceived lack of patriotism as well as the use of Japanese elements in the product's branding, which was interpreted by many nationalists as a betrayal of China's cultural identity, triggered negative sentiments on digital platforms.

In addition, the fact that the son of the company's CEO holds US citizenship further fuels the nationalist backlash, demonstrating how closely economic behaviour and national loyalty are intertwined in the minds of Chinese nationalists. This study highlights the complexity of navigating consumer nationalism in highly nationalistic market environments where even perceived affiliation can lead to significant reputational damage and influence consumer behaviour.

Finally, research on Chinese Internet activism and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) exposes the dynamic relationship between Internet activity and state control in China. From the beginning when the government tried to eradicate citizen action on the Internet to the current management and

co-operation approach [9]. Returning to the Nongfu Spring incident, the event also demonstrates the dynamic relationship between the actions of Chinese Internet nationalists and Chinese state power. As the online discussion about Wahaha and Nongfu Spring reached a fever pitch, China's official media had to resort to means to cool down the incident. On 4 March, the public journal 'Yongjinlou' of Zhejiang Daily, the official media of Zhejiang Province of China, posted an article on its online platform with the title 'The market is so big that it can accept two bottles of water', which was intended to calm the controversy on the Internet in its capacity as the official mouthpiece of the CCP. This also reflects the complex relationship between Chinese nationalism and the CCP, in the sense that on the one side the CCP uses nationalist narratives to gain legitimacy, while on the other side it needs to keep its fiery nationalism within a politically neutral sphere [13].

This study attempts to discuss the manifestation of Chinese consumer nationalism in the Nongfu Spring Incident; however, it is not possible to cover all aspects of the incident in this study. First, it is necessary to note that more than 20% of the comments in the Nongfu Spring comment section of the sample posts also supported Nongfu Spring from various perspectives or opposed the nationalist narrative. Recent studies of nationalism on the Chinese internet have also shown that the trend of nationalism in China has generally declined since 2018, and that even the rise of nationalism in China is more likely to be driven by short-term factors [14].

At the same time, the study also highlights that nationalist opinions on Chinese Weibo have become much more diverse, and that nationalists are not necessarily pro-regime and anti-freedom; in fact, most of them are critical of the domestic political situation [15]. Meanwhile, this study does not address the censorship of Chinese networks, such as the dynamic relationship between Chinese network censorship and Weibo democratism during the Diaoyu Islands incident in 2012 [16]. These reflect the broader characteristics as well as manifestations of democratism on the internet.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the profound impact of consumer nationalism on corporate reputation and consumer behaviour in China, particularly in the case of Nongfu Spring and its CEO Zhong. The findings suggest that nationalistic sentiments largely influence public perceptions, especially when corporate behaviour or affiliations are perceived to be in conflict with national interests. The backlash faced by Nongfu Spring was driven by accusations of unpatriotic behaviour and the perceived presence of foreign cultural elements in its brand, illustrating the strong influence of nationalism in the Chinese market.

In addition, the negative reaction to Zhong's son's US citizenship further highlights how closely economic behaviour is intertwined with notions of national loyalty in the minds of Chinese nationalists. These insights highlight the complexities that firms face in navigating consumer nationalism in an environment where nationalism is increasingly prevalent and where even perceived affiliation can lead to serious reputational damage and influence consumer behaviour. The study also points out the dynamic relationship between online activism, state control and public sentiment in China. This study contributes to a discussion of the role of nationalism in shaping corporate and consumer dynamics in contemporary China. However, the study also acknowledges its limitations, such as focusing on a single platform and company, which suggests the need for further research to disclose the wider influence of consumer nationalism across different contexts and industries.

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