

CHINA CONTENT ON TIKTOK: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA VIDEOS ON
NATIONAL IMAGE

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ABSTRACT

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TikTok is a recent social phenomenon that has transformed the social media landscape and fundamentally changed the way that people interact with content. The popular social media platforms used in the west are banned in China through regulations on the internet, with similar alternatives of their own. In combination with the high discoverability and often more raw depictions of everyday life and people available on TikTok, there is an opportunity for China related content on the platform to present a different image. This study first utilizes a brief content analysis to determine what type of China related content is being viewed the most on TikTok and how it represents Chinese people. The most viewed China TikTok videos portray the country and people with largely either a positive or neutral tone, and content is seemingly diverse across the videos. A survey then measured college students use of TikTok, national image of China, opinions on media about the country, and reaction to two China related TikToks. National image was shown to be positively correlated with both how much participants liked the videos they were shown and whether they see China related content as authentic. Additionally, national image was positively correlated with participants' perception of the U.S. and China having a good relationship. Republican leaning participants have a more negative image of China than Democrat leaning participants. The generally low reported encounter with China content on social media cannot fully reveal the impact of exposure on user's national image on China. The positive attitude toward China related TikTok videos by participants shows the potential of TikTok to act as a tool to form the images and opinions of nations, as well as how the feed and specific content may increase exposure to other country's content.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As social media and various technologies continuously advance, so does the idea of a “global village.” Coined by Marshall McLuhan in his 1962 book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, the idea of a global village has to do with technology virtually eliminating the previous challenges of time and space when it comes to communication (McLuhan, 1962). Over the past 60 years since the coining of this term, advancements in internet technology, global accessibility, and modern infrastructure, have drastically changed the way that people are able to interact with and observe the world around them.

While traditional media still drive much public knowledge of other nations, the opportunity to seek out perspectives of other countries on a more personal and individual level is becoming less of a challenge. With much of the population being equipped with a smartphone, being able to have an almost instant connection to anyone at all times across the world has become the norm. Online content has both increased and diversified exponentially with the rise of streaming. Whether it be music, movies, user-generated videos, or any other media content, it is available at any time with a connection to the internet. People are able to upload and share details of their lives and the area around them with both a network of connections or the world depending on their motivation. The rapid information spread and almost infinite amount of content allows for new opportunities to interact with the world.

Due to regulations placed on the internet in China, many of the popular websites and apps available in the United States are inaccessible to people in China unless they visit through the use of a virtual private network (VPN). Consequently, China has developed its own alternatives to many popular social networks, for example WeChat serves as an alternative to Facebook and

Weibo to Twitter. As much of the world becomes increasingly connected in the digital space, internet censorship laws create barriers for communication with certain countries.

TikTok, as it is known across the world, exists in China under the name Douyin. Douyin has identical features and is essentially the same app as TikTok, but the user base and content are completely separate. Launched in China in 2016 and globally in 2017, TikTok and Douyin are owned by the Chinese internet technology company ByteDance. In a community press release posted by TikTok in September of 2021, it was announced that the TikTok app had achieved over one billion monthly users worldwide (TikTok, 2021). Quickly rising to one of the top social platforms, it allows users to post short form video content up to three minutes in length, as well as to livestream. Along with the general interactive features such as following, commenting, liking, and sharing, the app is well known for its highly personalized algorithm on the “For You” content discovery page. Combining the algorithm with an infinite scroll, the app creates an addictive feed of seemingly infinite and varying content to retain user watch time (Smith, 2021).

Digital content and new media allow for opportunities to experience communities and cultures that many individuals would be blind to otherwise. Now more than ever there is an ability to seek out intimate glimpses into the daily life of people from all around the world through raw user created content. Acting as a form of soft power, there are opportunities available in new media content to connect people across different cultures that are not available in traditional media. In the case of the United States and China, this becomes more difficult due to the separation in access and limited intersection of platforms. However, content relating to China still does exist on popular U.S. platforms in several different forms, whether originating within the country or outside. In combination with China being a highly discussed topic in

American news media, ideas of the country are often present in the mind of consumers, but the separate platforms and a language barrier limit the amount of exposure to user-generated content.

New media platforms and content give power to the individual, particularly a younger generation, to form and spread ideas of their own due to the feeds and algorithms that push content to other users. These new platforms and ways of communicating can serve as additional tools in forming the national image one holds of another country. Whether it be a one-time viewing or a parasocial relationship built over time with a creator, there is opportunity for constant challenging or reinforcing of previously held ideas.

TikTok is pushing the user generated content space forward in its already seen influence on culture. A study done for TikTok by music-analytics company MRC Data found that 67% of users are more likely to seek out songs on streaming services after hearing them on the app (Whateley, 2022). With advancements in social media, especially along with the inception of TikTok, there is no longer a need to design content for a homogenous audience as traditional media has done in the past. People are now able to create, disseminate, and consume the messages that appeal to them. Accessibility has also played a major role in the platform allowing anyone with a smartphone to easily upload a video and potentially reach an audience. Social media has become more fluid in the ability for an individual to create and reinforce their own beliefs, be involved in worldwide communities, and connect with and reach out to others with far fewer barriers than have existed before.

Online video content has the ability to act as cultural diplomacy in being able to advance a positive image of nations. The Korean wave, starting in the 1990s and continuing today, is described as an increase in popularity of South Korean popular culture globally, and is seen as a

national success internally (Kang, 2015). The exposure causes consumers of the content to form specific images and opinions about Korea, potentially increasing their soft power through more global awareness of the country's popular culture. In 2021 the South Korean drama "Squid Game," despite being filmed in the Korean language, achieved massive international success. Jung Ho-yeon, one of the main actors in the show, had gone from roughly 400,000 Instagram followers before the show, to nearly 14 million in the three weeks following the release (Press-Reynolds, 2021). The success of a show like "Squid Game" and the meteoric rise in status that these figures experience shows a desire for people to interact with international media.

Research Problem

From preliminary viewing of the top TikTok videos with tags for either "China" or "Chinese," the large majority of the content was found to be either positive or neutral in its representation of China. With TikTok being a platform known for entertainment it is likely that the content will differ largely from what is found about China in many other forms of media. It is then assumed that through exposure and familiarity, those who interact with this type of user generated social media content may develop a greater understanding and appreciation of the people and places the content represents. Nations are concerned with their global image and the ways they are portrayed in the media. With a better understanding of how this user generated content interacts with national image, it can be seen as something to both utilize and monitor for countries that are concerned with their image globally. TikTok is unique in its scale, global impact, and content delivery, making it a particularly good subject for this study.

This study will work to address the limited research on TikTok as a new social media platform and tool for consuming alternative nontraditional content. Given the relationship between the United States and China, topics concerning politics and economics are among the

most commonly discussed in traditional media. With an increasing diversity of topics and content options presented by platforms like TikTok, there are questions about the impact this may have on core opinions and perceptions people have about others internationally. Through social media people are given the opportunity to express ideas and interests that they otherwise may not. Additionally, social media provides the ability for communities and bonds to be built through common interests, goals, or ideas. Different social media platforms utilized in China as opposed to those widely accessed around the rest of the world, create a layer of separation, beyond language, especially for younger people, with the internet becoming a main source for people to learn about others around the world. It remains to be known if this level of unknowingness created by the separation can be overcome through consumption of more diverse user-generated content.

Significance of the Study

The focus of this study is to contribute to the understanding of national image and the potential power that digital content has in exposing people to other countries and the people within them. Given the unique qualities of TikTok such as the algorithm, emphasis on personal experience, and short form content, TikTok stands out when compared against platforms like YouTube or Instagram. Due to the aspects of the app that focus on personal experience and immersion, gaps in theories like framing and agenda-setting exist when it comes to this new form of exposure. Additionally, given the nature of the app to primarily attract a younger audience, much is still unknown about the long term and lasting effects of repeated use of such platforms.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis will begin with a literature review in three parts: Background, Western Image of China, and Social Media and Intercultural Communication. The three parts work to provide the theory at the basis of the study, significant events of China's image development in western media over time, and information for both how social media has impacted the way people communicate across borders as well as the significance in the role that TikTok has come to play in pushing that forward.

The study consists of two research methods, beginning with a brief content analysis that works to develop support for the further results and discussion. The results of the content analysis will assist in answering the two research questions and lay the groundwork for the survey that follows. Results from the survey will then be analyzed in order to answer the three hypotheses, providing conclusions to the relevance of TikTok as a social platform and direction for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Part I: Background

National Image

American economist Kenneth E. Boulding first described the national images that are important in international systems as “those which a nation has of itself and of those other bodies in the system which constitute its international environment” (Boulding, 1959, p. 121). This definition describes an intersubjectivity between ‘self’ and ‘the other’ as information is communicated in a society (Meng, 2020). When thinking about national images of other countries it is also important to think of how images are formed from within people’s own countries and ideas of nationality.

National image is about how a nation is perceived by other nations while national identity is how people in a nation perceive their group belonging. National identity is explained in Triandafyllidou (1998) as a sort of double-edged sword that both allows the sense of belonging in a national community, but also defines who is a foreigner. He goes on to explain concrete examples of those things that create a distinction between a nation and the other, such as cultural traits, myths, and traditions. Belonging to a national community allows for easier communication with those inside the same community than with outsiders (Deutsch, 1966, p. 97 cf. Triandafyllidou, 1998). Given this, when we consume media that is from, or that include those we perceive as ‘the other,’ it is assumed that the information is processed in a different way than if it was from those who share the same national identity.

Castano et al. (2016) explains that the reason a country would be concerned with its national image has to do with their strength and ability to achieve international objectives and build alliances in ways that go beyond their economic and military power. In this way, national

images are seen as information-enhancing schemas that assist in building the mental representations of nations. Without much technical knowledge, people generally hold attitudes toward foreign countries, consistent with what they experience over time, in a way to simplify the complexity of the entire international environment that they live in. They go on to explain how maintaining a positive national image is especially important for a rising power such as China, particularly due to their challenging of United States hegemony. When a country is seen as such a distant other in a person's mind, it is possible that the extreme differences stick more in the formation of mental schemas.

Willnat et al. (2020) propose that national image consists of two main factors: cognitive, what an individual knows about a nation, and affective, how an individual feels about that nation. These factors, acquired over a lifetime, are then thought to shape an individual's perspective, with the idea that feelings toward the people from a certain country will lead to having similar feelings toward the country itself. This is then where the idea of stereotypes plays a role, as well as the media's role in shaping and perpetuating them. These authors propose that the concept of national image can be measured through a person's stereotypes, feelings, and knowledge about a nation and its people.

Given that national image is a concept used across several fields, there are multiple different ways the concept can be measured. One of the more commonly cited ways comes from the paper, *Country Reputation - From Measurement to Management: The Case of Liechtenstein* (Passow et al., 2005). From this study came the Fombrun-RI Country Reputation Index. The scale aims to measure a country's reputation from a primarily business perspective, however, the questions have also been applied to measuring individuals' general feelings about a country. The idea behind this was that when it comes to branding a country, image and reputation are the

primary factors. The Fombrun-RI Country Reputation Index is composed of six dimensions: emotional appeal, physical appeal, financial appeal, leadership appeal, cultural appeal, and social appeal (Passow et al., 2005). Each dimension includes three or four questions designed to be applied to any country in order to measure their reputation. Whereas country reputation is often used to compare countries for political and economic purposes, this scale can be adapted to measure national image. By isolating the emotional, physical, cultural, and social dimensions, it becomes more effective at targeting the mental representations people build of a particular country's culture and people.

The cognitive dimension of national image has been approached in different ways across studies depending on researchers' intended use. Willnat et al. (2022) suggested using general knowledge questions about China, including naming the capital or president, as a way to measure respondents' basic knowledge of the country as a whole. Fung et al. (2018) took a more opinionated approach by asking both Chinese and United States participants their thoughts on the importance of trade between the two countries and the countries acting as partners. This works to measure the participants' awareness of the political connection between the United States and China and the importance of the different aspects in their mind.

Stereotypes can be measured several different ways as well and could be specific to the country being studied. Zhang (2015) measured stereotypes of Chinese people by asking participants to agree or disagree on a 7-point scale about whether they perceive Chinese people as possessing several different traits. These traits were broken up into two categories including social manners and work ethics.

Due to the lack of direct contact with foreign nations, long-held attitudes and stereotypes are likely to play a role in how the public forms their opinions on any foreign issue at hand

(Zhang et al., 2022). Additionally, the United States is unique due to the number of Chinese immigrants present in the country who play a role in the formation of these stereotypes. Media stereotypes and travel experience with mainland Chinese people, however, may play a larger role in forming stereotypes due to seeing Chinese people living in the United States as fellow Americans. Zhang et al. (2022) applied these ideas when studying public opinion of the US-China trade war. They found those with negative stereotypes more likely to support tariffs and those without being less likely. The study utilized two different constructs to measure perceptions of both Chinese immigrants and mainland Chinese, with questions regarding work ethic, education, and perceived competition to Americans.

Taken together, national image is not defined by a single measurement and the purpose of the study affects the approach taken. The purpose is generally in finding out what factors play a role in exposing someone to ideas and information about nations, which then leads to the formation of ideas and opinions about these nations given the accumulation of life experiences. Given people get much of their information about countries outside of their own from media, it is important to look at the theories in media dissemination that contribute to the formation of national image. Agenda-setting and framing are the two common theories of how national images of other countries are formed.

Agenda-setting, Framing, and National Image

While agenda-setting is often thought of as how an individual's perceptions of issues is shaped and prioritized in importance, the same can be applied to nations and the people of a nation (Zhang & Meadows III, 2012). Relatively speaking, few people have direct contact with many foreign nations and people in their lifetime, therefore international news reports in the media often have an even stronger effect on those that they reach.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) define agenda-setting as the putting importance of topics and issues based on coverage from mass media news channels. In their often-cited 1972 study, they found that mass media is generally the only contact many individuals have with politics, and while it may not necessarily tell them what to do, it tells them what they should think, know, and feel about. Oftentimes without directly being told what to do or in this case vote for, agenda-setting is used to explain the influence of media on the attitudes of those watching by perceiving what they see as important (Willnat et al., 2022). This influence is due to the limited contact that people have with people from foreign countries, as well as the country and culture as a whole. When the media tells them what to think, know, and feel about a certain country they are having an effect on their national image.

Agenda-setting's significance to national image lies in its ability to change perceptions of a certain country's importance in people's minds. Manheim and Albritton (1984) discuss two dimensions of importance when it comes to a country's image being presented in the media; visibility and valence (cf. Zhang & Meadows III, 2012). Visibility refers to the volume of coverage, whereas valence refers to where the coverage lands on a scale of favorability. In a 2011 study examining coverage of foreign countries in *The New York Times*, it was found that the more a country was covered, the more it was seen as important to the U.S. (Zhang & Meadows III, 2012). However, importance does not necessarily mean it was seen positively, as China ranked highest in visibility while also having negative valence. This is different from situations where countries with a negative national image will receive negative valence and low visibility, while countries with a positive national image receive positive valence and high visibility (Zhang & Meadows III, 2012).

Scheufele (1999) explains framing as a model of inputs, processes, and outcomes that occur in mass media, that ultimately affect how people receive content. He further breaks the processes down into four categories: frame building, frame setting, individual-level effects of framing, and the link between individual frames and media frames.

Frame building is concerned with all of the internal factors that are in play when media content is being constructed, such as the journalists and media organizations (Scheufele, 1999). Framing is the way that information is structured and made sense of, as well as packaged in a way intended to reach an audience. Frame setting is then concerned with the perspectives and attributes of the issues to present, sometimes referred to as second level agenda-setting.

The individual level effects of framing then come into play once the particular piece of content is received by the audience and whether or not they accept the frame it is presented in (Scheufele, 1999). Lastly, Scheufele (1999) refers to the link between individual frames and media frames as journalists also acting as audiences. Similar to an audience being presented a certain frame, journalists are just as capable of adopting certain frames about the people, issues, or events they are creating content about. The effects of framing can be seen in studies such as Ha et al. (2021) that provided evidence for perceived peace journalism framing allowing audiences to also perceive the benefits due to the particular use of style and tone when discussing the US-China trade dispute. This displays the influence of the way that something is shown through the media. It is then assumed that user generated content on TikTok framing China in either a positive or negative way can potentially have the power to affect how the country is perceived in someone's mind.

Part II: Western Image of China

China's Image in Western Media

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the United States' relationship with China has been defined by several periods of tension while both nations rely heavily on each other for economic success. Ranking by GDP, the United States stands as the largest economy in the world alongside China as the close second and Japan in a distant third (The World Bank, 2020). In 2020 China served as the largest supplier of imports for the United States with the United States as its third largest export market (United States Trade Representative, n.d.). While both countries rely on the other in several aspects for economic success, they operate under incredibly different systems.

In understanding current media representations, it is first important to recognize the history of how Chinese people, and more generally Asians, have been treated in America since migrating here. Following the large wave of immigration toward the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, many North Americans were concerned of the Chinese immigrants' inability to assimilate which they saw as eventually damaging to their own economic advancements (Lee, 2007). This led to restrictions on Chinese immigration in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Peru, Australia, and New Zealand. When faced with labor shortages there was increased migration of those from other east Asian countries, which ultimately faced similar backlash given to the Chinese.

The idea of the Yellow Peril came about in American media around this same time and worked to warn of Japanese and Chinese immigrants wanting to take over America and white civilization (Shim, 1998). They were often depicted as subhuman and as if they were there to take jobs away from white American workers. This led to many Asian immigrants returning to

their home countries or moving into Chinatowns and working in trades that would not interfere with whites.

In the early 1900s many American films depicted Chinese characters as villains and gangsters often involved with crime (Shim, 1998). This was coupled with stereotypes of Asian women as sexual and subservient, furthering the Western idea that they are something exotic to be sought out. The model minority stereotypes followed in the 1960s when African Americans were fighting for civil rights. American media used Asian Americans to display success stories of what they saw as assimilating to American culture and ways of life without the help of anyone (Ngo & Lee, 2007). While they appear seemingly positive, these stereotypes worked to contain and silence Asian Americans, while also attempting to explain the shortcomings of other minorities by pointing the blame away from America itself (Osajima, 1987). There was a tendency for the media to push certain ideas when it was beneficial for them, while having long-lasting and harmful effects on entire populations.

The Yellow Peril idea grouped together Asians and Asian Americans as a single concept while pushing that there should be a collective attitude toward them (Lyman, 2000). The harmful idea that they are a group of people that should be feared left long-lasting effects that can still be seen today. As a rising power, China is seen as a threat, and the only real competition to America when it comes to the size of their economy. These same ideas can be seen today with technological advancements in China and the fear of cyberattacks and media propaganda. Being the largest power attempting to challenge U.S. hegemony, Western civilizations may fear this rise just as much as they did during the initial wave of immigration.

Development and Modernization

Non-western countries have generally been viewed by their levels of development and modernization, with the west acting as an ideal model (Cao, 2012). Cao (2012) points out two versions of the west's portrayal of China: history-oriented capitalist industrialism, and contemporary-based liberal humanism. The first is focused on scientific and technological advancements along with economic development, whereas the latter is focused on issues of human rights. These two framings of China impact the way that it is often presented through media.

After the rise in power of Deng Xiaoping, China experienced a period of major economic reform that greatly increased their presence in the global market (Goa, 2003). After being relatively closed off to the rest of the world, China embraced ideas of trade and capitalism. This led to more positive images portrayed in western media as political and economic interests converged (Cao, 2012). Major changes occurred in the relationship between the United States and China following President Bill Clinton's signing of the *U.S.-China Relations Act of 2000* ("U.S. Relations," 2021). This greatly assisted China in eventually joining the World Trade Organization in 2001, however, this came after a period of highly negative reporting due to the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Difference Between the U.S. Media Coverage of Tiananmen Square and Kwangju Movements

The protests in Tiananmen Square were part of a pro-democracy movement that occurred until suppression by the Chinese military on June 4, 1989. The events saw major news coverage in western media, specifically the United States. Similarly, the Kwangju movement occurred in South Korea roughly a decade earlier, with the same hope of democratic reform. While both

movements had several similarities, they saw contrasting coverage in the American press due to differences in government relations (Kim, 2000).

Following the events in Tiananmen Square there was an official presidential news conference speaking positively of the protestors and their fight for basic human rights and freedoms (Kim, 2000). This did not occur following the Kwangju events and instead the U.S. government lauded the South Korean troops for holding back what they saw as violent demonstrations. At the time, the United States saw South Korea as an important ally both economically as well as being a major factor in controlling the spread of communism. This was not true for China, however, who was seen as a threat to the U.S. government.

In a comparative analysis of the U.S. newspaper reporting of the two events, Kim (2000) found the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to both be influenced by the government's responses as well as the foreign policy at those times in their reporting. She goes on to point out how some of this may be due to the Korean government's control over media at the time in contrast to the many foreign journalists present in Beijing at the time of the protests. This does, however, point to U.S. media's hegemony perspective playing a large role in the framing of foreign news events.

China-U.S. Trade War

More recently there has been increasing conversation surrounding a trade war between the United States and China. Starting in 2018, the administration under former president Trump, imposed tariffs on several Chinese goods including clothing and electronics ("U.S. Relations," 2021). As conversations escalated over the following years tariffs increased on both sides, with the Chinese government answering and imposing them on goods leaving their country as well. Tensions between the countries rose as Trump signed the *Hong Kong Human Rights and*

Democracy Act showing open support for the Hong Kong protests, as well as declaring the situation in Xinjiang with the Uyghur population as a genocide, making the United States the first country to do so.

When discussing the back-and-forth tariffs, news media sources from the U.S. more often referred to it as a “war” than Chinese media sources (Ha et al., 2020). Along with this, they would use more demonizing language and combative rhetoric when discussing China, whereas China would discuss mutual interests between the two countries. The U.S. media, however, has not been completely one-sided and there is more of a mixed support but at the same time they are willing to cross partisan lines when it comes to foreign policy.

Many media outlets are now describing these disputes as a sort of cold war, as both parties do not seem to have an end goal at the moment. The *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* describes the current situation as “being driven less by economic realities and more by great power rivalry and nationalism - factors exacerbated by mutual mistrust over each other’s strategic intentions” (Huang, 2021).

Given that “Made in China” is one of the most ubiquitous terms in American consumerism, it is assumed that conversations of a trade war between China and the United States would at least resonate with a large percentage of the population. Han & Wang (2015) looked at the role of valence framing in connecting product-country image and national image. Through the country-of-origin effect, they found that product-country image serves as a mediator in forming national image because it is a shortcut to stereotypes and judgments. Because “Made in China” has the ability to carry both positive and negative meanings, it serves as a mediator in forming an overall national image. Having this term that is so known and frequently encountered

in American culture, news of a trade war could then have effects on everyday purchasing decisions when it comes to Chinese made products.

It is assumed that the media that people consume concerning the trade disputes will make them feel a certain way about the products, which in turn will lead to similar feelings about Chinese people and culture and an altering of their national image. Lu et al. (forthcoming) found that during the ongoing trade war Americans are likely to have an increase in political consumerism, or market-based political engagement, due to social media activities. This is especially true when it comes to expression from the social media user, leading to reasoning as a consequence of the mental elaboration and interpersonal interaction aspects of the platforms. Therefore, an increase in negative social media content related to China could work towards enhancing support for the US's strict measures.

Coronavirus

Possibly the biggest event that has affected the image of Chinese people and Asian Americans as of recently is the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. There has been an abundance of harmful rhetoric surrounding China since the beginning of the pandemic given its origins, including the use of terms such as “Chinese (Corona)Virus,” and “Wuhan (Corona)Virus.” On March 8, 2020 there was a 650% increase of the terms in retweets on Twitter, with an 800% increase in these terms on March 9, 2020 within news media articles (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). In the same study that tracked this increase, Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) found that after March 8, 2020 anti-Asian American bias grew enough to offset the previous three years of decline.

Between March 19, 2020, and June 2021, the Stop AAPI (Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders) Hate coalition reported over 9,000 racially motivated attacks related to the pandemic

(Lang, 2021). Many would attribute this to racially charged terms, like those previously mentioned, when referring to the pandemic. It was reported that there was a 1,900% increase in the NYPD reporting of hate crimes against Asian Americans in New York in 2020 (Lang, 2021). Along with the pandemic, the othering process of Asian Americans has been amplified, bringing with it the re-emergence of anti-Asian stereotypes that have been a part of America since the yellow peril and model minority myths (Gover et al., 2020).

Elias et al. (2021) discuss how COVID-19 created an ideological divide in the US, heightening nationalism especially among conservative groups. The impact fear has on the reaction to out-groups leads to further othering of minorities and ultimately racism and xenophobia. In a time where people want answers or feel overwhelmed by changes and information, they may look for areas to place blame. This fear of China can lead to a more negative or skeptical response when reading about China. China has, however, attempted to repair their image globally presenting themselves as a leader in dealing with the pandemic.

Research from the International Federation of Journalists looked into how China has been attempting to establish its global image as a leader in handling COVID (Oni et al., 2021). A total of 54 journalists in 50 different countries reported there to be a rise in Chinese coverage in their media. Those having more favorable coverage are countries where Beijing offered support. In general, coverage of China saw the most positive change across Europe, whereas North America saw a negative change. China is greatly aware of the importance of their national image and the necessity to protect as well as improve its national image and use a stricter standard for giving foreign journalists visas. In fact, the foreign ministry spokesperson of China had accused the United States of running a disinformation campaign against China (Embassy of the People's

Republic of China in the United States of America, 2021). He went on to urge the U.S. to respect science rather than engaging in political manipulation and shifting blame.

A Changing Image

A study from the Pew Research Center done in 2020 found many changing views toward China by those living in the United States (Devlin et al., 2020). In the published study, *U.S. Views of China Increasingly Negative Amid Coronavirus Outbreak*, Devlin et al. point to the recent trade war rhetoric as well as the pandemic as possible causes for these changes. It was found that two-thirds of participants in the survey had an overall unfavorable view of China, which is the highest since the Pew Research Center started asking this question in 2005. While older people are more likely to have an unfavorable view of China, this percentage is also growing among the younger population surveyed.

Among some of the greatest concerns that Americans have include China's impact on the environment, cyberattacks, as well as trade and job loss. National image is able to move fluidly, and it changes as more is learned, or opinions are altered. The importance lies in discovering the image certain forms of media are portraying about a nation such as China and the potential consequences it brings.

China's Social Media Presence

Since the beginning of the internet in China, the government has kept a watch on its power in promoting a free flow of ideas, with different restrictions imposed over time. What is now known as "The Great Firewall," many of the popular websites and apps used across the world are blocked in China, with alternatives of their own. Current president Xi Jinping has enforced several of these strict regulations since entering office, however, Chinese citizens are able to overcome them with the use of a VPN (virtual private network) (Matei, 2020). Still, the

separation is noticeable when compared to other countries, and due to all of the alternative Chinese platforms, there is an extra layer of difficulty when trying to access content across both sides.

One of the most well-known social media personalities known outside of China, that creates content from within the country, is YouTuber Li Ziqi. Among the most popular influencers to maintain a platform on both internet ecosystems, Li Ziqi has become widely successful through her videos where she can be found creating idyllic representations of China's countryside with ASMR-like qualities. ASMR, or autonomous sensory meridian response, has become an increasingly popular genre of online videos defined by their unique audio characteristics. In the case of Li Ziqi, the majority of her videos contain no speech and rely on music and ambient sounds. Li Ziqi was named an "ambassador of a program promoting economic empowerment of rural youth" by the state alongside other recognition given to her by Chinese media organizations (Matei, 2020). In a time where separation seems to be the defining trait of the internet between China and the rest of the world, she is a powerful example of introducing an international audience to a country's culture through online videos. With increasing accessibility, it is likely that more examples similar to Li Ziqi will continue to appear.

More recently, professional wrestling star and actor, John Cena was caught in a controversy with the Chinese government. On a press tour for his upcoming movie, he had referred to Taiwan as a country, leading to a series of videos and statements apologizing while speaking Mandarin (Victor, 2021; Talmazan, 2021). While attempting to repair his relationship with one of the world's largest film markets, the video became a viral hit, spawning different memes and re-creations across platforms, most noticeably TikTok. This is not the first time people have noticed high profile figures give in to China. Several players in the NBA, which

remains incredibly popular in China, faced backlash during the Hong Kong protests. While freedom of press and speech remain defining traits of the United States, the importance of maintaining business relationships has proven to take precedence at times.

Historically being seen as a country shrouded in mystery, China's image in international media can sometimes perpetuate those same ideas. While press freedom in the United States is vastly different than that in China, there have been many instances where the narrative seems to be consistent with the country's current foreign affairs. Similarity can be drawn between the times of Yellow Peril racism and now, where fear of China's advancement and role in the global economy seems to drive much of the conversation. In a time of rampant mis and disinformation it is important more than ever to be aware of the news media we consume while being cognizant of the sources and perspectives they are written from. The separate social platforms create an additional barrier of access beyond language, limiting the China related content an international audience can consume. When access is limited or made more difficult, it may be harder for user-generated social media content to act as a form of soft power or cultural diplomacy, therefore affecting the formation of national image.

Hypotheses

With national image being seen as the sum of cognitive, what an individual knows about a nation; and affective, how an individual feels about a nation, based on past media framing effects research, it is assumed that the type of new media content consumed will affect the national image one holds over a certain country, in this case China. This study assumes that most videos on TikTok/YouTube about China are positive. Those who consume more TikTok/YouTube videos about China will receive positive framing about China. Hence, the first

two hypotheses deal with the positive relationship between consumption of Chinese related new media content and the national image of China.

H1: People who like Chinese/China video content have a more positive national image of China, than those who do not like that content.

H2: People who consume more Chinese/China-related online video content (i.e. TikTok, YouTube) have a more positive affection towards Chinese people over those who consume less of that content.

The third hypothesis deals with the separation between American and Chinese internet content leading to questions of authenticity. This is based on the concern of cyber-attacks from China on the United States, as well as an increasing distrust in China and the Chinese government. It is then thought that those who have a negative national image of China will not trust the positive content related to China on social media, therefore seeing that content as propaganda or fake.

H3: People with a more negative national image of China will tend to see positive Chinese social media content as propaganda or fake.

Part III: Social Media and Intercultural Communication

Communication Through Social Media

Social media has fundamentally changed many ways that people communicate and will likely continue to as technology progresses. An important aspect of social media to be accounted for is the relatively short time that it has been around as a communication technology, leaving much of the impact of its routine use to still be understood. Research has found that when it comes to interpersonal communication, people tend to be more trusting of those on the other end in regard to sharing information or putting forward more open messages (Subramanian, 2017).

Additionally, relationships do not tend to go as deep as face-to-face communication, and people tend to follow and interact with those that share the same view as themselves. While potentially limiting the diversity of viewpoints they may achieve elsewhere, social media communication could on the other hand lend itself positively to the ability for friendships or communities to form that otherwise would not. Social media is able to work as a massive platform that unites those with similar goals.

Social media does not come without its unique set of challenges. A major challenge of social media and the impact it has had so far on populations, is the idea of information abundance (Subramanian, 2017). Especially alongside the rise in accessibility to smartphones, there is more readily available information than ever before, and this could lead to the desire to process or even respond to all of it. Information abundance could lead to the formation of thoughts and opinions that would otherwise never occur without the constant consumption of different content.

People with access to technology and social media are constantly experiencing being updated on the present moment, while also having some aspects of their life and interests documented online. When it comes to the idea of time, media can be described in two ways: time-binding and space-binding (Bergie & Hodson, 2015). Whereas time-binding media persists over time, space-binding media is able to overcome place and reach large audiences simultaneously. Much of social media exists as both, due to reach as well as the digital footprint left behind. Therefore, whether it is a person, place, or culture, it becomes much easier to both acquire new information and form quick opinions and judgments.

With social media and internet content acting as both time-binding and space-binding people are able to access both present and past information. This makes the ability to both learn

and interact with others easier as solutions to questions and information is often easily accessible through the internet. New forms of online content have made significant changes to world news, with the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine as an especially relevant example. It is now possible to read real time updates of the events on a place like Twitter and later see a TikTok posted by a Ukrainian documenting their city after having been bombed. The TikTok user Valerisssh, went viral sharing videos of her life living in a below-ground bunker with her parents (Court, 2022). By presenting the tragic events in a lighthearted and often humorous way, people around the world not only see the first hand impact of the events in the country, but also may be better able to relate to the people going through them.

Intercultural Communication in Social Media

While the negative impacts of social media have been extensively researched, several positive influences have been increasingly noted, especially in regard to the ease in communication with those across greater distances (Subramanian, 2017). In regard to the transformation of what it means to be a global village, the world in a way has become smaller with the increased opportunities for people to interact. A sort of intercultural contact has become an everyday occurrence for many depending on who they choose to follow or interact with on their personal social media.

Much literature has been written on YouTube and how it reaches beyond traditional media to create a space of its own with the ability to create new and unique narratives (Yu, 2019). In doing so, these spaces allow for those seen as the other to produce narratives to challenge those that are dominant with full creative control. Similarly to YouTube, TikTok and other video content driven social media platforms allow for discussion and dialogue in the form of comments. This dialogue comes from a place of shared interests and is done so voluntarily.

Oftentimes in the case of TikTok the motivation behind a comment is to get as many “likes” as possible, whether through humor, genuineness, or relatability. The comment section allows for the ability to reply to others fosters a constant back-and-forth relationship between users and the poster.

Sobré-Denton (2016) discusses how different social media platforms have allowed for people to form a global-local orientation. This orientation leads to the building of communities in online virtual spaces, and towards the building of a stronger global citizenship. The idea of virtual cosmopolitanism has been understood as the way social media networks allow for the flow of cultural and social capital (McEwan & Sobré-Denton, 2011). Virtual cosmopolitanism assumes that culture is dynamic, providing spaces where people can form groups, and exchange cultural capital with those distant and different from them (Sobré-Denton, 2016). In its simpler form, cosmopolitanism has to do with remaining rooted locally, while also having the understanding of belonging to a larger world. For this to be done on a virtual level, certain education socioeconomic barriers stand in the way.

It is understood that this virtual cosmopolitanism allows for a greater awareness and spread of ideas, however, it does not exist without inequality. Both accessibility to the technology as well as the skill to use it are issues that challenge the evenness of the playing field. Additionally, different cultures and areas of the world may adopt certain platforms into their popular culture at different times. This inequality of course then leads to certain cultural ideas being represented online more frequently than others.

Internationalization has been criticized for its tendency to impose Western lifestyles and replace local, regional, or national identities (Stier, 2009). While these same ideas could be related to the spread of social media platforms themselves, the content that appears on them is

instead oftentimes determined by the users. In the case of TikTok, aside from the terms of service and mechanical limitations of the app, users are free to consume and create content as diverse as they choose. Gudykunst and Kim (2003: 17), in their book “Communicating with Strangers,” describe intercultural communication as ‘...a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different cultures’ (cf. Stier, 2009). When viewed as a transaction between two users, whether passive or direct, the possibility for intercultural communication through social media becomes endless, only limited by regulations or the user's desire.

When viewing or interacting with content on social media from outside their own culture, a person acts as an outsider looking in. In doing so, this has been seen to increase appreciation for one's own culture through self-reflection and understanding (Stier, 2009). Additionally, research has found that intercultural communication can serve as a shortcut to reducing conflict and prejudice interculturally (Peng & Wu, 2016). The intergroup contact theory, as proposed by Gordon Allport, is the idea that under certain conditions, contact between majority and minority groups can reduce prejudice (Allport et al., 1954). These conditions include equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and mutual support of authorities, laws, and customs. While all of these conditions are not always present on social media, there are opportunities and situations where they can exist. By forming relationships with people online through common goals and interests' people may be able to find more similarity with others than they had previously thought.

Stier (2009) explains intercultural competence in two parts: content-competencies and processual competencies. Content-competencies consist of more static and often one-dimensional knowledge aspects of both the ‘home’ and ‘other’ cultures, whereas processual

competencies are more dynamic relating to the interactional context. In the context of social media each person is entering into the platform with their own individual knowledge and preconceptions. Additionally, the opportunity to learn is abundant, with literature emphasizing the ability for intercultural competence to be developed through both direct and indirect contact (Peng & Wu, 2016).

Influence of Social Media on National Image

Openness and interactivity have been pointed out as characteristics that give social media an advantage in the formation of national images (Yang & Wan, 2016). Along with these two traits, social media also has an element of communization, allowing any organization or ordinary person to have a voice and some element of control. Whereas before traditional media may have worked to push homogenous images of certain countries, opportunities exist on certain platforms to challenge longstanding norms or ideas. With the increased speed of globalization, the desire for countries to maintain, control, and improve their national image is likely to grow. Social media helps create more transparency, particularly due to the interactive element that it provides. The ability for the consumer to then understand the images being portrayed is both convenient and quickly done.

User-generated social media videos, like those seen on TikTok, exist as pieces of cultural artifacts in the form of entertainment and art, therefore playing into a country's soft power. As seen by the success of the Korean wave (Kang, 2015), it is assumed there is demand for international media in several areas of the world. Present and future social media seem to exist in many ways as a burgeoning reservoir for this national image management. Advancements in new technology and internet content are changing what it means to look through another person's

perspective from the outside. Firsthand footage and personal opinions are presented in packages that others from entirely different cultures and backgrounds may be able to relate to.

TikTok and Content Discovery across Culture through Algorithm

Particularly due to its highly personalized interface and short video format, TikTok stands out as unique in the current landscape of social media platforms. One aspect that TikTok utilizes to differentiate itself from other platforms deals with it focusing less on identity management (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020). For example, on Instagram much of the browsing is centered on a network of friends and followers that an individual has amassed over time. While content discovery options have increased over the years, they remain on the periphery. TikTok encourages users to interact most with the constantly updating algorithm catered to their habits, as well as the creation of original content. This is done through the ‘for you’ page acting as the landing page with videos from those that you follow scattered randomly within. To encourage content generation the button to create a video is centered at the bottom of the screen.

Additionally, users can click on the sound of any video to then have the option to use that sound on their own content. These two aspects display how TikTok is presented more towards the self in the user experience. On other platforms the actions taken by a user often deal with more insular interpersonal communication between a handpicked network, whereas TikTok allows greater opportunity to explore. These prominent features, paired with the popularity of the app, suggest that TikTok could be serving a different need to its users, not found through other platforms.

The uses and gratification theory is commonly used in research to understand the appeal and reason behind the popularity of TikTok (Montag et al., 2021; Omar & Dequan, 2020; Yang & Ha, 2021). The theory works to explain the reason why people choose to seek out particular

media (Katz et al., 1973). Yang & Ha (2021) performed a study involving a survey of Chinese college students to determine the primary motivation behind their use of Douyin measuring four elements: entertainment, information sharing, information seeking, and socialization. The results found entertainment to be the dominant motivation of the four, with socialization as the least. This emphasis on entertainment over information sharing or socialization displays the more insular nature of the app, less influenced by social groups due to the custom experience.

TikTok has only been around for a relatively short amount of time compared to the other major social media platforms, and there remains several unknowns surrounding its impact, power, and long-term use effects. With seemingly endless opportunities for entertainment, awareness, and influence, the app has proven incredibly successful especially among younger generations in a time where immediacy and convenience are highly sought after. Alongside the qualities of convenience and instant gratification, people are less confined to static narratives and instead are delivered content specific to their unique algorithm and what they interact with.

Along with a network of followers, TikTok fosters a unique influencer culture. TikTok excels in the discoverability category, with its aforementioned “For You” and discovery pages. Additionally, videos are not only served based on virality, and instead the algorithm will mix new videos into the user’s feed, allowing new or smaller creators a similar chance of being discovered (Gillespie, 2022). This discoverability assists in the diversity of content available for any user, and along with the casual nature of following another TikTok user, creates an advantageous ecosystem for budding influencers. Once amassing followers, it then changes how audiences perceive posts due to presumably higher metrics (likes, comments, shares) on the videos (Ha & Willnat, 2022).

Chen (2012) discusses the demassification effect of new media and changes that have been made to how people consume content. With advancements in social media, especially along with the inception of TikTok, there is no longer a need to design content for a homogenous audience as traditional media has done in the past. People are able to now create, disseminate, and consume the messages that appeal to them. Social media has become more fluid in the ability for an individual to create and reinforce their own beliefs, be involved in worldwide communities, and connect with others with far fewer barriers than have existed before. There are opportunities for building intercultural competence, however, research remains limited. It is important to build a better understanding of how this will impact future generations of which this has become their standard. In focusing more on the self and exploration, there are opportunities for future research to understand how the social media platforms unique content curation and how that plays a role in the formation of images.

Research Questions

With social media acting as a primary source of information for many, there is an importance to seeing how theories like agenda-setting and framing can be adapted to fit these new, changing media. With regard to visibility and valence, noticing how often something is being presented and the manner in which it is being presented can lead to understanding the potential impression it leaves on audiences. Due to the seemingly large amount of diverse content consumed on TikTok by a person at any time, the repetition of specific attributes or themes could lead to the formation of beliefs.

Given the history of the western portrayal of China as well as prevalent stereotypes and longstanding model minority myth, it is important to how, if at all, these themes carry over onto a platform like TikTok. Recent events such as the US/China trade war and COVID-19 pandemic

have played a large role in the portrayal of China by traditional media. Along with these factors, there has been a growing unfavorable view of China by those living in the United States due to environmental, cybersecurity, and trade concerns. With TikTok serving the primary purpose of entertainment, it is then possible that there is a greater variety of viewpoints as well as content on the platform.

The research questions for this study are largely exploratory and aim to discover the type of China related content that is viewed most on TikTok to provide sufficient understanding and context for analyzing the results of the survey.

RQ1: What type of Chinese/China related content is being viewed the most on TikTok?

RQ2: How are Chinese people and China as a country represented on highly viewed TikTok videos?

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Content Analysis

The study begins with a content analysis in an attempt to answer the research questions and determine themes among the top China related TikToks. The use of a content analysis will be able to account for the large diversity of videos on TikTok as well as work in discovering themes among them. The top 100 viewed videos were chosen due to having the largest reach, and therefore impact. Due to the limited search and categorization options on the platform, it is difficult to get a truly representative sample. Many videos do not contain a description or hashtags and are therefore unable to be properly searched or filtered. Sorting the most viewed TikToks that contain either “China” or “Chinese” somewhere in the description or video name has provided videos relevant to the study.

Using Octoparse, a web scraping tool, the top viewed TikToks containing either “China” or “Chinese” in the video description or hashtags were gathered into a spreadsheet. These were then sorted by view count and the top 100 were compiled to be used in the content analysis. Prior to this, videos were manually filtered out that were no longer available (they had been removed by TikTok or the content creator) or irrelevant (i.e. when China or Chinese is in the username, but the content is not related to China), replacing them with the next highest viewed video. The posting date of the videos gathered ranges from January 2020 to September 2021.

Included in the codebook were the data available from web scraping including the number of likes, shares, and comments displayed for each video for the purpose of understanding the type of interaction the video had from viewers. The number of views is not always indicative of likes and a higher number of comments could be a sign that the video was controversial or

sparked a conversation. Either way, the likes, shares, and comments give an idea of how much a video was interacted with over another.

The next item in the codebook, and presumably the most important, is the category of the video. The 20 topics that are filterable on the app, as defined by TikTok, were used. These include Food & Beverage, Sport, Performance Skills, Gaming, Fitness & Health, Fashion & Beauty, Dance, Outdoor Activities, Daily Life, Pop Culture, Animation & Fan Culture, Transportation & Vehicle, Science & Education, Professional Life, Family, Oddly Satisfying, Travel, Animal, Celebrity Account, and Comedy (What Marketers Should Know About TikTok's Creator Marketplace (TCM), n.d.). The topics are not made public through the app on any specific video; therefore they were coded roughly based on the main theme and content present in the video. This should provide an overview of the type of Chinese related TikToks that are being viewed as well as pushed to the top of the algorithm.

Other items in the codebook include whether or not the video includes stereotypes, whether it is positive, neutral, or negative about China, and what language is spoken in the video, if any. For the inclusion of stereotypes, the same 11 traits were chosen based on those included in the survey (open-minded, honest, polite, non-prejudiced, generous, arrogant, hardworking, inventive, good morals, accountable, smart), along with the ability to select multiple or none. The stereotypes category was later dropped from the coding analysis.

The 100 videos used for the content analysis were then viewed and coded by this researcher using Qualtrics to keep track of and store the information. Inter-coder reliability was accounted for by having a third party code 10% of the sample. The second coder was informed on all aspects and what to look for in each video. The variable for video topic had a 90%

agreement ($\alpha = .865$), and the variable for valence achieved 80% agreement ($\alpha = .661$). If positive and neutral were treated as interchangeable the agreement would achieve 100%.

Survey

The second portion of this study includes an online survey that attempts to test the three stated hypotheses about the interaction with China related content and national image.

Historically, surveys have been one of the most commonly used tools in quantitative mass communication research (Kamhawi & Weaver, 2003). The questionnaire will work towards both collecting information on TikTok use and other social media video consumption and attempting to determine factors that explain the participants viewpoints, in this case their national image of China. The survey consists of three main sections: general questions about the participant and their media use, national image measurements, and two China related TikTok videos followed by questions concerning the videos.

The sampling frame chosen for this study was a convenience sample consisting of 120 students currently enrolled in large lecture courses in either MDIA1030 Media and Information Society, or COMM2010 Communication Theory at Bowling Green State University. Given that these are lower-level courses, the aim was to have a younger sampling population with the assumption that they are more likely to consume more TikTok content. College students in the school of media and communication are appropriate for this survey given how they may generally hold stronger opinions about international media topics than students in other university courses. Communication students also may have more interest in subjects involving social media platforms.

Students in both courses were provided with extra credit upon completion of the survey. Those who did not want to participate in the study could earn the same credit by completing an

alternative assignment of equal difficulty. The university's IRB approval was sought and granted for the use of human subjects (IRB #1856961-4). The survey was designed to take ten to fifteen minutes to complete.

Questionnaire Design

The first section of the survey gathers basic information about the participants including their media use and general reactions to China related online video content. The participants were asked if they use TikTok. If they answered yes they were prompted to the set of questions specifically regarding TikTok. The first group of questions asked how often they watch videos on the app, how often they share videos and where they share them, as well as how likely they are to watch videos about China if they come across them. The survey then asked how often they see China related content on any social media platform as well as if they follow accounts on social media that post China related content, which will account for exposure to China content for those that answered no to using TikTok. The final question in this section dealt with their tendency to question the authenticity of China related social media content, as to later compare that with their national image in an attempt to answer the third hypothesis.

The second section of the survey included the questions intended to measure the participants' national image of China. Beginning with the affective element, the emotional, physical, cultural, and social appeals of China will all be measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. These questions were placed in a matrix format allowing participants to read the questions more easily as a group and properly visualize the scale.

For the cognitive elements, participants were asked five multiple choice questions concerning general knowledge about China. The five questions asked participants to identify the

capital, political system, current president, currency, and official name. The questions have four multiple choice answers with the option to select “I don’t know.” Alternatives to the correct answers were similar in nature.

The questions measuring stereotypes were then asked again using a matrix format to best streamline the answers and allow for easier visualization. These were broken up into the two sections of social manners and work ethics, with a 5-point Likert scale used for all questions ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Preceding the final section of the survey the participants were asked to watch two popular TikTok videos that are related to China. All participants viewed the same two videos in the same order, both two minutes in length. The purpose of the videos is to get the participants immediate reaction to seeing a TikTok video about China. Due to the quick and constant scrolling nature of TikTok, the ability to recall the type of videos they have come across in the past could be difficult. By having them watch the videos as part of the survey there is less reliance on their ability to recollect.

The first video is from content creator Li Ziqi (@cnliziqi on TikTok). The video is the same as her usual YouTube content, but shorter and edited to better fit the TikTok format. The video from Li Ziqi was chosen because her content has been proven to be received well by an audience outside of China. Li Ziqi is an example of a Chinese person demonstrating aspects of Chinese culture. The chosen video is currently the most viewed on her TikTok account.

The second video is from the content creator @karissaeats. She is an American living in China that mainly posts content about food and has gathered a following of over 200,000 on TikTok. This video represents the unique ability that user generated social media content has to show an audience an intimate glimpse into daily life that they otherwise might not be able to

find. Additionally, food content is both popular across social media video platforms and often attributed to Chinese culture. The video that was included is the second most popular on her account with roughly 3.7 million views.

After each video the participants were asked four short questions including if they enjoyed watching the video, if they found it entertaining, how likely they are to watch a similar video if they saw it on social media, and if they learned anything from the video. The first three questions were asked on a 5-point Likert scale and the fourth question included a text box if they answered yes with a prompt to include what they learned as an open ended answer.

In the final section of the survey participants were asked basic information including their age, class standing, race or ethnicity, and gender identity.

Measurements

National Image

The primary measurement in this study is the participant's national image of China, measured through a survey. This consists of the three previously mentioned dimensions: affective, cognitive, and stereotypes. Each of the three dimensions are calculated and given as a score out of five, which can then be combined with an average to generate a full score for each participant.

The cognitive aspect was first measured through five general knowledge questions about China. These questions asked respondents to identify the capital, current president, political system similar to Willnat et al., (2022) as well as currency, and the official full name of the country. Alternative answers given were relevant to the question and not designed to confuse participants.

The affective aspect was measured through several questions about how the participants feel about both the country and the people of China. Borrowed from the Fombrun-RI Country Reputation Index (Passow et al., 2005), the most relevant questions were pulled from the six dimensions. The dimensions included are emotional appeal (“I like China,” “I Trust China”), physical appeal (“China is a beautiful place,” “China has well-educated residents”), cultural appeal (“China is socially and culturally diverse,” “China has a rich historical past”), and social appeal (China supports good causes,” “China is a responsible member of the global community,” “China supports responsible environmental practices”).

Stereotypes were measured by asking participants to give their feelings about Chinese people under two different aspects, social manners and work ethics, using a 5-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Zhang, 2015). Items under social manners include open-minded, honest, polite, non-prejudiced, generous, and arrogant. Items under work ethics include hardworking, inventive, good morals, accountable, smart.

Control Variables

Additionally, three questions were asked as a control to measure the participants personal experience and contact with China and Chinese people. These questions included their travel experience to China, their number of Chinese friends and relatives, and their own self-rated knowledge of China following the items used in the public opinion survey of U.S. people on China by Ha et al. (2021). Participants were asked, on a 4-point scale, about their travel experience to China, whether they have Chinese friends or relatives, and how much they believe they know about China. In addition to this they were asked two opinionated questions on if they think the relationship between the U.S. and China is good, as well as if they think media

coverage about China in the U.S. is positive, both asked on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Additionally, a 5-point scale was included to measure their political ideology, ranging from Republican to Democrat, with Independent as the middle point.

Another general measure included in the study was the participants' use of TikTok measured on a 5-point scale from daily to never. Interactivity with the platform was measured by asking questions about how much they use the app features, post videos, and share videos off platform. Participants who do not use TikTok were still encouraged to take part in the survey, but they were informed to skip the questions specifically about the use of TikTok. Questions were asked concerning YouTube and other social media. Participants were asked how often they come across Chinese related content and general opinions about the content for each major social media platform. Both TikTok and non-TikTok China-related content opinions will be compared and combined to have an overview of opinion on China-related content on social media platforms.

The complete questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Top China-Related Content Videos

Viewing and coding the top 100 videos containing either ‘China’ or ‘Chinese’ in the video description or hashtags confirmed the previous assumption that most videos were either positive or neutral in nature. Of the 100 videos analyzed, a total of 41 were coded as positive, 53 neutral, and 6 negative. As mentioned previously, the videos were determined to belong to one of these three categories based on the overall theme and tone, as well as main subject matter. Given that TikTok videos are oftentimes short and lack context, videos were coded as neutral unless they were clearly attempting to portray some aspect of China or Chinese people in a positive or negative light. Videos coded as neutral largely consisted of food content, happenings in daily life, inoffensive comedy, or anything that did not blatantly appear either positive or negative. Videos coded as positive largely consisted of fashion videos showing Chinese people as attractive, videos showcasing impressive technology, or expert craftsmanship. The videos coded negative included offensive jokes, news events, and unprofessionalism.

After coding was complete a decision was made to not include the stereotypes category in the final analysis due to the lack of presence of the included traits being portrayed in the top videos. The stereotypes included in the content analysis were chosen from the survey and therefore were all positively worded, which made it difficult to attribute them to a majority of the videos. With the brief nature of the videos and oftentimes lack of structure or storytelling it did not make sense to include this category without further analysis or a more open ended input.

Language employed in the videos was found to not play a very important role in the analysis due to the nature of the content not being focused on this element. Of the videos, there were 55 containing English in either speech or a song, and only 6 containing Chinese in either

speech or a song. There were 4 videos that included a mix of English and Chinese. Of the remaining 35 videos, 28 contained no language with the other 7 containing various languages either spoken or in song (French, Malay, Punjabi, Spanish, Thai). But it is noteworthy that six videos containing exclusively Chinese language were among the top viewed.

Between the engagement measures of likes, comments, and views the highest correlations were between comments and likes ($r = .573, p = <.001$), and between views and likes ($r = .439, p = <.001$). There was a significant correlation between views and comments ($r = .244, p = .015$), however, less so than the other two relationships. No significant difference was found between the valence of the videos and number of views, likes, or comments.

Of the 20 topics coded, six appeared 10 or more times in the content analysis. These topics included Food & Beverage (18), Fashion & Beauty (16), Pop Culture (13), Performance Skills (12), Daily Life (10), and Comedy (10). The next highest topic frequency was five. It was excluded from further analysis along with topics occurring less than five times.

A one-way ANOVA was used to compare the means of views, comments, and likes between topics. The results of this analysis are displayed in Table 1. The Food and Beverage topic had the highest number of average views at 24.17 million. Despite being lower in average views, the Fashion and Beauty and Comedy topics had the highest number of average likes at 2.9 and 2.88 million, respectively. Fashion and Beauty and Comedy also received the highest average number of comments.

Table 1*Video Topic and Average Views, Likes, and Comments*

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Average # of Views (in millions)</i>	<i>Average # of Likes (in millions)</i>	<i>Average # of Comments</i>
<i>Food & Beverage (N=18)</i>	24.17	2.03	11,874
<i>Performance Skills (N=12)</i>	22.1	1.67	20,907
<i>Fashion & Beauty (N=16)</i>	17.66	2.90	26,295
<i>Daily Life (N=10)</i>	18.11	1.19	17,897
<i>Pop Culture (N=13)</i>	16.37	2.39	13,943
<i>Comedy (N=10)</i>	16.22	2.88	28,022

Survey*Demographics of Participants*

Respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 25 with the large majority between 18 and 22. Even though classes selected were introductory, the sample was spread across all class standings with 28 (23.7%) freshman, 51 (43.2%) sophomores, 20 (16.9%) juniors, and 19 (16.1%) seniors. Of the participants 62 (52.5%) were male, 49 (41.5%) were female, 4 (3.4%) were non-binary, and 3 (2.5%) preferred to self-describe in a text box. In regard to political ideology a slight majority were Democrat leaning accounting for 44 (38%) participants, with 42 (36.2%) identifying as independent, and 30 (25.8%) as Republican leaning.

TikTok Use

Of the 120 survey participants 97 (80.8%) indicated that they use TikTok, with 76 (78.4%) in that group reporting daily use. Of those who use TikTok, 73 (75.3%) share videos from the app multiple times a week or daily. With the ability to select more than one answer, 71 participants indicated that they share TikTok videos through text messages, 65 share through

TikTok messages, and 56 through Snapchat. Other social platforms were significantly lower with 17 indicating that they share TikTok videos through Instagram and only one share through Twitter. The high proportion of users who share videos multiple times a week or daily indicates that video sharing is a very common practice on TikTok.

Watching TikTok Videos on China and China's National Image

To indicate the national image of China for each of the participants an average score out of five was calculated for each component of national image: affective, cognitive, and stereotypes. The affective measurement included nine items ($\alpha = .763$), and the stereotypes measurement included 11 items ($\alpha = .890$). For the five questions measuring the cognitive element, each participant was given a whole number score for the number answered correctly. For the five cognitive questions, 97 (80.8%) correctly identified the capital, 88 (73.3%) correctly identified the political system, 59 (49.2%) correctly identified the country's official name, 55 (45.8%) correctly identified the president, and 32 (26.7%) correctly identified the currency. After further analysis this measurement did not seem to accurately represent this dimension, particularly due to the high number (73.3%) of participants who incorrectly identified the currency, frequently confusing Japanese Yen and Chinese Yuan. In general, the results show participants' low knowledge about China except about its political system and capital. To avoid confounding results due to confusion of the cognitive knowledge questions, the final national image score was calculated using only the affective and stereotype elements for a combined 20 items ($\alpha = .883$). The mean values for these items can be found in Table 2.

Table 2*National Image Measurements (1 strongly disagree, 5 strongly agree)*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I like China	120	1	5	3.30	1.026
I trust China	120	1	5	2.47	1.004
China is a beautiful place	120	1	5	3.98	1.025
China has well-educated residents	120	1	5	3.59	.930
China is socially and culturally diverse	120	1	5	2.99	.992
China has a rich historical past	120	1	5	4.26	.921
China supports good causes	120	1	5	2.61	.833
China is a responsible member of the global community	120	1	5	2.88	1.139
China supports responsible environmental practices	120	1	4	2.28	1.020
Chinese people are Open-minded	119	1	5	3.08	.819
Chinese people are Honest	118	1	5	3.28	.886
Chinese people are Polite	118	2	5	3.53	.854
Chinese people are Non-prejudiced	119	1	5	2.85	.830
Chinese people are Generous	118	2	5	3.31	.811
Chinese people are Humble	119	1	5	3.40	.816
Chinese people are Hardworking	119	1	5	4.09	.873
Chinese people are Inventive	118	1	5	3.90	.900
Chinese people are Accountable	118	1	5	3.37	.932
Chinese people are Moral	119	1	5	3.44	.926
Chinese people are Smart	119	1	5	4.08	.829

Direct interaction on China-related content videos was low with only 9 (7.5%) participants indicating that they follow or subscribe to an account across any social media platform that posts content related to China. Due to this, to address the first hypothesis, two scores were made for the participants' reception to each viewed TikTok video by combining three questions ("I enjoyed watching the video," "I found the video entertaining," and "How likely are you to watch a similar video if you came across it?"). These responses can be found in Table 3. A reliability analysis was run for the items in both groups. The Cronbach's Alpha for the group of questions following the Li Ziqi video was $\alpha = .828$, with the value for the questions following the Karissaeats video being $\alpha = .931$.

Table 3

Video Responses

	Li Ziqi Mean Score	Karissaeats Mean Score	Mean Difference	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
"I enjoyed watching the video."	4.08	3.63	.449***	1.129	.104
"I found the video entertaining."	3.92	3.57	.347**	1.143	.105
"How likely are you to watch a similar video if you came across it?"	3.65	3.35	.305**	1.317	.121

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

When comparing the receptiveness of the two TikTok videos shown and national image, a weak correlation was found with both the Li Ziqi video ($r = .201, p = .034$) and the Karissaeats video ($r = .216, p = .022$). Participants reported higher receptiveness to the Li Ziqi video ($M = 3.88, SD = .77$) than the Karissaeats video ($M = 3.51, SD = 1.1$) ($t = 3.739, df = 117, p < .001$). Hence the first hypothesis that people that like Chinese/China video content have a more positive

national image of China is supported. When gender of respondents were compared for their receptiveness toward the videos, females ($M = 4.12$, $SD = .77$) were more receptive to the Li Ziqi video than males ($M = 3.74$, $SD = .76$) ($t = -2.594$, $df = 109$, $p = .011$). Similarly, females ($M = 3.87$, $SD = .99$) were more receptive to the Karissaeats video over males ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.1$) ($t = -2.999$, $df = 109$, $p = .003$).

No significant correlation was found between national image and questions concerning how often participants come across China related content on social media platforms, or their likelihood to watch the videos similar to the ones the survey presented to them. Therefore, the second hypothesis that people who consume more China related content have a higher affection towards Chinese people could not be supported.

To address the third hypothesis, national image was compared against the two questions concerning authenticity and propaganda. A significant correlation was found between a more positive national image and whether participants view China related content as authentic ($r = .309$, $p < .001$). Additionally, the question concerning if participants see China related content as being propaganda from the Chinese government was then reverse coded and a positive correlation was found with a more positive national image ($r = .356$, $p < .001$). Hence hypothesis three that people with a more negative national image of China will tend to see positive Chinese social media content as propaganda or fake was supported.

Political Ideology and Perceived Authenticity of China-Related Content

A one-way ANOVA was used to determine significant difference between the means on both questions of authenticity and propaganda based on political ideology. Those who indicated themselves as Democratic leaning ($M = 3.05$, $SD = .75$) compared against Republican leaning ($M = 2.43$, $SD = .77$) were more likely to think content is authentic ($F = 5.68$, $df = 2$, $p = .004$).

Additionally, those who identified themselves as democratic leaning ($M = 3.25$, $SD = .14$) compared to republican leaning ($M = 2.53$, $SD = .15$) were less likely to see China related content as propaganda ($F = 5.92$, $df = 2$, $p = .004$). Similar results were found in regard to political ideology and national image, with those identifying as Democratic leaning ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .52$) having a higher overall national image than those identifying as Republican leaning ($M = 3.16$, $SD = .45$) ($F = .348$, $df = 69$, $p = .008$).

Perceived US-China Relations and Media Coverage of China

Two additional questions measured the participants' perception of US-China relations and media coverage. When asked if they think the relationship between China and the U.S. is good, 52 (43.3%) leaned toward disagree, while 47 (39.2%) had no opinion either way, and 21 (17.5%) indicated that they somewhat agree. A positive correlation was found between this question and overall national image ($r = .313$, $p = <.001$). Hence the national image of a country and perceived U.S. relation with that country is related. When asked if they believe coverage in the U.S. about China is positive, answers trended more towards disagree, with 77 (64.2%) either somewhat or strongly disagreeing, 37 (30.8%) with no opinion either way, and 6 (5%) indicating that they somewhat agree. Table 4 is a summary of all major variables in the study.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Video Interaction					
How often do you watch videos on TikTok?	97	1	5	4.58	.956
How often do you share videos on TikTok?	97	1	5	4.02	1.145

How likely are you to watch a video about China on TikTok if you came across one?	97	1	5	2.82	1.164
How often do you come across content related to China on social media? (i.e. TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, etc.)	120	1	5	2.27	.898
Perceptions of China					
I think social media content from or about China is authentic.	120	1	5	2.77	.796
I think social media content from or about China is propaganda from the Chinese government.	120	1	5	3.09	.926
I think media coverage in the U.S. about China is positive.	120	1	4	2.17	.853
The relationship between China and the U.S. is good.	119	1	4	2.62	.908
China Experience					
What is your travel experience with China?	120	1	3	1.04	.239
Do you have Chinese friends or relatives?	120	1	4	1.69	.807
How much do you know about China?	120	1	3	1.91	.449

Regression Analysis of Predictors of China's National Image and TikTok Use

A linear regression was run in order to find any significant relationships between all independent variables and national image as the dependent variable. Predictor variables included frequency of TikTok use, frequency of encountering China related content, questions of

authenticity and propaganda, and perceived media coverage of China. Control variables included ethnicity, gender, age, political ideology, and China experience. The full results of the regression analysis can be found in Table 5. Questions about China-related content's authenticity ($t = 2.18$, $p = .032$) and whether or not it is seen as propaganda ($t = 2.377$, $p = .020$) appear as the two significant predictors. This means that if participants saw China related content as authentic and if they did not see it as propaganda, they were likely to have a more positive national image of China. Additionally the question asking if participants perceive the relationship between the U.S. and China as good was a significant predictor of national image ($t = 2.083$, $p = .041$). However, perceiving the media coverage of China as negative did not significantly predict having a negative national image of China. Travel and interaction with Chinese people also did not show relationship with national image, probably due to the extremely low scores of the participants.

Table 5

Linear Regression of National Image Predictors

	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	2.306	1.009		2.286	.025
How often do you watch videos on TikTok?	-.021	.059	-.038	-.353	.725
How often do you come across content related to China on social media? (i.e. TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, etc.)	-.033	.065	-.057	-.507	.614
I think social media content from or about China is authentic.	.177	.081	.242	2.184	.032

I think social media content from or about China is propaganda from the Chinese government. (reverse coded)	.161	.068	.262	2.377	.020
I think media coverage in the U.S. about China is positive.	-.004	.068	-.007	-.066	.947
The relationship between China and the U.S. is good.	.134	.065	.232	2.083	.041
Political Leaning	-.003	.036	-.011	-.094	.925
White/Nonwhite	-.114	.130	-.095	-.875	.384
Gender	-.094	.087	-.114	-1.076	.285
Age	.002	.037	.006	.051	.959
China Experience	.092	.152	.067	.606	.546

DV is National Image of China

Audience's Takeaway of China-Related Content

After watching each TikTok the participants were asked if they learned something from the video, with the option to include in a text box what they learned. A total of 52 participants answered for Li Ziqi, and 46 answered for Karissaeats.

Only three participants made comments concerning authenticity and propaganda. After Li Ziqi one person wrote “I do not want to label all content out of China as simply propaganda.” After Karissaeats one person wrote “TikTok’s about China kind of try to ‘sell’ China” with another writing “Everyone makes China seem like an unbearable place to live due to communism, but the food looked really good.”

The remaining comments were positive or neutral in their reaction to the video. Many people commented on the inventiveness, creativity, and beauty of Li Ziqi. One commenter wrote

“I didn’t know bamboo could be so useful and everything felt less modern. It made me appreciate the skills humans have.” In the case of Karissaeats, comments were generally centered around learning about different types of foods and how apartment complexes have cafeterias for the residents. One commenter wrote “it’s intriguing to see what they eat,” with another writing “Learned about types of Chinese foods that I had never heard about before. Makes me want to try new foods.”

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

China-Related TikTok Content

Although there was a relatively small sample size, the results shown through the content analysis give a good idea of the type of Chinese related content that is being viewed and interacted with the most on TikTok.

Of the six videos that were deemed as a negative portrayal of China, it is likely they could be interpreted differently depending on who the end user is. In one there is a joke being made about covid coming from China, and another where someone asks if what they are eating is chicken and the street food vendor replies with animal noises, implying that it is cat. While presented in a way meant to be humorous, these TikToks could still work to perpetuate harmful stereotypes. The other negatively coded videos show a flood carrying cars down a street, what they claim to be a Chinese rocket falling into earth, a woman sleeping on the job, and a man showing a Bluetooth device that he bought from China speaking with a heavy accent.

The lack of many negative videos appearing in the 100 top viewed is likely due to there being a focus on entertainment when it comes to TikTok. While a wide variety of content exists on the platform, the short and funny videos may be more likely to rise to the top due to the app being seen as a quick and entertaining escape for users. TikTok content is user-generated and not official reports about an event or an issue. Political content is probably not high on the interest of users of TikTok, unlike mainstream media which focuses on China as a political and economic threat to the U.S.

The topic with the highest number of average views was Food & Beverage. This could be attributed to both the popularity of food content on TikTok and YouTube as a whole, as well as the popularity of Chinese food globally and the tendency for people to see food as having a

strong connection to Chinese culture as a whole. Videos in this topic included tutorials on how to season a wok, aesthetically appealing food preparation, and commentary on how to eat Chinese food, among others.

The Performance Skills topic resulted in the second highest number of average views. These videos skewed more on the positive side, including displays of a disciplined military, people completing work skillfully, and impressive handwriting. The topic also includes videos of Chinese people completing work in a skillful manner, whether chopping food or on a production line. While the content is oftentimes presented in positive or humorous ways, again, it may work to perpetuate stereotypes depending on the perception of the audience.

The topics Fashion & Beauty and Comedy were the two highest in average number of comments and likes. Of the six topics analyzed these two were significantly higher when it came to user interaction. Content in the Comedy videos ranged from popular culture references to topics of life as a Chinese American. It is often not directly related to mainland China, but the Chinese culture of Chinese Americans. Videos under the topic Fashion & Beauty appeared overwhelmingly positive in the portrayal of Chinese people as fashionable and innovative when it came to clothing. This topic contained the most videos that followed a specific trend out of the 100 analyzed. All with a similar format, they would have a popular song playing in the background while showing multiple slow-motion videos of Chinese people walking outdoors in lavish outfits.

To the research question of what Chinese/China related content is being viewed the most, it is difficult to give any one answer. On one hand, the topic of Food & Beverage came out clearly on top, but there was a wide diversity of videos within, and same with Performance Skills. The Chinese street fashion trend took an aesthetically appealing approach, as several other

videos did that involved food or craft. Future research would be helpful in determining how this could be viewed by TikTok users in general comparatively against the overall most popular videos on the app. In general, China-related content is still a niche among what people watch on TikTok, although all videos in the content analysis achieved over 10 million views.

In regard to the research question of how Chinese people and China are represented on highly viewed TikTok videos, this brief content analysis shows that the videos generally tend to be either positive or neutral in their portrayal. As mentioned, however, while acts of self-deprecation or racial jokes may attempt to be humorous, depending on the end user they could work to build on and preserve existing stereotypes. In this study, they were counted as negative when the intention was harmful. But as the popular China related content is concerned, it is overwhelmingly positive or neutral, and provides great contrast to traditional U.S. news media which usually casts China in a negative light. The positive videos can provide a positive framing of China and watching them can become salient attributes in the understanding of China.

TikTok Use and Shareability

The results of the survey are consistent with the assumption that young college students are among the population of active TikTok users as 80% of them used TikTok. Amid TikTok users, the large majority indicated daily use, displaying the strong habit-forming aspect of the app, similar to the other major social platforms. Being available to a U.S. audience for nearly four years, this displays the longevity that the platform has proven to have, making it significant when talking about social and cultural impact.

Along with active use of the app, a large majority of TikTok users (75.3%) indicated that they share videos on the app multiple times a week more. The high shareability nature of TikTok is consistent with the platform's interests in discoverability and personalized content distribution.

Most of the sharing is done so with presumably small circles or from person to person, as shown through the survey. The largest majority of participants indicated that they share through text messages, with TikTok messages and Snapchat following closely behind. Sharing to other social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter was much less common. This could be indicative of the content being more significant to a user's personal interests or humor, and therefore they are not interested in sharing it with a larger network of followers on a platform where image management is more of a priority.

Sharing a video on TikTok is likely unique from other platforms that host video content like YouTube, because of the low effort and commitment required from those on the receiving end. The short and often entertaining videos can be opened either through TikTok or a browser window if opened through a computer or the receiver does not have the app installed. The high shareability is important to note as more brands integrate into the platform. Along with ideas being easily shared and spread, the share button, as well as the number of times a video has been shared, is shown on each video directly below the comments.

National Image and China Related Content

The scales used to measure national image proved reliable, with the exception of the cognitive aspect which was not used in the final national image score computation. Of the five multiple choice basic knowledge questions that were asked, only two were answered correctly by more than half of the participants. As shown through the literature, China has consistently been a major topic in American news media, but the survey results show a lack of basic China knowledge among college students.

Not surprisingly, the average national image score is low (or on the negative side). The mean score is 3.31 out of 5. As this study found, national image is related to perceived U.S.-

China relations and the consumption of China-content can facilitate positive national image of China. Perceived authenticity of the videos was shown to be a main issue. How to determine authenticity and whether videos posted from users are authentic became an issue to be considered.

In the case of the two videos that participants were asked to view for the study, positive correlations were found with national image. Hypothesis 1 states that people that like Chinese/China video content have a more positive national image of China can be supported, with the caveat that a low (7.5%) number of participants reported following or subscribing to social media accounts that post China related content. The two chosen videos represent only a small corner of the type of content available, however, they were consistent with the popular topics found in the content analysis. The Li Ziqi video could fall into either Daily Life or Performance Skills, while the Karissaeats video would represent Food & Beverage.

A notable finding related to the two videos shown was the significantly higher receptiveness to the Li Ziqi video overall than the Karissaeats video. Participants enjoyed watching a video of a Chinese person performing traditional practices over an American displaying aspects of Chinese culture. As shown in the top China related TikToks, many videos in the Fashion & Beauty and Food & Beverage topics would take an aesthetically appealing approach, similar to Li Ziqi. A major difference between the two videos used for the survey is the inclusion of speech, with Karissaeats narrating her experience and Li Ziqi using only ambient sounds and music in ASMR format. It is possible that personality could have played a role in audience opinion as everyone has a unique personal preference. There may be a novelty effect in the preference for the Li Ziqi video.

Reported interaction with China related content on social media was low in the survey, both with following and encountering. This could have been due to several reasons. There is a possibility that this is difficult to recall unless the content is blatantly related to China or explicitly stated somewhere that the survey participant would have noticed before. Similar to the difficulty in acquiring the top China related videos for the content analysis, many TikTok videos are posted with limited or no text, causing it to be difficult to discern where a video is coming from or the content context. Additionally, due to the short length of TikTok videos and endless scroll feature of the app, users are likely to encounter a large quantity of different videos. Especially when a person's main motive is entertainment, they may not be paying close attention to the context. Hypothesis 2 states people that consume more Chinese/China-related online video content (i.e. TikTok, YouTube) have a more positive affection towards Chinese people. Although the self-rated frequencies resulted in the inability to confirm the hypothesis, it is possible that more accurate measures would lead to different results such as showing different China-related content video examples to people and asking whether they have watched similar content before.

Taking everything into account, the regression analysis found three variables to have a significant relationship with predicting national image: the authenticity of China related content, whether or not China related content is propaganda, and perception of the relationship between the U.S. and China. Variables concerning encountering and interacting with Chinese content were not significant predictors, possibly due to the aforementioned low self-reporting and the difficulties that go along with that recollection. More data is needed to understand the relationship that TikTok has with the three significant predictor variables and other possible interacting factors.

Authenticity and Propaganda

While the majority of respondents neither agreed or disagreed on the questions of authenticity and propaganda, the remaining percentage leaned more heavily towards seeing the content as propaganda (29.2%) and not being authentic (30%). These results are consistent with the literature on a growing concern of cyberattacks from China and general increase in distrust of China by younger people. Hypothesis 3 stated that people with a more negative national image of China will tend to see positive Chinese social media content as propaganda or fake. The hypothesis was consistent with both questions of authenticity and propaganda (reverse coded) resulting in significant positive correlations with national image.

Political ideology played a significant role in the major findings of the survey, with Republican leaning respondents scoring lower in both overall national image and trust in Chinese social media content. Given the imposing of tariffs by former president Trump and his comments made on the origins of COVID-19, these results are consistent with views held by the Republican party. Both political leanings, however, saw no significant difference when it came to the two questions asking about the relationship between China and the U.S. and whether or not media coverage in the U.S. about China is positive. While both political leanings differ on national image and perception of content, there was no difference from the overall majority trending towards seeing the relationship as bad and media coverage as negative.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Several limitations were present in the study, particularly due to constraints on being able to recruit a larger sample of survey participants. A larger and more geographically diverse sample size would be advantageous for being able to draw significant conclusions. Depending on where participants are located in the United States they are likely to encounter and interact with

Chinese people at different frequencies, which could have an impact on preconceived notions and overall image. Additionally, the cognitive element of national image should be reevaluated for future studies. Rather than knowledge questions with only a single correct answer, it would have likely been beneficial to gather more self-reported knowledge from participants to measure their perceived understanding of the country.

For future research on TikTok, given additional time and resources, the type of content being delivered across several different feeds and algorithms could be tracked. This then could be compared with each person's results to a survey in order to more accurately depict how the content they consume plays a role in their opinions and national image. This could in theory eliminate the difficulty of recalling the content they come across or follow. Additionally, having participants watch a greater amount of more diverse TikTok videos, along with a more in depth reaction, would assist in discovering the effects of different content.

This study only asked two questions on authenticity and propaganda, but they both were shown to be predictors of national image. A more in depth study on the role that these ideas play, as well as why people feel the way that they do would help in understanding how, if at all, the content separation affects Chinese content creators. Additional questions following the videos asking participants if they believed the videos to be inauthentic or propaganda would have been beneficial to include and important for future research. Future experiments could be used to measure participants perceived authenticity of certain videos to discover the factors that play a role in a video's legitimacy.

Furthermore, the role that TikTok plays as being a source of news is something that this study does not thoroughly cover. As younger people seemingly move further away from sources of news from traditional media, it would be advantageous to understand what they see on TikTok

as news, and what causes them to see it as accurate or not. Alongside this, there is much room for research to understand the role of misinformation on TikTok and the impact that it may be having on nations and the people within them.

In regard to the content analysis, as previously mentioned, many videos on TikTok do not contain text explicitly stating what is shown in the video. Therefore, a truly accurate sample of the top China related videos was unable to be gathered. The diversity of content on TikTok and the ability for any creator to be seen, regardless of followers or virality, makes it difficult to know what any one person is likely to come across. In addition the sample only included 100 videos due to constraints on time and resources. Computer aided tools may be superior in dealing with TikTok videos, given the sheer volume in existence as well as the amount that one consumes in any one time using the app.

Conclusion

This study works to open up the conversation around research on TikTok and national image. Social phenomena like TikTok/Douyin force a reevaluation of how people interact with and make sense of the world around them. As entire generations continue to grow up with this new communication tool, the effects of its integration into culture will become clearer. Additionally, as the world continues to develop the tools that allow people to be more connected and have a platform to express their ideas, nations may become more aware of the ways this can positively or negatively affect their image. As discussed previously, the evolving algorithm technology works in a way that breaks down barriers to the spread of information and increases discoverability.

As the relationship between the U.S. and China undergoes changes, it is likely that Americans' opinions about China and Chinese people will transform as well. Shown by recent

events, most notably COVID-19, portrayal through traditional media has had significant effects on Chinese Americans, and more broadly Asian Americans as a consequence. The survey in this study displayed low knowledge of China from young people when it came to basic questions, however, respondents were more opinionated on the country's portrayal in U.S. media, showing a certain level of awareness and judgment. Preconceived notions about the country and its people play a role in how others interact with content related to it, as shown through questions of authenticity. TikTok allows for a way to educate, or at least inform, through entertainment, and it is possible that an increased amount of Chinese content on the platform would lead to more interaction.

The separation of internet content between China and the rest of the world is not showing any signs of changing, and it is unclear if this is something many people on either side pay much mind to. The results of the survey show a connection between perceived authenticity of online video content and national image. It could then be assumed that this skepticism of content from China may come from a place of being unrelatable. The clear lack of self-reported interaction with China related content could work towards causing the citizens to be seen more as outsiders. Seen by the positive reception of the Li Ziqi video, it is possible that if more American and mainland Chinese people used the same social media platforms the interest in each other's respective content would increase.

Viewing the impact of entertainment from countries like Korea and Japan on American popular culture, there seems to be opportunity for China to capitalize on this, but insular policies create additional barriers. China in U.S. traditional media is most often by-way-of politics and economics. Those in China that use VPN services to post on platforms like YouTube or TikTok likely do so for the specific reason of reaching a western audience, given that they have similar

platforms more convenient for them. This is of course then limiting of the diversity of content available, resulting in a lack of the whole picture. While language barriers will always play a role, increasing content from creators like Li Ziqi or more intimate and raw content about daily life in China on TikTok offer opportunities for new perspectives. Some TikTokers posted content from China and used English text that helped people understand the content in Chinese. The intimate nature of content on TikTok allows people to come across in a way that is relatable to others, possibly increasing a feeling of connection.

The uniqueness of TikTok lies in the personal experience catered to each individual user through algorithm. As this transforms, and other platforms continue to follow in this model, it will be important to pay attention to the effects it has on lessening the homogeneity of traditional media and also the possibility of creating echo chambers for certain viewpoints. With the algorithm comes the power for anyone, regardless of following, to get noticed and pushed to the top if the content aligns with interests. Time is needed to determine the true significance of this, but the results of the study have shown a willingness of younger people to interact with China related content, as revealed by the positive evaluation of the videos shown to the participants both quantitatively and qualitatively, and a possibility for them to be more open to it given increased knowledge and confirmations of authenticity.

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APPENDIX A. THESIS SURVEY

ADULT CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH:

Please check the “I AGREE” box below if you consent to participate in the study

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. Your participation in this research will lead to a better understanding of online video consumption habits and how they may relate to one’s national image of China. The principal investigator of this study is graduate student Cole Highhouse, under the advisory of Dr. Louisa Ha, in the School of Media and Communication at Bowling Green State University. You must be at least 18 years of age and a BGSU student to participate. The survey should take approximately 10-15 minutes.

The information provided below describes the purpose and procedure as well as any possible risks that may arise over the course of the study. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your participation, please contact Cole Highhouse. E-mail: coleh@bgsu.edu Phone: (419) 320-7106

PURPOSE:

The information being collected in this survey includes general participant information, online video consumption habits, measures of national image of China, and general opinions of content. The information being collected will be used to describe relationships between user content consumption habits and their perceived national image of China. While there may not be direct benefits to you as a participant, the information gathered here will work towards a better understanding of the ever changing global social media landscape.

PROCEDURE:

The study consists of a one-time survey that will ask questions about your use of the social media app TikTok as well as other online video platforms. If you do not use TikTok you are still encouraged to participate in the survey. You will then be asked to give your opinion on several aspects of China and Chinese people, as well as general knowledge questions about the country. Near the end of the survey, you will be asked to watch a short TikTok video followed by a few questions asking your opinion about what you had watched.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

All information will be kept securely confidential, and your name will be collected to be able to inform your professor that you completed the survey. Extra credit will be awarded through your professor for the completion of the survey. If you choose not to complete the survey your professor will inform you of an alternative option to earn the extra credit. Your name, however, will not be associated with any aspect of the study.

The principal investigator and faculty advisors are the only individuals that will have access to the data collected. Data will be kept on a password-protected computer and only be used for the

length that it takes to complete the master's thesis. The survey host (QUALTRICS) uses strong encryption and other data security methods to protect your information. There are no known risks to you beyond those experienced in everyday life if you decide to participate in this survey. The researcher guarantees that your responses will not be identified with you personally.

Some employers may use tracking software and you may want to complete the survey on a personal computer. You should not leave the survey open if using a public computer or one that others may have access to. Clearing the browser cache and page history after completing the survey will further help to ensure confidentiality.

VOLUNTARY:

Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary and your decision to participate will not affect your relationship with Bowling Green State University. The study adheres to current BGSU COVID-19 guidelines. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions, not do a particular task, or stop participation at any time without explanation or penalty.

If you have other questions, please contact the principal investigator Cole Highhouse at coleh@bgsu.edu or faculty advisor Dr. Louisa Ha at louisah@bgsu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the BGSU Institutional Review Board at 1-419-372-7716 and irb@bgsu.edu.

Sincerely,

Cole Highhouse

- ☐ I AGREE (Continue with the survey)
- ☐ I DO NOT AGREE (End the survey)

What is your name? (for extra credit purposes only)

What class are you in? (for extra credit purposes only)

Do you use TikTok?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

How often do you watch videos on TikTok?

- ☐ About once a month or less
- ☐ Fewer than once a week
- ☐ About once a week
- ☐ Multiple times a week
- ☐ Daily

How often do you share videos from TikTok?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ About once a month or less
- ☐ Fewer than once a week
- ☐ Multiple times a week
- ☐ Daily

Where do you share videos from TikTok? (select all that apply)

- ☐ Text Messages
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Snapchat
- ☐ TikTok
- ☐ Other: _____

How likely are you to watch a video about China on TikTok if you came across one?

- ☐ Extremely unlikely
- ☐ Somewhat unlikely
- ☐ Neither likely nor unlikely
- ☐ Somewhat likely
- ☐ Extremely likely

How often do you come across content related to China on social media? (i.e. TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, etc.)

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Frequently
- ☐ Very Frequently

Do you follow/subscribe to any accounts that post content related to China on social media?

- ☐ No
 - ☐ Yes (If you can recall any, what are they?)
-

I think social media content from or about China is authentic.

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

I think social media content from or about China is propaganda from the Chinese government.

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

Please indicate how you feel about the following phrases:

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I like China	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I trust China	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
China is a beautiful place	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
China has well- educated residents	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please indicate how you feel about the following phrases:

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
China is socially and culturally diverse	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
China has a rich historical past	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
China supports good causes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
China is a responsible member of the global community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
China supports responsible environmental practices	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What is the capital of China?

- Shanghai
- Beijing
- Xi'An
- I don't know

What is the current political system in China?

- Communism
- Democracy
- Monarchy
- I don't know

Who is the president of China?

- Li Keqiang
- Hu Jintao
- Xi Jinping
- I don't know

What is the currency used in China?

- Yuan
- Dollar
- Yen
- I don't know

What is the official name of China?

- The Republic of China
- People's Republic of China
- China
- I don't know

Chinese people are...

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Open-minded	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Honest	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Polite	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Non-prejudiced	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Generous	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Humble	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Chinese people are...

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Hardworking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inventive	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Accountable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Moral	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Smart	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What is your travel experience with China?

- ☐ I have never been there
- ☐ I have been there once
- ☐ I have been there more than once
- ☐ I have been there many times

Do you have Chinese friends or relatives?

- ☐ I have none
- ☐ I have one or two
- ☐ I have a few
- ☐ I have many

How much do you know about China?

- ☐ I don't know anything
- ☐ I know some things
- ☐ I know a lot
- ☐ I know China very well

The relationship between China and the U.S. is good.

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

I think media coverage in the U.S. about China is positive.

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

Please watch the following TikTok video from content creator @cnliziqi

I enjoyed watching the video.

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

I found the video entertaining.

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

How likely are you to watch a similar video if you came across it?

- ☐ Extremely unlikely
- ☐ Somewhat unlikely
- ☐ Neither likely nor unlikely
- ☐ Somewhat likely
- ☐ Extremely likely

Did you learn something from the video?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes (If so, what?) _____

Please watch the following TikTok video from content creator @karissaeats

I enjoyed watching the video.

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

I found the video entertaining.

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Strongly agree

How likely are you to watch a similar video if you came across it?

- ☐ Extremely unlikely
- ☐ Somewhat unlikely
- ☐ Neither likely nor unlikely
- ☐ Somewhat likely
- ☐ Extremely likely

Did you learn something from the video?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes (If so, what?) _____

What is your age? (in years)

What is your class standing?

- ☐ Freshman
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior
- ☐ Graduate Student
- ☐ Not a Student

Gender: How do you identify?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe _____

What is your political ideology?

- ☐ Republican
- ☐ Close to Republican
- ☐ Independent
- ☐ Close to Democrat
- ☐ Democrat

Which of the following best describes you?

- ☐ Asian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino
- ☐ Native American or Alaskan Native
- ☐ White or Caucasian
- ☐ A race/ethnicity not listed here

APPENDIX B. CODING SHEET

Who is coding this?

- ☐ Cole
- ☐ Other

Link to TikTok Video

Number of Views (in millions)

Number of Likes (in millions)

Number of Comments (leave blank if comments are closed)

Category of Best Fit

- Food & Beverage
- Sport
- Performance Skills
- Gaming
- Fitness & Health
- Fashion & Beauty
- Dance
- Outdoor Activities
- Daily Life
- Pop Culture
- Animation & Fan Culture
- Transportation & Vehicle
- Science & Education
- Professional Life
- Family
- Oddly Satisfying
- Travel
- Animal
- Celebrity Account
- Comedy

Does the video include stereotypes? Chinese people are...

- ☐ Open-minded
- ☐ Honest
- ☐ Polite
- ☐ Non-prejudiced
- ☐ Generous
- ☐ Humble
- ☐ Hardworking
- ☐ Inventive
- ☐ Good Morals
- ☐ Accountable
- ☐ Smart
- ☐ None

Positive about China?

- Positive (some trait about Chinese culture or Chinese people is shown in a positive way as the main point of the video)
- Negative (some trait about Chinese culture or Chinese people is shown in a negative way as the main point of the video)
- Neutral

Language spoken? (enter N/A if no speech)

APPENDIX C. TOP 100 CHINA RELATED TIKTOK VIDEOS

https://www.tiktok.com/@kdramassoft/video/6964263330332560645?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@cn_cover/video/6956757453547572481?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@cookingbomb/video/7007220851493833990?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@kc_dramas/video/6961982209121062149?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@marstruck/video/6945157351540280581?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@gegethejing/video/6908538437201169669?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@huxskiee/video/6966594546452974849?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@a_chinesgirl/video/6969729600477728026?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@phillipqv/video/6930830654779231494?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@iamsuyee/video/6896319466783706373?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@itsdominepth/video/7005564429953666305?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@cookingbomb/video/6995267453844458757?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@chinesecongfu8/video/6979582028207361286?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@xiaomany/video/6784873495252733189?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@ryanhaley/video/6980808200513735942?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@pupufood/video/6960432882548559109?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@kdramassoft/video/6956653699523431686?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@dimsimlim/video/7005191433711865089?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

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https://www.tiktok.com/@yantastic/video/6848606133016431878?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@rainerrs/video/6936902334433758470?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

https://www.tiktok.com/@marstruck/video/6916206114136755462?is_from_webapp=v1&q=Chinese&t=1633830527573

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https://www.tiktok.com/@joseyumbo4/video/6962681348330900741?is_from_webapp=v1&q=China&t=1633830522284

https://www.tiktok.com/@xiaomei2000/video/6958416041475099905?is_from_webapp=v1&q=China&t=1633830522284

https://www.tiktok.com/@nick.digiovanni/video/6880258332699921670?is_from_webapp=v1&q=China&t=1633830522284

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