

Article

Engaging Global Audiences as Social Media Influencers and Supporters of China's Public Diplomacy: A Study of Pro-China Western YouTubers

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Abstract

This exploratory mixed-methods research study examined 27 Western YouTubers who are pro-China with over 644 million views and 4.7 million subscribers in 2024. We analyzed their top 10 videos ($N = 270$) with human coding using both qualitative and quantitative content analysis and most-liked comments on these videos using human-machine collaboration with generative AI and audience metrics, showing how influencer marketing techniques can be used to engage audiences and the potential public diplomacy benefits for China on global social media. This study identified the influencer appeals and content attributes in the videos that YouTubers used to promote China's image and refute the criticisms of China to their Western peers. We found that most videos use Chinese in addition to English, and almost all videos related to China feature at least one China accomplishment icon. Their audiences are mostly a mix of Chinese and Western audiences. These YouTubers' most common appeals are authenticity and homophily. They present a very friendly character and share their daily experiences in China. Content comparing China with the West or refutation of Western criticism was not found more effective in engaging audiences than videos not using these approaches. By speaking up for China, these YouTubers and their followers form a pro-China community on YouTube, offering perspectives different from what they received from Western mainstream media to global audiences.

Keywords: pro-China YouTubers; authenticity; homophily; global communication; country image; content analysis; public diplomacy; social media influencers

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1. Introduction

For the first time, China was rated by 79 out of 100 countries in a 110,000 people global survey as more positive than the United States in 2025 ([Nira Data, 2025](#)). Additionally, an issue article in *The Economist* magazine of May 2025 was titled "How China became cool in the West" ([The Economist, 2025](#)). Such an increase in national image and soft power of China can be partly attributed to social media, especially some popular pro-China YouTubers from around the world who consistently portray China in a positive light. These YouTubers are not celebrities, but they do have many followers on YouTube.

This exploratory research study examined the content strategies and audience engagement of 27 Western YouTubers who are pro-China, totaling over 644 million views and 4.7 million subscribers in 2024. Using qualitative and quantitative content analysis and computational methods, we analyzed their 10 most-viewed videos and the most-liked audience

comments on those videos to examine the communication characteristics of online influencers' content and how they engage audiences. The study explores how these YouTubers present Chinese society and culture to audiences from their personal perspectives, enabling more international audiences to understand China through their lived experiences, and enhancing China's international power and influence. This study advances the public diplomacy scholarship by illustrating how influencer marketing techniques can be used for public diplomacy by their communication with foreign publics to advance state interests (Snow, 2020). This study identified the specific influencer appeals and content attributes in the videos the YouTubers employed in promoting China's image and defending China against Western criticism to their Western peers.

Social media influencers (SMIs) are active content creators on social media and have a large following and subscribers on social media accounts. Using a strategic communication perspective, Enke and Borchers (2019) define SMIs as "third-party actors who have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality to and influence on organizational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web" (p. 261). These influencers, through exhibiting their personal lives via social media platforms (Chae, 2017), are perceived as important peers of the users. On YouTube, pro-China YouTubers are immigrants, sojourners, or travelers in China whose videos are related to their lives in China and actively present a positive image of China.

Unlike past research on influencers which focuses mostly on their persuasiveness in endorsing commercial brands (Ha & Yang, 2023), this study focuses on the influencer techniques used by the pro-China YouTubers that can aid the public diplomacy for China. Specifically, we are interested in how they promote or defend China from a Westerner's perspective and the common attributes of these videos' success in gaining audience views and likes, the composition of their audiences, and reactions to the videos from the comments of the videos.

Although an increasing number of studies have examined YouTube social media influencers and China's national image, their focus has been primarily on specific content and events, such as China's image during COVID-19 (Zhao & Zhao, 2020), Chinese customs and culture as portrayed by Li Ziqi (Whyke et al., 2022), digital public diplomacy through social media as a platform for disseminating video content produced by the Chinese government and state media (e.g., Cho-Li et al., 2025), or the narratives and topics covered by these influencers (Sullivan & Wang, 2024). These studies have not applied social media influencer persuasion theory to explain influencers' overall success in generating audience engagement. Our study contributes to the literature by explaining the popularity of these influencers through the content attributes and appeals they employ, their persuasion techniques, and the resulting audience engagement, while extending social media influencer persuasion theory beyond its commercial marketing applications. In addition, we specifically demonstrate that refutation and comparison as persuasion techniques provide no significant benefits for audience engagement. Further, to the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to examine, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the most popular and visible audience responses to these influencer videos to determine what resonates most strongly with vocal viewers, as reflected in their comments. Methodologically, our study advances human-machine collaboration by demonstrating the feasibility of using AI to code multilingual texts in international communication research.

Several major Western media began to pay attention to Western Pro-China YouTubers in late 2021 when Deutsche Welle, the *New York Times*, and AFP all covered them, saying their videos "alternate between praise of China's rapid development and rebuttals of negative foreign reports about the country" (AFP, 2021). One of these YouTubers, Fernando

Munoz Bernal, a Colombian English teacher in a city in Guangdong province and the creator of the “FerMuBe” YouTube Channel, told AFP and in his video that he was motivated by fear of a conflict between China and the West sparked by what he calls a “disinformation campaign” against Beijing (Bernal, 2021). Moreover, as foreigners living and working in China, these YouTubers may be more inclined to present China positively, given the benefits of having a good relationship with China and avoiding potential professional and personal risks with criticism against China. In addition, influencers may adjust their content topics to receive more benefits, rewards, and incentives, including both monetary and non-monetary forms. Specifically, influencers use their narration and share their personal experiences to influence the audience’s affection toward them, thereby gaining the audience’s viewing time and attention, and even develop a liking for influencers’ images. This helps influencers to expand their exposure and influence and continuously encourage audience interaction, such as liking, sharing and commenting. All of these forms can directly or indirectly generate profits (Libai et al., 2025). A recent experiment confirmed that foreign influencers can increase persuasiveness of authoritarian propaganda, especially for foreign audiences (Liang & McNamee, 2026).

Brockling et al. (2023) studied the degree of overlap of commenters in these videos and found they attracted a new group of audiences not covered by the Chinese state media. They called these pro-China YouTubers as “state endorsers” because they are pro-China and always support the Chinese government’s stance in their videos. Nonetheless, these pro-China influencers declare in their videos and interviews with the press that they do it out of their own will, not receiving payment from the China government (Deutsche Welle, 2021; Today, 2020). So, if they are not directly paid to speak well about China, it is probably not appropriate to call them state endorsers and thus draw an equivalency with brand endorsers in influencer marketing who are compensated by the brands. They may use similar appeals as brand influencers, but it is better just to keep labeling them as pro-China YouTubers. It is beyond the scope of this study to determine how genuine these YouTubers are in their support of China.

The researchers note that there are also Western anti-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) YouTubers such as China Uncensored, SerpentZA, and Matthew Tye (Tye, 2025). However, we are more interested in the pro-China YouTubers and how they defend and promote China while maintaining their success with audiences as social media influencers. There is also a recent published research article on Chinese anti-CCP YouTubers (Qin et al., 2025). Yet there is no published study on the pro-China Western YouTubers who are not part of state Chinese media. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the audience engagement content strategies of independent Western pro-China YouTubers, including their language and subtitle choices, influencer appeals, national image and accomplishment icons in their videos, and audience reactions shown by most popular audience comments as a community. The study thereby fills a gap in the research on the use of influencer marketing techniques by Western content creators on the perception of a country and the benefits to digital public diplomacy.

The first research question that we posed below reflect our three concerns of these pro-China YouTubers: (1) language accommodation, (2) influencer marketing persuasive appeals shown in these videos, and (3) content attributes of the videos related to how China is presented.

RQ1: How do pro-China YouTubers’ videos portray China through language, subtitles, influencer attributes (homophily, authenticity, physical attractiveness, parasocial interaction), and content related to China’s national image?

2. Literature Review

2.1. *China as the Underdog in Soft Power and Use of Public Diplomacy*

China has been suffering from a negative country image as an oppressive regime under the Chinese Communist Party dictatorship, especially in the West (Callahan, 2015). In recent years, China's rapid economic development has not changed how the Western media portrays China's image (Okuda, 2016). After China attained economic success as the second largest economy in the world along with technological advancements, leaders in China would like to rise in the international arena to realize the "China dream" (Liu, 2015). In 2013 President Xi Jinping issued a directive to "tell China's stories well" to improve the national image and narrative of China in other countries (Huang & Wang, 2019). The Chinese government invested heavily in state media such as CGTN and established a presence on all major Western social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, to promote China (Tohill & Ha, 2024). Nonetheless, these efforts are mainly seen as propaganda with little effect, especially when compared with prevalent Western media criticism of China and negative opinion of China in international public opinion surveys (Ma, 2024; Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2022). Duan (2016) contends that "All major events or topics of discussions—be it politics, economics, military and culture—happening around the globe are eventually defined within the news framework of the US media" (p. 267). Indeed, about 90 percent of the international news comes from major Western news agencies such as the Associated Press, Reuters, and Agence France-Presse (AFP).

Public diplomacy has been defined as "a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and cultures, as well as its national goals and current policies" (Tuch, 1990, pp. 3–4). However, who the communicators are in facilitating this process have changed over time. Pro-China YouTubers may be seen as informal communicators whose videos often present China positively, thereby contributing to the broader communication of China's national image. If these YouTubers do it not out of the directions of the government, but based on their own experience and beliefs, they can still be voluntary agents of public diplomacy. As Löffelholz et al. (2014) have pointed out, public diplomacy includes any effort that generates sympathy and understanding for a nation's ideals, goals, (foreign) policies, institutions, culture, and model of society, building positive images and relationships, facilitating closer political ties or alliances, and encouraging tourism and foreign direct investments. All these are beneficial to increase China's national soft power. Soft power refers to the ability to persuade others through values, culture, and policies, rather than through coercion or force. When combined with hard power, soft power forms a comprehensive strategy that enhances a country's overall influence (Nye, 2019). State governments have been utilizing social media and other new technologies (e.g., 5G/6G broadband technology; Green energy) to promote their national brand and government image. A positive national image contributes to enhancing the goodwill and attractiveness of a country. On the contrary, a negative national image reduces the attractiveness and soft power and may lead to country conflicts (Boulding, 1956). Unlike China's state news media with an official mission to speak well for China, Western social media influencers such as the pro-China YouTubers showcase China's soft power from their lived experience in China.

2.2. *Communication Accommodation Theory: Language Choice*

Communication accommodation theory (CAT) examines how individuals adjust their communication styles in different social interactions. The theory suggests that people modify their tone, gestures, and overall communication strategies based on their interaction partners to reduce social distance, making interactions smoother, and considering others'

needs and preferences (Elhami et al., 2024). Language choice reflects the target audience type of these YouTubers. As the Western Pro-China YouTubers are all foreigners to Chinese, when their videos are uploaded on YouTube, they can choose to have English as the oral language, with either Chinese or English subtitles or both. Although it is evident that more languages and subtitles will increase viewership, the language use of Pro-China YouTubers' video content and how it relates to the type of audiences they get is not yet known. For example, videos with Chinese subtitles can attract Chinese viewers. Therefore, this study will first explore the language and subtitles presented in their videos as the language use affects the type of audience they may attract.

2.3. Influencer Appeals Based on Influencer Marketing Persuasion Theory

2.3.1. Homophily

The influencer marketing research literature has identified several influencer appeals that make them so persuasive to users (Ha & Yang, 2023). The first is homophily. Homophily refers to the tendency of users to form connections with others who share similar characteristics, rather than with those who are different, within a social system (Malinen & Koivula, 2020). Users identify the influencers as their peers with similar perspectives or backgrounds. Such perceived similarity of influencers by the followers increases their trust in and relatedness to them (Shoenberger & Kim, 2022). Social homophily in online networks is fundamentally driven by audience self-selection based on their own emotional tendencies, whereby users with similar emotional dispositions are more likely to consistently follow the same creators, thereby forming stability at the level of specific influencers or channels (Rosenbusch et al., 2019). These Western pro-China influencers enjoy the advantage of homophily to gain the trust of Western audiences in terms and narratives that they can understand and resonate with. Indeed, a large-scale experiment of 4800 people by Liang and McNamee (2026) demonstrated that American influencers have the strongest influence on Americans in terms of pro-China content, rather than Chinese influencers.

2.3.2. Authenticity

One key attraction of influencers is their perceived authenticity with their personalized and lived experience stories. Hopwood et al. (2021) argue that realness is a core feature of authenticity and can include both negatives and positives. In influencer marketing videos, realness can be achieved through the revealing of the creators personal life, the homemade feel of the video, and an amateurism that can enhance the perception of realness. Authenticity is a key factor for maintaining long-term relationships with influencers and followers. It strengthens the relationship, helping to build trust, loyalty, and even commitment on both sides (Coco & Eckert, 2020).

2.3.3. Physical Attractiveness and Parasocial Interactions

Third, based on the celebrity endorser literature, the physical attractiveness of the influencer (Ohanian, 1990) and the parasocial interactions of the influencers with their followers (Lou, 2021) are also what made them a highly persuasive source.

2.4. China's National Image in Pro-China YouTube Videos

National image includes people's overall impression of a country. It holds an important role in policy decisions, economic interests, national identity, and international power. Studies have shown that national image not only affects how the public views a country, but also influences consumer buying habits, travel decisions, and cross-cultural communication (Nes, 2018). Specifically, national image is connected to a country's political, economic, and technological aspects (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). National image is an abstract concept because symbols, historical figures, and other elements can help attract people's attention.

With the rise of the internet, foreign social media influencers let their followers learn about different countries by showing videos of those places and sharing their opinions, and these videos can also encourage followers to search for more information about the destinations (Lorgeoux & Divakaran, 2023).

One way to examine how these pro-China YouTubers promote China's national image is to analyze the type of image about China they present to the audience. He et al. (2019) conducted a content analysis of answers to users' questions related to China on Quora, one of the most popular English-language social Q&A platforms, to examine the image of China in the answers. Most responses to the users' questions were about the positive national image of China. Cho-Li et al.'s (2025) thematic analysis of the 140 YouTube videos of foreign content creators selected by China state media found the China narratives to be "a tapestry of tradition and modernity," "a target of Western media bias," "a champion of pandemic management," "an effective governance model," and "a promoter of global cooperation."

In our study, we analyzed pro-China YouTubers' most popular videos in terms of the macro-country destination image and micro-country destination image based on Zhang et al.'s (2015) typology. Specifically, we examined, in their most popular videos, how these pro-China YouTubers present China to their Western peers and the global audience. This approach is particularly useful to our study as these pro-China Western YouTubers are mostly travelers and sojourners in China whose perspectives are as visitors and tourists. Tourism research typically sees country image promotion as a destination for visit through attractions in the country. Macro factors, such as political stability, economic development, modernization and high technology, and rich cultural heritage, and micro factors, including natural landscapes, safety, and transportation convenience, are all identified as influencing a country's image and travel destination choice. In addition, as China boasts its economic development, it has developed some accomplishment icons commonly found in its official propaganda, such as poverty reduction, 5G, high-speed trains, green energy, etc. The pro-China YouTubers might be highlighting these specific achievements in praise of China's success.

Additionally, as pro-China YouTubers are working in an unfavorable climate to China in the Western media, they may need to provide perspectives from their Western experience and contrast that experience with their experience of China in order to show China's superiority or success. The tough Western criticism of China also places these influencers in a defensive position, and they need to refute those criticisms of China. Hence, we also want to know how often these popular videos of the influencers refute Western criticism of China, compare China with other countries, and whether such strategies engage audiences. This leads to our RQ2 in examining the effectiveness of these strategies in presenting China to the global audiences:

RQ2: How much do audiences engage in pro-China YouTubers' construction of China's national image through comparisons and rebuttals of Western criticism?

2.5. Type of Audiences and Audiences' Responses to the Videos

Furthermore, to understand the audience of these videos—specifically, whether the viewers are Chinese—and identify which audience responses resonate most with other viewers, we examined the language and topics of the comments posted on the videos.

RQ3: What comment topic is the most common among the most-liked comments and which topic has the highest number of likes in the top videos?

3. Methods

This mixed-methods research study includes a quantitative content analysis of the top 10 most viewed videos and the most liked comments of each of the selected pro-China

YouTubers and a qualitative analysis of some of these videos in conjunction with our desk research of the background of selected pro-China YouTubers. We also experimented with using generative AI to identify categories in the user comments.

To compile the list of pro-China YouTubers, the authors consulted prior research on the topic, such as Brockling et al.'s (2023) list of China State Endorsers, list of Pro-China and Anti-China Influencers of Reddit (rChina, 2021), articles in the *New York Times* (Mozur et al., 2021), Western news agencies such as Deutsche Welle (2021) and AFP (2021) and based on the researchers' knowledge. To qualify as pro-China Western YouTubers/social media influencers in our study, the YouTubers must have (1) regular postings on YouTube with at least an average of one video a month; (2) the most viewed videos must have at least 100,000 views (we did not just use the number of subscribers because many of these YouTubers have less than 100,000 subscribers but have more than 100,000 views and 100,000 views can be deemed as having high reach to generate impact); (3) these YouTubers must not be of Chinese origin; (4) their postings about China must be consistently positive; and (5) the YouTubers must either be individuals or couples, and not groups, with their own individual personal style and brand identity. Based on these criteria, 27 pro-China Western YouTubers were selected by the two researchers (See Table 1 with channel name, URL, number of videos and views, year started on YouTube). We used this purposive sample of the most popular pro-China YouTubers to understand their popularity because they are more likely to generate meaningful audience impact. Their consistent positive coverage of China contributes to cumulative audience effects, rather than a one-time exposure, making them well-suited for examining the application of influencer marketing theory in this context.

After identifying these YouTubers, we first conducted desk research to learn about their background and presence in other Chinese social media platforms. The sources we used to collect the background information of these YouTubers and their channels include socialblade.com, Qidvid.com, YouTube channel description, and online searches using their names.

Then we conducted a content analysis of a purposive sample of the top ten most viewed videos of each of these YouTubers to analyze the attributes of their success in gaining viewership and likes. Choosing these top videos allows us to understand what factors attract viewership and likes for these videos. Python (version 2024) scripts were developed to interface with the YouTube API to facilitate communication and retrieve targeted data on video metrics such as views and likes. A team of eight graduate students and two faculty coders in an international studies university in China who are familiar with China and have high English skills were trained to code the 270 videos (10 videos $\times$ 27 channels). After several practicing sessions achieving consensus, coders independently coded the videos following the coding scheme. Coder reliability was assessed through 10% double coding of a random sample of the videos by the first author. An average of 72% percent coder agreement was attained for all of the variables. For some variables that are easy to objectively count, such as language use, we achieved a perfect 100% agreement. However, for some other multiple response variables such as presence of accomplishment icons, which has 15 categories, and macro and micro national images, which have 14 and 12 categories, respectively, some items were more easily identified than others, have a lower percent agreement on those items. The influencer appeal variables percent agreement was 88%, but the Krippendorff Alpha was only 0.67. The percent agreement of comparison with the West was 92% and refutation of Western criticism was 96%, Hence the researchers decided that the key variables for their research questions were of high reliability to be used for the study. We caution readers that those accomplishment icons and national images may be over or under-counted due to the lower percent of coder agreement.

Table 1. Profile of pro-China YouTubers and YouTube channels selected in this study.

YouTube Channel	Influencer Gender	Channel Total Views	YouTube Registration Date	# Subscriber	#Video Posted	Nationality
1. Barrett	Male	48,605,648	6 May 2019	371K	546	UK
2. Barrie V	Male	784,490	5 October 2020	19.3K	188	UK
3. Cyrus Janssen	Male	82,028,559	16 November 2006	538K	377	US
4. Daniel Dumbrill	Male	13,033,051	9 September 2013	167K	254	Canada
5. FerMuBe	Male	2,837,098	6 January 2015	34.2K	628	Columbia
6. Gweilo 60	Male	17,451,188	4 June 2017	100K	772	Canada
7. HazzaChin aVlogs	Male	1,677,626	17 September 2020	26.5K	82	Australia
8. JERRY GOODE	Male	4,756,341	18 January 2017	46K	267	Dual Nat. UK and South Africa
9. Living in China	Male	49,273,386	6 June 2007	424K	259	UK
10. livinlavidaluke	Male	871,545	27 December 2017	16.6K	77	UK
11. Luca&Rachele 路卡和瑞丽	Couple (Woman is Italian, and man is Chinese)	25,123,585	21 September 2014	140K	260	Italy
12. Nathan Rich 火锅大王	Male	36,617,051	2 January 2015	498K	228	US
13. Noel Lee	Male	919,612	26 March 2021	15K	172	Singapore
14. Nuance	Male	715,993	20 January 2021	14K	65	US
15. Rafa Goes Around!	Male	7,322,148	21 December 2010	61K	332	US
16. The China Traveler	Male	15,820,003	11 November 2014	138K	632	UK
17. the JaYoe Nation	Male	25,357,371	28 February 2012	123K	1888	US
18. 杰里德 Jared	Male	46,638,437	29 January 2010	361K	236	Canada
19. Reports on China	Male	5,585,490	20 August 2006	62.4K	248	New Zealand
20. Numuves	Male	15,321,154	10 October 2010	83.7K	381	Canada
21. Fel Thommy	Male	33,209,024	16 November 2013	184K	272	US
22. Because I'm Lizzy	Female	1,654,216	23 June 2015	20.6K	59	South Africa
23. Adventure with Alan & Shannon	Couple	943,711	26 June 2020	17.2K	136	Scotland/UK
24. Blondie in China	Female	57,709,248	24 August 2017	391K	349	Australia
25. Thomas 阿福	Male	133,863,898	1 April 2016	675K	432	Germany
26. Willene Business & Lifestyle	Male	4,323,744	2 August 2022	33.4K	278	US
27. Reporterfy Media & Travel	Male	28,476,444	17 May 2017	194K	295	UK

Sources: 1. Boost your views and subscribers on YouTube—vidIQ. (n.d.). <https://vidiq.com/>; 2. YouTube, Twitch, Twitter, & Instagram statistics—socialblade.com. (n.d.). <https://socialblade.co>. Data as of 1 December 2024.

A quantitative content analysis was conducted on the 250 most-liked comments of YouTube videos, which excluded comments on videos not related to China. The unit of analysis was the individual comment. We decided to try a human-machine (AI) collaboration approach by reviewing the 11 categories suggested by ChatGPT, then asking ChatGPT to refine the categories with a mutually exclusive scheme based on the dominant theme or communicative function shown in the comments, so as to establish its own codebook and code the comments based on the codebook. Using the revised 10-category coding scheme, each comment was assigned one mutually exclusive category based on its dominant theme

or communicative function. The categories captured commenters' (1) positive evaluations of China, (2) criticism of Western media, (3) personal experience, (4) support for the influencer, (5) China–West comparisons, (6) development and infrastructure, (7) governance and foreign policy, (8) questions and information sharing, (9) off-topic comments, and (10) criticism of China or the influencer.

Then, the first author first checked for appropriateness of the AI's coding. The second author double coded 20% randomly chosen viewer comments based on the codebook and computed the intercoder reliability between human and AI coders. The intercoder reliability is high (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.93$, Cohen's Kappa = 0.93, inter-coder agreement: 94%) showing the success of this human–AI collaboration in coding the comments. The codebook and the representative verbatim example comment representing each comment category can be found in Appendix A.

For this paper, the researchers experimented with using ChatGPT 3.5 as a tool to analyze the video comments because of its ability to summarize and synthesize text content. Prior studies found generative AI such as ChatGPT useful for thematic analysis, especially for short texts (e.g., De Paoli, 2023). We ultimately decided to use ChatGPT 3.5 instead of other later versions (such as ChatGPT 4.0 or 5.0), because we have found evidence that newer versions tend to overthink content, which in turn reduces accuracy (Fan et al., 2024; Peters & Chin-Yee, 2025). As a result, newer versions often perform worse than earlier models in terms of summarization accuracy. To reduce this risk and ensure reliability, we decided to continue using ChatGPT 3.5.

4. Measures

4.1. Language Used in the Videos

In analyzing the languages of the videos, we examined the use of English and Chinese language in oral narration and subtitles with 10 combinations, such as English only without subtitles, Chinese only without subtitles, English with Chinese subtitles, and one “other” type of combination which is the use of non-English language and either Chinese or English.

4.2. Video Format

Four video formats were identified: (1) vlog (single person narration, perspective), (2) interviews of other people, (3) multiple hosts, and (4) others, such as a collection of Douyin (TikTok in China) video clips.

4.3. The Positive Character of Influencer

Influencers usually present their personality as likable in the videos. Six positive characters were identified, and the personality reflected in the video was coded based on the past results of Alcosero and Gomez (2022), Masuda et al. (2021), and Kim and Read (2020): (1) friendly: defined as the YouTuber creating a relaxed and friendly atmosphere; (2) polite: showing positive politeness strategies of concern and complimenting, to let audiences feel closer; (3) trustworthy: videos provide reliable and dependable information; (4) competent and knowledgeable: the influencers have spent a lot of time in preparing the video including research and camera/editing work; (5) funny: humorous, comical, causing laughter; and (6) sarcastic: mocking other people and being critical of others.

4.4. Influencer Appeal

Based on a review of influencer marketing literature on the appeal of influencers (Ha & Yang, 2023), we examined the presence of the following appeals in the videos.

- Homophily: defined as self-experience testimonials emphasizing the YouTuber as a fellow foreigner showing audience any aspect of their life within China.

- Authenticity: defined as being self-revelatory, such as sharing personal life, live demonstration, sound bites, street interviews, and documentation that reflect a realness.
- Physical attractiveness: the YouTuber's physical traits that are considered aesthetically pleasing such as youthfulness, even teeth, facial symmetry, etc.
- Parasocial relationship with viewers: lots of interaction with the audience, addressing the audience as "YOU," responding to viewer comments, etc.

4.5. Macro and Micro Destination Country Image Attributes

Based on Zhang et al.'s (2015) macro and micro destination country image attributes, we examined the presence of the macro destination country image factors in these pro-China YouTuber videos.

4.6. Use of China Accomplishment Icons

As China has been aggressively self-promoting its accomplishments to its people and the world, the research team identified the 15 most commonly used accomplishment icons by the Chinese government and examined if they were mentioned in popular pro-China videos. These accomplishments include the Belt Road Initiative success/project completion, 5G/6G broadband technology, high-speed trains, solar/green energy, electric cars and batteries, economic growth, etc.

4.7. Comparison with the Western Countries

One way to demonstrate the success or superiority of China is to compare it with the West. We examined if the videos mention or contain a comparison with the Western countries showing that China is better than these countries.

4.8. Refutation of Western Criticism

China has always been accused of being evil or oppressive in mainstream Western media. We examined whether the videos helped defend China by refuting the criticism of the West with evidence. If the content of the video involved the refutation of Western media criticism of China, or if video titles pointed out that the video is a refutation of Western media with titles such as "expose lies in the *New York Times*," then the video was considered a "refutation of Western criticism."

4.9. Language of Comments

The language of the comments was used as a proxy of the audience composition as we could not identify the nationality of the commenters via the user profile. We have only English, mostly English, an almost equal proportion of Chinese and English, mostly Chinese, and Chinese only as five language categories in the comments. If the comments are mostly in Chinese, then the audience of the videos is presumably mostly Chinese people who are either overseas Chinese or are in the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, or Taiwan because it is very unlikely that a non-Chinese user will write comments in Chinese on YouTube.

4.10. Audience Engagement

The interactive engagement of digital consumers on social platforms refers to their likes, comments, and sharing of video content (Gavilanes et al., 2018). For YouTube, only likes, comments, and views metrics are available to the public. Hence these metrics were used as dependent variables by which to compare the audience engagement through the language used in the videos, through the presentation of China either as a refutation of Western criticism or as a comparison with Western countries, and through comment topics.

5. Results

5.1. Profile of the Pro-China Influencers

Most of the pro-China YouTubers are males. Overall, the 27 influencers consisted of 23 males, two females (Because I'm Lizzy, Blondie in China), and two pro-YouTuber channels run by couples (Luca & Rachele 路卡和瑞丽, Adventure with Alan & Shannon).

Pro-China influencers all have connections with China, which we classified into three categories: sojourners, travelers, and immigrants. We define sojourners as those who have resided continuously in China for more than one year. Those who have a Chinese spouse or if their children have a Chinese nationality were counted as immigrants. Those who stayed in China for a short period without working or studying there were counted as travelers. Based on these criteria, most pro-China YouTubers are sojourners. A total of 17 influencers of the 27 (63%) were classified as sojourners who have lived and worked in China for a long period. Travelers are the distant second largest group: Numuves was born in Canada; Fel Thommy (高飞) comes from the United States; Adventure with Alan & Shannon (Alan and Shannon) are two Scots; Blondie in China (Amy) comes from Australia, and Reporterfy Media & Travel (Alex), was born in the United Kingdom. Noel Lee is a Singaporean.

The remaining five influencers were classified as immigrants: Jerry Goode (dual nationality of the UK and South Africa) was classified in this manner because, according to his statement on Douyin, his two children have Chinese nationality. As for Luca and Rachele 路卡和瑞丽. Rachele was born in Italy, and her husband is Chinese. Thomas 阿福 is German, and his ex-wife is Chinese. Gweilo60 comes from Canada. His wife is Chinese as well. JaYoe was born in the United States, and he has a Chinese wife. Cyrus Janssen is the only sojourner whose wife is Chinese but stays in the U.S. and owns a consultancy on China and lives in China sometimes.

5.2. Quantitative Content Analysis

The 27 pro-China YouTubers had a mean of 183,846 subscribers and the 270 videos we analyzed had a mean of 613,282 views and 25,657 likes. According to the video classification of each influencer by vidIQ, the result shows that personal lifestyle takes up the largest percentage, with 32.1%. News and politics accounted for 10.7 percent. Among the 270 top videos we analyzed, 20 videos are not directly related to China, such as travel vlogs of other countries and coverage of other international issues such as the Israeli–Hammas conflicts. The mean length of the videos is 16 min ($SD = 18.53$). Shorter videos are more likely to have higher views ($r = -0.161, p < 0.01$). However, video length does not affect the number of its likes (n.s.).

5.3. Language and Video Format

In the content analysis, the Chinese and English combinations (oral in English, Chinese + English subtitles; oral in Chinese, English + Chinese subtitles; oral in English, Chinese subtitles only; oral in Chinese, English subtitles only) occupy a total of 52.2% of all the videos. “English only” was the second most frequent type of language used among the 270 top videos, accounting for 45.6% of the total. Chinese-only videos were only 4.1% (See Table 2). In terms of viewership, the Chinese and English combination achieved a higher average viewership than English- or Chinese-only videos. It should be noted that the deviation is large, so the viewership varied by videos. The six videos with oral Chinese and English subtitles have the highest mean viewership.

The most common video format is the vlog using the influencer's perspective which accounted for 68.1 percent of the total. The format of interviews with others accounted for 11.9% percent, and the multi-host interview format accounted for only 3.3 percent. Interestingly, other forms of videos accounted for 16.7%, such as TikTok video collection compilations, videos with background music only, and a combination of vlogs and street interviews.

Table 2. Language use in pro-China YouTuber videos.

The Language of the Video	Frequency (%)	Mean Views (SD)
English only	123 (45.6)	400,216 (627,431)
Oral in English, Chinese + English subtitles	51 (18.9)	331,694 (411,289)
Oral in Chinese, English + Chinese subtitles	18 (6.7)	1,399,213 (1,165,410)
Chinese only	11 (4.1)	434,265 (115,290)
Mostly English, some Chinese only	12 (4.4)	581,807 (779,630)
Mostly Chinese, some English only	2 (0.7)	2,847,757 (797,134)
No language use (no voice-over narration)	2 (0.7)	105,250 (77,210)
Oral in English, Chinese subtitles only, no English subtitles	22 (8.1)	693,654 (385,828)
Oral in Chinese, English subtitles only	6 (2.2)	6,238,246 (385,828)
Oral in both English and Chinese depending on who is talking and both Chinese and English subtitles	19 (7.0)	891,304 (663,223)
Chinese, English, and Italian, oral in Chinese, Chinese and English and Italian subtitles	4 (1.5)	413,870 (39,822)
Total	270	100

5.4. Influencer Persuasive Appeals

We then examined the presence of common influencer appeals based on the influencer marketing literature. Authenticity is most dominant with 81.5% of videos showing this appeal. Homophily is the second most common appeal of the influencers (75.9%). Physical attractiveness (27%) and parasocial relationships with audience development (25.2%) were much less commonly found.

In terms of character/personality appeal, the most common character of the influencer displayed in these videos is friendly (54.1%), followed by trustworthy (48.9%) and knowledgeable (45.9%). Polite (34.8%), competent (24.4%), and funny (18.1%) are less commonly found characteristics displayed in the videos but still have considerable presence.

5.5. Macro and Micro Country Images

The analysis of China's macro national image attributes in the 270 videos shows that modernization and high technology (31.5%), the friendliness of Chinese people (27%), and Chinese economic development (25.2%) were the most common attributes. Other macro factors such as Chinese people are polite (16.3%), political stability (15.9%), a rich cultural heritage (13.3%), and Chinese people are hardworking (12.2%) and helpful (12.2%), were also found in the videos.

In analyzing China's micro national image attributes in the videos, China has good service facilities (22.2%), China is a safe country (18.5%), convenient transportation (16.3%), unique historical culture (13.7%), China has a variety of food (15.2%), and hospitality to foreigners (10.7%) were the most commonly found micro national image attributes with 40 videos or more having one or more of these attributes. Almost every video except one features at least one or more of the destination image factors (Table 3).

When analyzing China's accomplishment icons in the video, we found that economic growth was the most featured China accomplishment icon ($n = 51$, 25.1%). Good infrastructure (such as bridges, major highways, and so on) was also one of the significant icons ($n = 43$, 15.9%). In addition, the Chinese icons of high-speed trains ($n = 27$, 10.0%), mobile payment ($n = 25$, 9.3%), environmental protection ($n = 21$, 7.8%), and other technological achievements ($n = 20$, 7.4%) were also common ones found. However, artificial intelligence, space tech-

nology, and anti-corruption were not quite commonly mentioned as China accomplishment icons in the videos, appearing at a relatively low frequency in the videos ($n < 10$).

Table 3. Macro and micro destination national image factors in top videos.

Macro Destination National Image	Frequency	Percent
Modernization and high technology	85	31.5
Chinese people are friendly	73	27
Economic development	68	25.2
Chinese people are polite	44	16.3
Political Stability	43	15.9
Chinese people are hardworking	33	12.2
Rich cultural heritage	36	13.3
Chinese people are helpful	33	12.2
Chinese people are trustworthy	23	8.5
Chinese people are honest.	14	5.2
Chinese have a high education level	9	3.3
Other	52	19.3
Micro Destination National Image	Frequency	Percent
Good service facility	60	22.2
Safety	50	18.5
Convenient transportation	44	16.3
A variety of food	41	15.2
A variety of ethnic cultures	38	14.1
Unique historical culture	37	13.7
Suitable accommodation/hospitality of people to foreigners	29	10.7
Various natural landscapes	32	11.9
Various outdoor activities	21	7.8
Other	59	21.9

5.6. Approaches to Present China and Audience Engagement

Refutation of Western criticism and comparing China and the West were quite commonly used in these most popular pro-China videos. About 44% of all the videos we analyzed either employed a refutation approach, blaming Western media bias or comparing the West and China. As shown in Table 4, there are a wide range of audience engagements with high standard deviations in these videos.

Table 4. Audience engagement metrics of videos that criticize Western media and compare with other countries.

Refute Western (Media) Criticism of China?		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Number of views *	Yes	111	374,465.95	588,398
	No	139	748,505.76	1,554,595
Number of likes/ Thumbs ups	Yes	111	14,607.48	23,483
	No	139	34,227.21	220,784
Is China compared with the West?				
Number of views	Yes	109	567,238.68	689,184
	No	141	594,177.35	1,532,714
Number of likes/ Thumbs ups	Yes	109	41,141.28	247,214
	No	141	13,436.96	34,198

Note: * $p < 0.01$. Excluded non-applicable videos not about China. Weighted views and likes by followers did not change the result.

5.7. Relationship Between Language and Presentation Approach on Audience Engagement

Independent t-tests were conducted to examine the differences in audience engagement between the videos with different language use and content attributes. Videos using a combination of English and Chinese have significantly higher views than videos with English only ($t = 2.081$, $df = 198$, $p = 0.039$).

Videos refuting Western media criticism of China have lower views and likes than those that do not refute Western criticism of China. As shown in Table 4, videos that do not refute Western criticism have statistically significant higher views ($M = 748,505.76$) than videos that refute Western criticism ($M = 374,465.95$), ($t = 2.401$, $df = 248$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, videos that refute Western criticism have lower likes ($M = 14,607.48$) than videos not refuting Western criticism ($M = 34,227.21$), although the difference is not statistically significant due to the wide range (SD) of likes among those non-refuting videos ($t = -0.932$, $df = 248$, $p = 0.35$).

When analyzing whether the videos comparing China with the West have higher or lower viewership than those that did not compare with the West and China, there is no statistically significant difference ($t = -0.171$, $df = 248$, $p = 0.185$) in the number of views. Ironically, videos that contain content not related to China by these pro-China YouTubers have the highest number of views ($M = 998,902$, $SD = 754,639.6$). However, in terms of likes, videos that compare the West with China have a higher mean number of likes ($M = 41,141$, $SD = 247,214$) than those that do not compare the West with China ($M = 13,436.96$, $SD = 34,198$), though, due to the high standard deviations, the difference is not statistically significant ($t = 1.315$, $df = 248$, $p = 0.19$).

5.8. Qualitative Analysis: Video Content Strategy Examples

To illustrate how both refutation of Western criticism and comparison between China and the West approaches work in terms of engaging audiences, we selected the highest viewed video with a large amount of likes and comments (high audience engagement) for each approach, as well as its most liked comment, for qualitative analysis.

One successful comparison video is Jason Lightfoot's video (Living in China channel) titled, "America CAN'T Compete with China's Infrastructure!" which has over 3.1 million views and 48,843 likes. Jason introduces the interior of a subway in Shenzhen, showing there is a charging station on the subway, and that the subway train is driverless. He says that "the subway is like a spaceship and like the magical scene of a Star Wars movie." He makes a persuasive case for China's subway system being very advanced by comparing China with other Western subway systems. His viewpoint also resonated with the audience. A person left a comment: "I visited China in 2018 and I was blown away, not only by the infrastructure but also by the hospitality, and [the] love shown to me by the people." The comment received over 2000 likes.

An example of how refutation is being used is Willene Business & Lifestyle's (Willene) most popular video, which has received 900,000 views. In that video, he clarifies the Western media's misunderstandings of China from the perspective of a foreigner who has lived in China for several years, showing the audience the "real side" of the country. He describes China as "a safe and free place" and stresses that "people should not let the world influence their thinking." Additionally, he randomly asked residents, all of whom expressed their love for China and had no plan to leave. This is in response to many Western news media reports that Chinese people want to leave China. Below the video, several commenters shared their thoughts. The most-liked comment said: "You do not judge China until you visit it for yourself, and you have to see it to believe it." That positive comment received over 1000 likes.

5.9. Video Audience Analysis: Language Used in Comments

To gauge the origin of the people who actively watch these videos and post their comments, coders browsed the comments and determined the language used in the comments. According to the analysis, most of the comments have a mix of languages in English and Chinese indicating that most of these videos have both Chinese and English-speaking audiences. The comments of 66% of videos were mostly in English mixed with a few Chinese comments, and only 16% videos had comments in English only (i.e., no Chinese-speaking audience). Additionally, 11% of videos had mostly Chinese comments. There were even seven videos that had only Chinese comments because influencer Thomas 阿福's videos are almost all in Chinese.

5.10. Topics and Examples in the Most-liked Video Comments

Of the 10 different topics identified in the most-liked comments, two topics: safety/quality of living (N = 51), thankfulness for speaking up for China/thanks to this influencer's video (N = 45) took up the largest percentages, per Table 5. Off-topic and topics unrelated to China received the highest average number of likes (but very large standard deviation) because of humor that easily resonates with audiences, such as "Do you want to learn Chinese? Me before this video: No. Me after this video: No3," which is one of the most top-liked comments, with the highest likes among all of the 250 videos analyzed. Comments containing positive evaluations of China and Chinese people received the second highest average likes. For the governance and quality of life topic, the most liked comment receiving the highest amount of likes (7224 likes) in the category is "The problem is that the US claims to be fighting for democracy; but acting like a global dictator in practice." For the category of the appreciation for the video/support of the influencer, the most-liked comment with 54,300 likes was, "Just wanna let you know, he is better than you at your own language, Literally my dad," which is in response to the video of Fel Thommy titled, "CHINESE FATHER TELLS HIS CHILD THIS BECAUSE OF A BLACKMAN." This is in reference to Thommy, a black American creator that speaks Chinese and who was greatly appreciated by a Chinese father, who told his children to learn from him.

Table 5. Comparison of most-liked comment topics by number of likes.

Comment Topic		N	Mean	SD
1.	Positive evaluation of China and Chinese people	25	4887.36	11,744.48
2.	Criticism of Western media and the West	25	1052.96	2707.97
3.	Personal experience in China	28	1453.28	2689.13
4.	Support for the influencer/appreciation for the video	49	2021.86	6252.17
5.	Comparison between China and the West	18	1894.06	2656.97
6.	China's development and infrastructure	10	1101.20	749.35
7.	Governance, safety, quality of life and foreign policy	51	1398.75	1720.71
8.	Questions or information sharing	12	389.00	465.63
9.	Off-topic/Non-China related	25	6520.40	15,746.44
10.	Criticism of China or the influencer	7	798.71	1132.08
Total		250	2311.92	7109.48

Note: Most-liked comments from the 20 non-China related videos were excluded in this analysis.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This study set out to explore the communication strategies of Western pro-China influencers and their audience engagement metrics. The results advance digital public diplomacy scholarship by showing that the emergence of popular Western pro-China influencers has shifted the field's focus from traditional state-led digital public diplomacy

toward the role of non-state actors (NSAs) as suggested by [Cho-Li et al. \(2025\)](#) and interaction between influencers and audiences. As peers of their Western audiences, these influencers document their authentic lives and travel experiences and present China through their own lens. Our study also demonstrates the utility of social media influencer persuasion theory in explaining their success. By identifying the attitudes and interests of the more vocal viewers of these videos and the audience reactions that resonate the most with other viewers, which are overwhelmingly supportive of China, this study reveals the formation of pro-China communities online.

This study of pro-China YouTubers found a much higher presence of authenticity and homophily appeals over other influencer attributes such as attractiveness and parasocial interaction with audiences. As many influencers come from Western countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, they can easily use their experience in their home countries to compare with what they experienced in China, giving the Western audience a peer (homophily) and an authentic perspective. However, this study shows that the videos do not have solely Western audiences. More than half of the videos are dual language with English and some combinations of Chinese to attract not only Western audiences but also the Chinese diaspora. The audience's comments are also mostly a combination of English and Chinese language which correspond to the mixed language use in the videos. As China is the largest emigrant country in the world with 46 million overseas Chinese ([Academy of Cultural Diplomacy, n.d.](#)), the Chinese diaspora is an important market for these pro-China influencers. It is understandable that most of these YouTubers would want to accommodate them as per the communication accommodation theory, and their mixed language use strategy is successful in gaining Chinese audiences.

Parasocial relationship and physical attractiveness as influencer appeals are much less common for these pro-China videos. Past literature on authenticity indicates that authenticity is essential to building the credibility of influencers and the trust of consumers. As these YouTubers have a mission to promote and defend China from criticism, they need to show their authenticity through their lived experience or interviews of Chinese people. Hence, it is no surprise that friendliness, trustworthiness, and knowledge are the common likable characteristics we found in these influencers' videos as they present their China experience.

The common presence of macro and micro destination national image factors in these videos is positive publicity for China so as to make it a destination of choice for foreigners. Macro factors, such as China's economic development and Chinese people's friendly attitude towards foreigners, and micro factors, such as good service facilities, are all conducive to attracting visitors abroad. Chinese accomplishment icons such as highways, bridges, high-speed trains, and mobile payments were the most featured in the videos, showing that pro-China YouTubers find these icons to be attractive to foreign audiences. It should be noted that these YouTubers often include the disclaimer that "China is not perfect." China is often presented as victimized by the domination of Western media criticism and is misunderstood by the West, as almost half of their most popular China-related videos use the strategy of refuting Western criticism.

It is noteworthy that, as supporters of China's public diplomacy, these pro-China YouTubers' approach of refuting Western criticism of China and comparing China to the West seem to be ineffective in boosting their videos' reach, as the number of views and likes of these types of videos are lower than those that do not use these strategies. This finding has important implications on public diplomacy strategies on social media in creating favorable images of a country such as China. Refutation may not be the most effective approach. The audience may not be very receptive to a combative refutation style blaming Western media. However, there are certain exceptions, such as a few videos that have high engagement while using a refutation style as shown in our qualitative analysis of

Willene Business & Lifestyle's video showing that Chinese people do not want to leave China, refuting Western media. However, and overall, the audience metrics data seem to indicate that audiences generally prefer watching YouTubers who show their authentic daily experience in China or other novelties found in China over refutation-style videos or a direct comparison between China and other Western countries. Nonetheless, the considerable presence of the refutation and comparative approaches of these popular videos means they are still important presentation strategies and that viewership is still healthy when using these approaches.

Through this study, we found that popular pro-China YouTubers' positive promotion of China's national image can help foreigners who are not familiar with China to appreciate China through video content that uses a foreigner's perspective. With their high views and positive testimonies, these influencers play an important role in supporting the public diplomacy of China. By analyzing the content attributes, language, and characteristics of influencers, we reveal the recipe by which these YouTubers attract audiences through influencer marketing persuasion techniques: They present themselves with likable characteristics such as being friendly and honest, boast one or more of the Chinese accomplishment icons, and present one or more macro and micro favorable national image factor for China. They play up their homophily and authenticity with their target audience—people not from China but interested in knowing about China and helping Western audiences discover the “real” China. Therefore, this study contributes to how China is presented positively from a non-Chinese perspective and examines the content and interactions of Western YouTubers with their audiences in the comment section, offering a new perspective on these social influencers' role in digital public diplomacy.

Our comment analysis result shows that almost all of the most “liked” comments of the videos are positive about China, which lead us to believe that most of these videos' vocal viewers are probably also pro-China. Only two percent of these comments are negative toward China or the YouTuber. Although we recognize most-liked comments do not represent all audiences, these comments are highly visible to the viewers and reflect opinions supported by other vocal viewers. Hence, we may conclude that these pro-China YouTubers have formed a community of their echo chamber reinforcing their support of China. Most of the most popular comments were supportive of the positive content of China in the video as quality of life and appreciating the influencer's speaking up for China were the two most common comment topics. Nevertheless, the fact that there was a very small presence of most-liked comments that were anti-China shows that some people who are critical of China also watch the videos and let their opposing views known. Their comments have won some supporters and have become the most-liked comment of the relevant video. However, these negative comments received the second lowest likes when compared with other positive comments.

These popular YouTubers, as content creators, strive to maintain audience interest in their content. Their videos are each presented as a genuine sharing of their lived experiences in or opinions about China. Nonetheless, these videos do have public diplomacy benefits to China, as they attempt to generate sympathy and understanding for China's nation's ideals, goals, (foreign) policies, institutions, culture, and model of society, building positive images and relationships as per Löffelholz et al. (2014). We should note that the high viewership and popularity of the pro-China YouTubers are due to how they successfully appeal to the audience's interest as social media influencers by their influencer appeal, presentation style, persona, and by choosing topics of interest to the audience. The higher view counts and likes for YouTubers' non-China related videos than their pro-China videos show these influencers' success in creating content in general and that their broader content beyond China can attract more viewers for them. Hence, a mix of non-China and pro-China content

is more successful in audience engagement for these Pro-China YouTubers than China content only.

Most of the popular Pro-China YouTubers in this study are sojourners earning a living or study in China. The question of why most of them are males is puzzling. A possible explanation is that this pattern is consistent with existing research on gender and political communication and the results of another study on foreign content creators about China (Cho-Li et al., 2025). Prior studies found that political discourse has been male dominated; despite formal progress toward gender equality, women continue to face structural challenges in political participation and remain underrepresented on social media political posts (Aalering & Rohrbach, 2022; Ha et al., 2022). Therefore, the gender distribution of pro-China YouTubers in this study reflects existing male domination in political communication.

Finally, we would like to note the success of our experiment in using generative AI large language models (LLMs) to develop a codebook and code textual comments. We were pleasantly impressed by ChatGPT's ability to code both Chinese and English comments with a high accuracy comparable to bilingual human coders. Our human-machine collaboration and validation show that with proper procedure for refinement and checking, using LLMs can improve efficiency and reduce coder fatigue in coding large amounts of textual data with a high level of accuracy. Yet for multimodal data and long videos such as those on YouTube, it will take much more advancement in LLM technology to achieve satisfactory coding.

7. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study only examined the most popular pro-China influencers on the YouTube platform. To fully assess their popularity in both China and outside China, it would be helpful to research their popularity in different platforms and how similar their styles and content of the videos across platforms are. Our focus on YouTube as a single platform may overlook key public diplomacy dynamics occurring on other global platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter). Influencers adapt their content formats and appeal to platform algorithms and user expectations. YouTube's algorithm may favor certain videos over others: comments receiving more likes are more visible to audiences, while videos with more views are more likely to be recommended to similar users. Therefore, YouTubers will adapt their content strategies to YouTube's algorithm. As the TikTok algorithm and short format may make these pro-China videos more accessible and discoverable, future studies can examine TikTokers who are pro-China. Moreover, it is not known whether watchers of these videos or readers of the positive comments who are neutral or who have little knowledge about China will become more supportive of China and this requires more experimental studies. Furthermore, the study's focus on most-liked comments cannot represent all audience comments is another limitation of our study, and we suggest future research can include a randomly selected representative sample of the comments to provide a more comprehensive explanation of audience comment dynamics.

Despite the limitations, the current exploratory study provides a profile of the more successful pro-China YouTubers and shows how these pro-China YouTubers build their pro-China community online using influencer marketing persuasion techniques. This study shows that authenticity and homophily are the most utilized appeals for content about supporting China. This study advances the research of online opinion leaders and public diplomacy by showing how these social media influencers engage audiences for non-commercial political persuasion purposes. Their video language use, choice of topics, content attributes, influencer appeals, and personality traits contribute to their high viewership and likes. Their content supports public diplomacy for China by generating sympathy and appreciation for China and Chinese culture, encouraging tourism and foreigners to work and live in China.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Comment topic categories and definitions suggested by ChatGPT and validated by the researchers.

Code	Category	Definition	Include	Exclude/Decision Rule	Example Comments
1	Positive evaluation of China and Chinese people	Comments expressing admiration, love, pride, respect, or favorable evaluation of China, Chinese people, Chinese culture, food, society, or achievements.	General praise of China or Chinese people/culture; love from another country; pride in Chinese identity when the main point is positive evaluation.	Do not code as Category 1 if the main point is infrastructure (6), personal experience (3), governance/safety/freedom (7), or support for the influencer (4).	"China did the best in fighting the pandemic. All other countries owe a lot to China. Chinese people made a lot sacrifices for the world. Thank you Chinese people 🙌🙌🙌"
2	Criticism of Western media or the West	Comments criticizing Western media, Western governments, Western public discourse, misinformation, propaganda, hypocrisy, or anti-China narratives.	Mentions BBC/CNN/Western media bias, Western hypocrisy, anti-China reporting, false narratives, or slander.	Do not code as Category 2 if the comment mainly compares China and the West without emphasizing media/misinformation; use 5 or 7 instead.	"BBCs arrogance has reached a level their assumed self-entitlement is that you drop everything and reply to them immediately lol"
3	Personal experience in China	Comments sharing first-hand experiences, memories, anecdotes, observations, or intentions related to living in, visiting, studying, working in, or traveling to China.	First-person accounts such as 'I lived in China,' 'I visited China,' 'I grew up in China,' or 'I want to go/move to China.'	Do not code as Category 3 for general travel advice without personal experience; use 8 or 4 if it praises the video.	"New Zealander here. I have been to China 14 times through work. Trust me, it is an amazing place. Really nice people and cheap food. Western media lie, because their own countries are not that great."
4	Support for the influencer/appreciation for the video	Comments expressing gratitude, encouragement, compliments, or appreciation toward the influencer, creator, video, interview, subtitles, or the act of speaking positively about China.	Thanks to the creator, praise for a video/interview/subtitles, encouragement to keep making videos, or appreciation for speaking up for China.	Do not code as Category 4 if the comment primarily debates politics, media, or governance; use 2 or 7.	"If you did not make so many video, I even do not know the gov did so many works for poor people. REALLY Nice Work!"

Table A1. Cont.

Code	Category	Definition	Include	Exclude/Decision Rule	Example Comments
5	Comparisons between China and the West	Comments explicitly comparing China with Western countries or systems, including comparisons of society, economy, politics, infrastructure, media, safety, quality of life, or values.	Explicit A-versus-B comparison between China and the West/US/Canada/Australia/Europe, even when humorous or critical.	Do not code as Category 5 if the comparison is mainly about foreign policy/war/diplomacy; use 7.	"Other countries won't be able to running affordable public transport like China, cuz their transport is running by private company, profit always their first priority."
6	China's development and infrastructure	Comments emphasizing China's modernization, infrastructure, engineering, transportation, technology, urban development, manufacturing, Huawei/EVs, or economic progress.	Focus on roads, bridges, high-speed rail, architecture, cities, EVs, Huawei, technology, engineering, factories, or rapid development.	Do not code as Category 6 for broad praise without development/infrastructure emphasis; use 1.	"I must say this video shock me. I am American and never would I imagine China to look like that. It looks like something out of a Sci-fi Futuristic Movie. Holy cow. I'm stunned at those architectures."
7	Governance, safety, quality of life, and foreign policy	Comments discussing governance, public policy, social stability, safety, quality of life, democracy, freedom, human rights, religion, social welfare, diplomacy, war, sanctions, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Muslims, or U.S./China foreign policy.	Focus on freedom, democracy, safety, social welfare, religion, public health, governance accountability, international relations, wars, sanctions, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, or foreign policy.	Do not code as Category 7 for generic praise or criticism unless governance, safety, democracy, rights, policy, or international relations are central.	"Amazing... Everyone looks very happy. And the US is trying very hard to convince the world that the people of Xinjiang are suffering greatly."
8	Questions or information sharing	Comments asking questions, offering factual clarification, explaining terms, correcting misunderstandings, or sharing practical information related to China or the video.	Neutral questions, corrections, definitions, translations, cultural explanations, or practical advice.	Do not code as Category 8 if the question is rhetorical political criticism; use 2 or 7.	"What do you think? Are telling positive stories like this instantly propaganda? Are we doing ourselves a disservice by only focusing on the negative stories without question? Does this video do anything to color your understanding of Muslims in China CN?"
9	Off-topic/non-China-related	Comments unrelated to China or the substantive video topic, including generic influencer promotion, spam-like calls for likes, unrelated jokes, unrelated personality comments, or stories mainly about other contexts without meaningful China relevance.	No meaningful China-related content or no substantive relation to the video topic; generic self-promotion or unrelated jokes.	Do not code as Category 9 simply because a comment is short; if it praises China, China-related culture, or the video, use the relevant substantive code.	"I wonder if anyone ever just impulsively goes way off script... I'd love to see the producers go into a panic."

Table A1. Cont.

Code	Category	Definition	Include	Exclude/Decision Rule	Example Comments
10	Criticism of China or the influencer	Comments expressing negative evaluation of China, Chinese society, the Chinese government, the influencer, or the video; includes accusations such as propaganda/wumao or direct criticism of the creator's claims.	Directly negative toward China or toward the influencer/video, including accusations that the video is paid propaganda.	Do not code as Category 10 for criticism of Western media or Western governments; use 2 or 7.	"50 cents (wumao) per video"

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