

# *The Influence of News Reports and Online Comments on Postgraduates' Trust to Graduate Supervisors*

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**Keywords:** Conflict between graduate students and supervisors, news reports, online comments, trust to graduate supervisors

**Abstract:** In order to explore the impact of news reports and online comments on graduate students' trust to graduate supervisors, 337 graduate students were selected through the method of random sampling on campus. After reading news reports and online comments on conflict events between graduate students and supervisors, the trust scale was used to measure the trust of the research object to tutors. The results show that after controlling the satisfaction with the teacher-student relationship, the main effect of the direction of news reports, the main effect of the direction of online reviews, and the interaction effect of both are significant. The results show that the directionality of news reports and of online comments have a significant impact on the degree of trust of graduate students to their tutors. When the direction of online comments changes from positive to negative, the trust of research objects to their tutors also decreases under the conditions of positive and neutral news reports. However, under the condition of negative news reports, the trust level of the subjects to their tutors is always at a low level. Based on this result, the joint efforts of media, graduate students, tutors and schools are indispensable to build a harmonious and mutual trust between graduate students and teachers, and enhance the degree of trust of graduate students in tutors.

## 1. Introduction

Xu [1], the doctoral supervisor of Tsinghua University, once wrote that in the process of getting along with graduate students, the most important thing is to let graduate students trust him, let graduate students believe that the supervisor is consistent with their goals and interests, that the supervisor will respect their research interests, and that the supervisor will follow the principles fairly and consistently. The mutual trust between graduate students and supervisors has a positive effect on both postgraduates and their tutors [2]. The positive interaction between postgraduates and tutors is also affected to some extent by the degree of mutual trust between teachers and students [3]. However, in recent years, some conflicts between graduate students and supervisors have been reported frequently. News reports like "postgraduates suspected of committing suicide due to the oppression of their supervisors" have pushed the issue of postgraduates' teacher-student relationship to the forefront of public opinion.

Studies have indicated that, as an important information communication tool, media articles can exert a great influence on either the resolution or deepening of group conflict. In the doctor-patient

context, for example, news articles presenting a positive image of medical workers can increase public trust in hospitals and doctors, while negative articles can greatly reduce such trust and worsen the doctor–patient relationship [4]. Therefore, whether graduate students' trust in their tutors is also affected by media reports is one of the issues that this study focuses on.

Meanwhile, with the development of Internet technology and intelligent electronic products, reading online news reports through intelligent electronic products has gradually become an important, even the main channel for people to understand news events. Different from the form of traditional news reports, online news reports are not only a one-way information transmission process, but also have the function of online reviews, which makes the readers of news reports not only passive receivers of information, but also publishers of information by publishing online reviews [5]. In this way, what has an impact on the readers of online news reports is not only the content of the news report itself, but also the content of online comments related to it. As an important reference information, the content of online comments provides readers with other people's views and positions on news events, thus jointly affecting the process of readers' information reception and attitude formation with the content of the news report itself.

Some studies have found that online reviews of certain reports can significantly affect readers' perceptions [5-6]. Kim and Rhee [7] found that readers tended to judge the direction of public opinion by reading online reviews and then form their own opinions. Regarding online reviews, Lim and Heide [8] considered them directional, dividing them into positive and negative directions. Other studies have further divided the direction of online reviews into supportive, nonsupportive, and neutral directions [9]. Therefore, in addition to the impact of news reports on the trust of postgraduates to their tutors, this study also focuses on the directionality of online comments on news reports about conflicts between graduate students and supervisors, and whether it will also affect the trust level of postgraduates who read the reports and comments on their tutors.

In addition, there are so many factors that affect the level of graduate students' trust in graduate supervisors, not only the content of news reports and online reviews. Among them, graduate students' satisfaction with the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students is particularly critical. Researches show that when individuals are satisfied with the interpersonal relationship, their trust in others in the interpersonal relationship is relatively high. On the contrary, if the individual is dissatisfied with the interpersonal relationship, the degree of trust of others in the interpersonal relationship is relatively low [10]. In fact, this phenomenon exists not only in the field of education, but also in many fields, including consumption [11], management [12], etc., that is, there is a corresponding relationship between high satisfaction and high trust.

Therefore, in order to more accurately examine the impact of news reports and online comments on graduate students' trust in graduate supervisors, the research also measured graduate students' satisfaction with the teacher-student relationship, and used it as a covariate in subsequent statistics, which was controlled by the method of covariance analysis.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1. Participants**

The research team randomly selected subjects in libraries and laboratories of some universities in Nanjing, China. First, asked whether the potential research object is a postgraduate or doctoral student. After receiving a positive response, the researchers introduced the content of this study to them, and emphasized that no personal information needs to be disclosed during the research process. After that, they were asked whether they were willing to participate in this survey. When they received a positive reply, they were selected as participants.

Based on the above methods, 350 research materials and questionnaires were distributed, and

337 valid questionnaires were recovered. Among them, 67 doctoral students (including 43 males and 24 females) and 270 postgraduate students (including 121 males and 149 females) were aged between 21 and 42, with an average age of  $25.32 \pm 3.11$  years.

## 2.2. Research Instruments and Measures

### 2.2.1. News Articles

In order to avoid the fact that the research object knew about the news report events in the research materials before, the news report materials of this study adapted the real news events, specifically the news report events triggered by the suicide of a university graduate student. In the materials, vague expressions such as "a university" are used to prevent the research object from connecting it with some real cases in reality and affecting its cognition of the materials. In order to improve the authenticity and credibility of the research materials, the names, avatars, authentication marks and other information of the online media were fictitious, and the avatars, nicknames and other information of online commentators were retained.

The direction of news reporting can be divided into positive, neutral and negative. The positive report refers to the report that has a positive impact on the perception of the tutor image of graduate readers. In the report, the tutor actively communicates with the graduate family, cooperates with the relevant departments to carry out the investigation, and further provides help to the graduate family after the investigation results eliminate the responsibility of the tutor. Negative report refers to the report that has a negative impact on the perception of the tutor image of the graduate readers. In the report, the tutor refused to communicate with the graduate family, with a brutal attitude, and refused to interview journalists. Neutral report refers to the report that lacks obvious information clues that affect the perception direction of the tutor image of graduate readers. The report only gives a neutral description of the event. In the report, relevant departments have intervened in the investigation, and schools, tutors and parents are waiting for the investigation results.

### 2.2.2. Online Reviews

In this study, online reviews can be divided into positive, negative and neutral types. Online reviews of the articles were created with directional characteristics. Lai and Zhu [13] found that if the opinions expressed by two or more online reviews are consistent (i.e., the contents of the reviews mutually confirm each other), the effect of information spread will be greater than that of a single review, and such information also has higher credibility. Therefore, based on directional characteristics, each review was considered either positive, neutral, or negative. Examples include the following: "most of the tutors are kind-hearted, and no one wants to encounter this" (positive); "since the relevant departments have intervened in the investigation, the official investigation should prevail" (neutral); and "the tutors simply treat the graduate students as a machine to squeeze" (negative), etc.

### 2.2.3. Trust Scale

This study selected the Trust Scale to measure the degree of trust of graduate students to their tutors. The questionnaire was compiled by Rempel et al. [14]. It was originally used to measure the trust level in intimate relationships. In recent years, it has also been often used in the research of parent-child, friend, teacher and student relationships. The questionnaire contains 18 questions, each of which describes the subject's views on specific interpersonal relationship objects. In the process of use, the expression of "peer" in the original questionnaire is changed to "supervisors", such as "I completely trust the commitment of the supervisors to me". Seven point scoring method

is adopted for all questions, in which "1" means "completely disagree" and "7" means "completely agree". The total score after reversing the reverse scoring of the question indicates the graduate students' trust in the tutor. The higher the total score, the higher the trust. In this study, the internal consistency coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.91.

#### **2.2.4. Interpersonal Satisfaction Questionnaire**

In this study, the interpersonal satisfaction questionnaire was selected to measure the graduate students' satisfaction with the interpersonal relationship between them and their tutors. The questionnaire was prepared by Zhao and Zuo [15] to measure the satisfaction of the subjects with specific interpersonal relationships under the Chinese cultural background. The questionnaire contains 39 questions, each of which describes the subject's views on specific interpersonal relationships. During the use, the description object in the original questionnaire is changed to "supervisors", such as "I can't communicate with the tutor (reverse scoring)". Six point scoring method is adopted for all questions, in which "1" means "completely disagree" and "6" means "completely agree". The total score after reversing the reverse scoring of the question indicates the graduate students' satisfaction with the teacher-student relationship. The higher the total score, the higher the satisfaction. In this study, the internal consistency coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.88.

### **2.3. Research Design and Process**

This study used a 3×3 between-subjects design. The independent variables were the directionality of the news reports (i.e., positive, neutral, or negative) and of the online reviews (i.e., positive, neutral, or negative). The dependent variable was the degree of trust of the research object to the tutor, that is, the score of the trust scale. The control variable is the degree of satisfaction of the research object with the teacher-student relationship, that is, the score of the interpersonal relationship satisfaction questionnaire.

To ensure the effectiveness of independent variable manipulation, prior to the study, 150 college students were invited to rate the directionality expressed in three news reports and three comments under each news report with the 11 numbers of 0~10, in which "0" means completely negative and "10" means completely positive. 15~20 students were randomly assigned to each experimental treatment, that is, each college student only read news reports with a certain directional feature and online reviews with the same three directional features.

In formal experiment, in order to avoid the influence of news reports and online comments, the subjects were asked to fill in the interpersonal satisfaction questionnaire based on their relationship with their tutor first. Afterwards, news reports and screenshots of online comments were distributed to the research subjects. Each participant only read news reports with a certain directional feature and online comments with the same three directional features (Table 1). After reading, they will be given a trust scale, which will be filled in and recycled on the spot.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Validation of Independent Variable Manipulation**

The manipulation of the directionality of news articles and online reviews was validated as described above. 150 college students were invited to score news articles and online reviews. Directionality was scored from 0 to 10, where "0" means completely negative, and "10" means completely positive.

The results showed a significant difference in the scores of college students for news reports with three directional characteristics ( $F=112.898$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). Further post test found that the scores of positive reports were significantly higher than neutral and negative reports, and the scores of neutral reports were significantly higher than negative reports. The result showed that the manipulation of the independent variable "directivity of news reports" was effective.

The results also showed no significant differences among the three reviews under each directional condition ( $F_{\text{positive}}=1.699$ ,  $p_{\text{positive}}=0.199$ ;  $F_{\text{neutral}}=0.856$ ,  $p_{\text{neutral}}=0.428$ ;  $F_{\text{negative}}=0.065$ ,  $p_{\text{negative}}=0.937$ ). Then, the average scores of the three reviews under each directional condition were calculated, and the differences in the average scores for the three directional conditions were compared on this basis. The results showed a significant difference between the three average scores ( $F_{\text{average score}}=627.972$ ,  $p_{\text{average score}} < 0.01$ ). Further post hoc tests indicated that the average score for positive reviews was significantly higher than that for neutral and negative reviews; the average score for neutral reviews was also significantly higher than for negative reviews. These results indicate that the manipulation of the independent variable (directionality of online reviews) was effective.

Table 1: Distribution of participants under different experimental conditions

Directionality of news report	Directionality of online comments	Experimental treatment
Positive(N=112)	Positive(N=37)	After reading positive news reports, participants only read three positive online reviews.
	Neutral(N=38)	After reading positive news reports, participants only read three neutral online reviews.
	Negative(N=37)	After reading positive news reports, participants only read three negative online reviews.
Neutral(N=112)	Positive(N=37)	After reading neutral news reports, participants only read three positive online reviews.
	Neutral(N=37)	After reading neutral news reports, participants only read three neutral online reviews.
	Negative(N=38)	After reading neutral news reports, participants only read three negative online comments.
Negative(N=113)	Positive(N=38)	After reading negative news reports, participants only read three positive online reviews.
	Neutral(N=37)	After reading negative news reports, participants only read three neutral online reviews.
	Negative(N=38)	After reading negative news reports, participants only read three negative online comments.

### 3.2. Results of Descriptive Statistics

Table 2: Postgraduates' trust in tutors and satisfaction with teacher-student relationship ( $M \pm SD$ )

News Report	Positive news report			Neutral news report			Negative news report		
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Negative
trust	99.68	93.76	70.43	89.97	66.89	58.32	62.55	60.70	55.84
	$\pm$ 11.27	$\pm$ 11.88	$\pm$ 15.86	$\pm$ 10.87	$\pm$ 18.15	$\pm$ 15.81	$\pm$ 18.46	$\pm$ 24.75	$\pm$ 13.97
satisfaction	172.70	145.61	105.51	163.54	139.19	121.18	136.79	141.49	138.87
	$\pm$ 29.64	$\pm$ 47.41	$\pm$ 34.25	$\pm$ 35.15	$\pm$ 32.76	$\pm$ 34.25	$\pm$ 28.65	$\pm$ 26.39	$\pm$ 38.32

Table 2 shows the data for the average and standard deviations of the independent variable under

the nine treatments.

### 3.3. The Influence of News Reports and Online Comments on Postgraduates' Trust to Graduate Supervisors

A two-way ANOVA test was used with news reports and online review directionality as the independent variables, the score of trust scale as the dependent variable and the score of interpersonal satisfaction questionnaire as covariate. The results showed that the degree of satisfaction of postgraduates with the teacher-student relationship could indeed significantly predict their trust in their tutors ( $F_{\text{satisfaction}}=7.850$ ,  $p_{\text{satisfaction}}=0.005$ ). After excluding the influence of satisfaction, the main effect of news report direction was significant ( $F_{\text{news report}}=86.945$ ,  $p_{\text{news report}} < 0.01$ ), the main effect of the directionality of online reviews was significant ( $F_{\text{review directionality}}=36.918$ ,  $p_{\text{review directionality}} < 0.01$ ) while both interaction effects were significant ( $F_{\text{interaction effect}}=7.261$ ,  $p_{\text{interaction effect}} < 0.01$ ).

Using the simple effect test based on Bonferroni correction, Figure 1 shows that, (1) for positive reports, there was no significant difference between the subjects' trust in tutors under the conditions of positive and neutral comments (mean difference between positive and medium was 3.971,  $p_{\text{positive-medium}}=0.878$ ), while under the conditions of negative comments, the subjects' trust decreased significantly (mean difference between positive and negative was 24.430,  $p_{\text{positive-negative}} < 0.01$ ; mean difference between positive and negative was 20.459,  $p_{\text{positive-negative}} < 0.01$ ); (2) for neutral reports, there was a significant difference in the trust degree of the subjects to their tutors under the conditions of positive and neutral comments, positive and negative comments (mean difference between positive and negative was 21.337,  $p_{\text{positive-negative}} < 0.01$ ; mean difference between positive and negative was 28.623,  $p_{\text{positive and negative}} < 0.01$ ), while there was no significant difference between neutral and negative comments (mean difference between positive and negative was 7.286,  $p_{\text{positive-negative}}=0.155$ ); (3) for negative reports, no matter what the direction of the comments, there was no significant difference between the subjects' trust in their tutors (mean difference between positive and medium was 2.186,  $p_{\text{positive-medium}}=1.000$ ; mean difference between positive and negative was 6.859,  $p_{\text{positive-negative}}=0.189$ ; mean difference between medium and negative was 4.673,  $p_{\text{positive-negative}}=0.624$ ). In short, when the direction of online comments changed from positive to negative, under the conditions of positive and neutral news reports, the trust of the research object to the tutor also decreased. However, under the condition of negative news reports, the trust level of the subjects to their tutors was always at a low level.

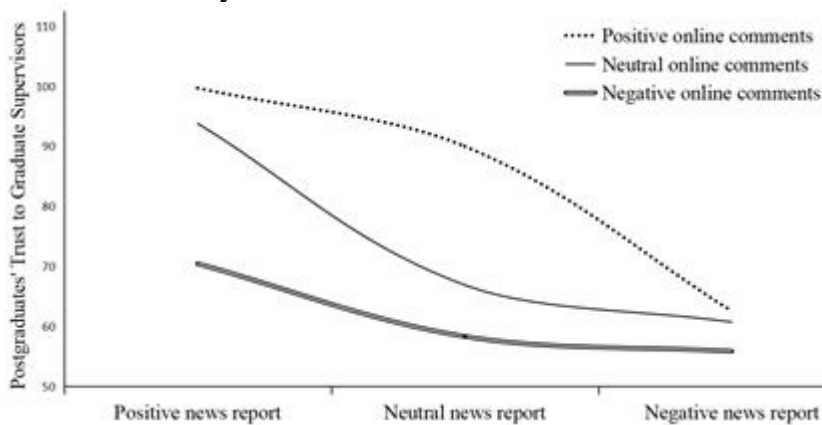


Figure 1: The Change Trend of Postgraduates' Trust to Graduate Supervisors

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. The Influence of News Report on Trust

Walter Lippman put forward the theory of "pseudo environment" in *Public Opinion*. The so-called "pseudo environment" refers to the "symbolic" reality proposed by the media after selective processing. On the one hand, this reality has been processed by the media, so it is not a completely real objective environment, and it deviates from the reality to a certain extent. On the other hand, this "symbolic" reality is not completely separated from the objective reality. It should be based on the objective reality, and its deviation from the objective reality should be controlled within a certain range. Readers of news reports use the "pseudo environment" constructed by news media as a medium to understand the objective reality, and thus form their subjective cognition of news events [16]. Therefore, under the conditions of different news reports, it is not difficult to understand the differences in the degree of trust of graduate students to their tutors.

The study mentioned above has also indicated that media articles can exert a great influence on either the resolution or deepening of group conflict. In the doctor–patient context, news articles presenting a positive image of medical workers can increase public trust in hospitals and doctors, while negative articles can greatly reduce such trust and worsen the doctor–patient relationship [4]. For graduate students, in the report of teacher-student conflict events, the "pseudo environment" created by the news media first affected the news report readers' perception of the image of the graduate tutor, which made the readers have the cognition that the graduate tutor is "competent" or "incompetent", and then affected their trust in the tutor.

### 4.2. The Influence of Online Reviews on Trust

This study also found that online reviews have an impact on graduate students' trust in their tutors. The impact of online comments on news report readers has been confirmed by many studies, and even Yang [17] found that online reviews had a deeper influence on readers than news articles themselves. As the research of Lee and Jang [6] showed, if the views of online comments and news reports were inconsistent, the readers of news reports tended to form their own views on the event based on the views of online comments. Therefore, in this study, even when the direction of news reports was positive or neutral, as long as the direction of comments was negative, the degree of trust of graduate students to their tutors would also decrease.

However, there are exceptions, that is, when news reports are negative, regardless of the direction of the comments, graduate students have relatively low trust in their tutors. This phenomenon that readers are more affected by negative information is also involved in domestic and foreign studies, that is, when reading news reports and online reviews, news report readers pay more attention to negative or negative content, and form their own views on the news event based on it [18-19]. This also explains the role of negative news reports and online reviews in this study to some extent.

### 4.3. The Interaction Between News Reports and Online Reviews

This study also shows that there is an interaction between news reports and online reviews, that is, for positive and neutral news reports, the degree of trust of graduate students in their tutors will change with the direction of the review. However, for negative news reports, the degree of trust of graduate students in tutors is always at a low level. The "two path model" of information dissemination may explain this phenomenon. The model believes that there are two paths for the impact of information on the audience, one is the "central path" based on objective facts, and the

other is the "peripheral path" based on subjective emotions [20]. Research shows that, because the expression of subjective emotions lacks convincing objective evidence, compared with the "peripheral path", the "central path" based on objective facts has a greater impact on the audience, and the resulting changes in the attitude of the information dissemination audience are more lasting and profound [21]. The research of domestic scholars in the field of consumer psychology also verified this theory, that is, the higher the objectivity and authenticity of network information, the higher the consumers' willingness to buy [22].

For news reports, especially those of authoritative media used in this study (the names of news media and microblog authentication marks are retained in the materials of this study to improve the real surname and authority of the materials), their objective reports have an impact on readers through the "central path". While online comments are the readers' personal views on the event and, to some extent, the reflection of the readers' personal emotions. Therefore, the impact of online comments on the readers of news reports is more similar to the "peripheral path". Therefore, starting from the "dual path model" and combining with the research mentioned above, that is, readers of news reports pay more attention to negative or negative content. When news reports are negative, compared with online reviews that work through the "peripheral path", news reports that work through the "central path" have a more significant impact on readers, so that regardless of the direction of the review, Postgraduates' trust in their tutors is always at a low level.

#### 4.4. Inspiration and Suggestions

Building a harmonious and mutual trust relationship between teachers and students has a positive effect on both graduate students and their supervisors. Based on the findings of this study, it is not difficult to see that in order to build this kind of mutual trust between teachers and students, especially in the general environment where graduate student teacher-student conflicts are frequently reported, to improve the degree of graduate students' trust in their tutors, we need to work together in many ways.

First of all, the news media need to make efforts to objectively report and guide comments. On the one hand, the news media need to objectively and truly report the contradictions between graduate students and teachers. Although this study found that positive media reports and online comments can improve the degree of trust of graduate students in their tutors, this does not mean that the news media should "whitewash the peace" and ignore the existence of contradictions between graduate students and teachers, but it suggests that the news media should objectively and truly report contradictory events, and should not distort facts or exaggerate contradictions in order to "generate eyeballs" and "generate traffic". On the other hand, there are many real cases of harmonious teacher-student relationship in reality, and the news media also need to report these cases objectively and truthfully. Although some studies show that compared with neutral and positive reports, readers seem to prefer reports of contradictory events [23], the news media should stick to the conscience of the media, and must not deliberately create a conflict atmosphere in order to attract readers, cater to the public's mood [24], which causes the number of teacher-student conflicts in news reports to far exceed that of teacher-student harmony, Cause the situation that "good things don't go out, bad things spread far".

Secondly, the majority of netizens, including graduate students, should improve their media literacy and treat news reports and online comments objectively and calmly. On the one hand, graduate students are the receivers of information, so they need to distinguish right from wrong, do not believe in rumors, and avoid misleading themselves by false information. On the other hand, in this We Media era, every online participant can become a publisher of information. Therefore, whether you are publishing online comments or we media information, think twice before act. Do



not spread rumors to avoid misleading others by false information.

Finally, for graduate tutors, on the one hand, should try the best to avoid the occurrence of conflicts between graduate students and teachers, and fundamentally eliminate the negative factors that affect graduate students' trust in teachers. This research points out that the degree of satisfaction of postgraduates with the teacher-student relationship will affect their trust in their tutors. Therefore, if the majority of tutors can demonstrate their words and deeds in daily life, as Xu [1], the doctoral supervisor of Tsinghua University, said at the beginning of the article, to convince postgraduates that the goals and interests of the tutors and students are consistent, the tutors will respect their research interests, and the tutors will follow the principles fairly and consistently, In order to improve the graduate students' satisfaction with the teacher-student relationship, it will certainly promote the graduate students' trust in their tutors and build a harmonious and mutually trusted teacher-student relationship. On the other hand, when conflicts between teachers and students inevitably occur, what teachers and schools should do is not "hide", but on the basis of active communication, grasp the initiative of public opinion, release information objectively and truly through authoritative media and channels, and strive to "keep the truth ahead of rumors" to avoid misleading readers by untrue information. Therefore, in this network era, learning how to deal with and use network media is actually a required course for graduate tutors and college administrators.

## 5. Conclusions

This study found that after controlling the satisfaction of the teacher-student relationship, the directionality of news reports and online reviews still had a significant impact on the degree of trust of graduate students to their tutors. At the same time, the interaction between the directionality of news reports and the directionality of online reviews is significant, that is, for positive and neutral news reports, the degree of trust of graduate students to their tutors will change with the change of the direction of reviews. However, for negative news reports, the degree of trust is always at a low level.

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