

Temporal evolution of strategic narratives: Chinese TikTok propaganda and the South China Sea conflict

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Abstract

Despite extensive research on social media influence, a significant gap exists in understanding how audiences interpret and engage with Chinese propaganda on short-form video platforms, particularly regarding territorial disputes. This study examines the temporal evolution of strategic narratives in Chinese TikTok propaganda related to the South China Sea conflict, integrating Walton's propaganda framework with Strategic Narrative Theory. A quantitative survey approach employed 100 university students from Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta who evaluated five Chinese state-controlled TikTok videos using surveys based on Walton's ten propaganda characteristics, with temporal pattern analysis examining strategic narrative evolution across the video sequence. Statistical analysis revealed three distinct strategic narrative types: (1) core narratives maintaining consistency across videos (PC4, PC6, PC8), (2) adaptive narratives demonstrating systematic learning and optimization (PC10), and (3) experimental narratives testing alternative approaches (PC1, PC7). The findings demonstrate that Chinese propaganda operates through sophisticated portfolio management strategies combining narrative stability with dynamic optimization mechanisms, indicating a mature understanding of digital audience psychology and cross-cultural influence effectiveness. This research advances strategic communication theory by providing empirical evidence that contemporary digital propaganda functions as evolving strategic narrative systems rather than static content, requiring analytical frameworks capable of capturing dynamic communication processes in competitive information environments.

Introduction

The South China Sea conflict is a complex geopolitical matter involving multiple governments with competing territorial claims. This region holds considerable strategic significance owing to its abundant natural resources, particularly oil and gas reserves, and its function as a vital international maritime corridor (Heydarian, 2017; Ye, 2022). Given its unique characteristics, the conflict in the area has intensified in recent years, attracting

international attention and engaging significant powers such as the United States and China, each aiming to exert their influence (Xiangning & Ji, 2019). The geopolitical dynamics are further complicated by the economic interdependence of the states concerned, requiring a balance between competitiveness and cooperation (Masroor & Khani, 2018).

Beyond physical contestation, countries including China— who mostly assert their claim the contested territories— have turned to digital platforms, especially TikTok, to shape public opinion. TikTok's algorithmic content dissemination and interactive style provide an efficient medium for propagating state-sponsored narratives (Liang et al., 2021). The platform's capacity to generate viral content via concise videos makes it optimal for political campaigns and propaganda (A. Moir, 2023). Political figures and countries alike utilize TikTok's functionalities to amplify views and connect with broader audiences (Terradillos et al., 2025).

The focus on disseminating information on digital media has made understanding propaganda strategies in contemporary digital contexts essential because of digital propaganda's intricate and frequently concealed nature. The digital landscape facilitates swift dissemination and extensive reach, rendering it a potent instrument for shaping public opinion and political results (Farkas & Neumayer, 2018; Lock & Ludolph, 2019). Examining these methodologies aids in recognizing and combating disinformation and propaganda, fostering a more informed and discriminating populace.

Regardless, a significant gap exists in comprehending how audiences interpret and engage with Chinese propaganda on TikTok. Although specific studies have examined the overall utilization of TikTok by youth, including their connection with news material (Galbe, 2024; Lei et al., 2024), there is a paucity of studies explicitly focusing on their participation in propaganda. Moreover, there is also a critical need to analyze how propaganda characteristics manifest in short-form video content. Short videos are a unique medium that combines various modalities, making them a powerful tool for emotional persuasion and propaganda (Bu et al., 2024; Zhao & Zhang, 2024), but there is still limited research on how these techniques disseminate propaganda and how it impacts audience perception as a form of soft power.

This study seeks to thoroughly examine audience perceptions of Chinese TikTok propaganda related to the South China Sea dispute by employing a focused methodology that combines Walton's (1997) propaganda framework with Strategic Narrative Theory (Miskimmon et al., 2014). The study aims to assess how students from Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta recognize and react to diverse propaganda techniques present in TikTok videos, quantify the efficacy of each propaganda characteristic as strategic narrative elements, and analyze the temporal evolution patterns of strategic narratives across multiple videos. The study will analyze temporal patterns from survey data to identify strategic narrative adaptations and optimization mechanisms in Chinese digital conflict communication.

Social Media as Tools for International Propaganda

The digital age has profoundly altered propaganda methods, rendering them more advanced and efficacious. Traditional propaganda techniques, including direct communication and mass media (newspapers, radio, television), have transformed into interactive and digital formats on social media platforms (Çakmak, 2023). This change has facilitated more efficient propaganda transmission by utilizing social media's global reach, low cost, and trust dynamics (Ma & Thomas, 2020). Traditional state media and social media exhibit different approaches in their dissemination of propaganda. Traditional

media frequently prioritize conflict-oriented frames and possess a more centralized production approach, whereas social media facilitates enhanced frame diversity and user-generated content. Social media platforms facilitate the rapid and extensive distribution of information, frequently circumventing conventional gatekeepers, resulting in a more decentralized and participatory mode of propaganda (U. Klinger & Svensson, 2014).

This general feature of social media has significantly evolved its role to cover and influence famous international disputes such as the Iranian elections in 2009, the Arab Spring in 2011, the Ukraine Conflict in 2014, Brexit in 2016, the Christchurch Attack in 2019, and ongoing conflicts, including the Israel-Palestinian War (Chenou & Restrepo, 2023; Ford, 2020; Huhtinen & Rantapelkonen, 2016; Niekerk & Maharaj, 2013). Its growing role in the coverage and dissemination of information in different international disputes demonstrates its evolution in shaping political landscapes and spreading propaganda, making the utilization of social media necessary for every country involved for broader dissemination and discourse.

Unlike traditional media, social media offers platform-specific affordances that facilitate information operations. It allows for the rapid dissemination of information globally, reaching a vast audience almost instantaneously, which helps deliver narratives and discussions on specific issues (Zeitsoff, 2017). Furthermore, the low cost of participation and ease of access make social media an attractive medium for spreading propaganda, which also exploits the trust relationships between users and information sources, making it easier to spread misleading information (Sample et al., 2018). Another feature of social media is its ability to anonymize and micro-target specific audiences with tailored messages, with platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) allowing these features to enhance the effectiveness of propaganda campaigns (Alzaidi et al., 2025). Lastly, encrypted messaging applications like WhatsApp and Telegram are also used for propaganda efforts due to their encrypted nature, which makes monitoring and countering disinformation more challenging (Martin et al., 2023).

These platform affordances collectively create a fertile environment for various actors to conduct sophisticated information operations that can shape public discourse and political outcomes with unprecedented efficiency and scale, resulting in the concept of “sharp power” (Leonova, 2019). It combines elements of hard and soft power, using digital platforms to achieve its goals: to limit free expression, spread confusion, and distort the political environment within democracies (Leonova, 2019; Walker, 2018). The evolution of this digital battlespace presents significant challenges for democratic societies seeking to maintain information integrity while preserving open discourse.

Digital Background of the South China Sea Conflict

The South China Sea (SCS) is a contentious area characterized by competing territorial assertions from China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. The conflicts are fueled by the region’s geopolitical significance, abundant natural resources, and crucial marine trade routes (Yuan, 2017), which have further escalated due to China’s aggressive measures, such as land reclamation and military fortification of contested locations (Medcalf et al., 2015). China’s claims in the South China Sea are grounded in historical claims, notably the “Nine-Dash Line,” which comprises the majority of the area of the sea and is deeply motivated by a combination of nationalism, economic interests, and strategic factors (Gau, 2012). Moreover, the strategic significance of the South China Sea is highlighted by its function in global commerce and energy security, establishing it as a crucial element for China’s regional power projection (Cáceres, 2013).

China's assertion strategy goes beyond just a showcase of military power in the area. Over the years, they have also actively utilized the dissemination of information, which has evolved over time as new mediums have been introduced. The conflict has undergone a notable transition from traditional to digital propaganda, mirroring broader transformations in the dissemination and consumption of information (Lei et al., 2024). Traditional media, including government-operated newspapers and television, maintain a presence, while internet platforms have gained significant influence. For example, China's state media employs traditional and digital platforms to convey distinct messages to home and foreign audiences, highlighting peaceful resolutions globally while inciting nationalism locally (Song & Kim, 2024). This dual strategy emphasizes the sophisticated utilization of media to shape views and retain narrative control.

Various social media platforms have played an essential role in disseminating information and propaganda on the conflict by increasing sentiments of nationalism and molding public opinion. Chinese social media, such as WeChat and Weibo, have significantly strengthened support for China's robust regional economic policies. It has been demonstrated that the dissemination of incidental news on WeChat substantially increases the level of support for coercive measures among Chinese university students (Wang & Cai, 2018). The participation of influential users on Weibo has also significantly impacted the discourse in the public sphere, wherein these users, who include public intellectuals and media organizations, contribute to a diverse ecosystem of ideas that can either support or challenge the dominant nationalistic narratives (Guan, 2019).

Utilizing the discourse of information through social media can be a critical avenue for countries to mold geopolitical narratives and transform how conflicts in the South China Sea are perceived and managed. The emergence of digital media has created new avenues for activism and political dissent; however, authoritarian governments in Southeast Asia have succeeded in retaining control via heightened internet prohibitions (A. Sinpeng, 2019). Digital media has also enabled the dissemination of disinformation, which can sway public opinion and intensify conflicts (Tapsell, 2021). The convergence of traditional and digital media in nations such as Indonesia and Malaysia has significantly influenced news production and information transmission, altering the overarching narrative of geopolitical matters (Tapsell, 2014). This makes it crucial as public opinion and international perception play essential roles in the conflict, which is evident as they influence the political commitment and actions of the nations involved. For instance, the low interest in the South China Sea conflict among the general public in Europe, including Germany, affects the political engagement of these countries in the dispute (Ebbighausen, 2023). Additionally, citizens' perceptions from different countries, such as China and the Philippines, significantly impact the approach to conflict resolution and the acceptance of peaceful solutions (Chang, 2021).

The changing digital landscape has profoundly altered the South China Sea conflict from a mere territorial dispute into a complex information battleground where state narratives vie for legitimacy and public endorsement. The digitalization of geopolitical conflict signifies a pivotal transformation in how regional powers advocate for their interests, carrying substantial consequences for future dispute resolution frameworks. Countries engaged in the South China Sea conflict will undoubtedly formulate more advanced digital methods to sway local and international perceptions, potentially establishing new escalation and diplomatic interaction pathways.

Theoretical Framework

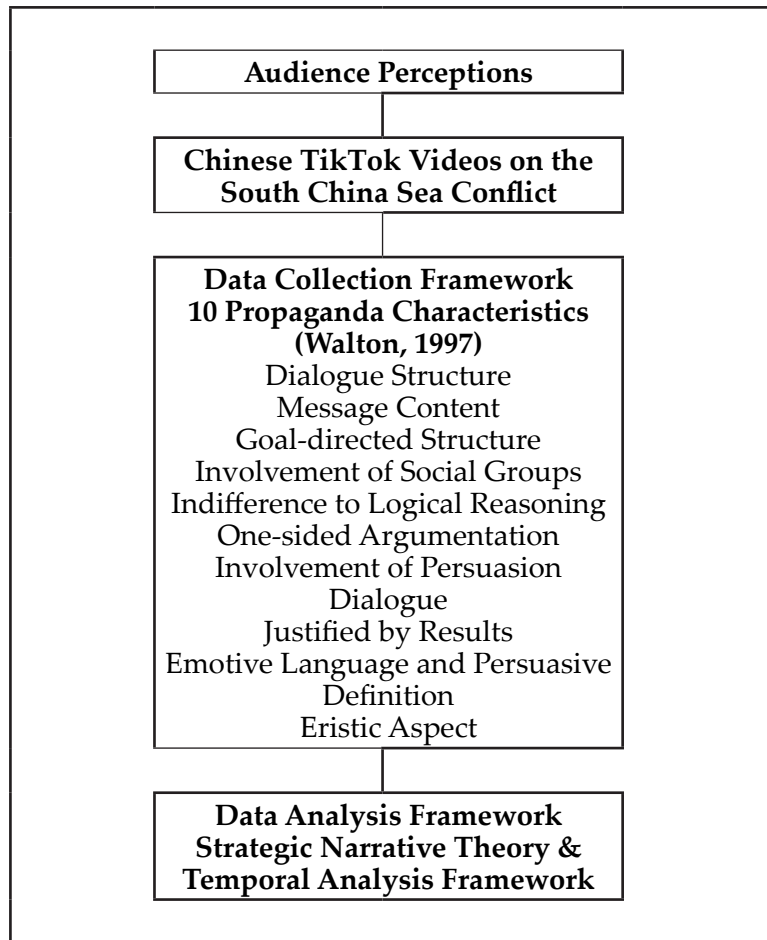


Figure 1. Theoretical and Methodological Framework of the Study

(Source: authors' illustration)

This study employs a dual theoretical framework combining Douglas Walton's propaganda analysis model with Strategic Narrative Theory (Miskimmon et al., 2014) to examine Chinese TikTok propaganda related to the South China Sea conflict. Walton's (1997) framework identifies ten key characteristics of propaganda that provide a comprehensive structure for analyzing digital media content. The first characteristic is dialogue structure, where communication is presented as dialogue but functions as one-way messaging with restricted feedback. Next is the message content, which refers to information structured around a central agenda-serving claim rather than balanced information. Goal-directed structure involves content organization that leads recipients toward predetermined conclusions instead of enabling independent evaluation.

Walton further identifies the involvement of social groups, where propaganda appeals to group identity by creating in-group/out-group dynamics. Fifth, indifference to logical reasoning is evident when rational argument is bypassed through emotional appeals or irrelevant connections. Moreover, one-sided argumentation presents only supporting evidence while excluding or minimizing counter-perspectives, while the involvement of persuasion dialogue simulates balanced discussion while guiding recipients toward predetermined conclusions through controlled information presentation.

The final three characteristics include justification by results, where outcomes and benefits are emphasized over ethical or legal considerations; emotive language and

persuasive definition, which uses emotionally charged terminology to frame issues favorably; and the eristic aspect, which adopts a competitive, victory-oriented approach to communication rather than seeking mutual understanding.

Complementing Walton's framework, this study applies Strategic Narrative Theory (Miskimmon et al., 2014) as an analytical lens to interpret propaganda dynamics. Strategic narratives are coherent systems of story elements that communicate the identity, values, and purposes of political actors to achieve strategic objectives through three key processes: formation (narrative construction), projection (narrative dissemination), and reception (audience interpretation). This study focuses specifically on the reception phase, examining how audiences recognize and interpret strategic narrative elements embedded within propaganda characteristics.

Building on this foundation, this research contributes a temporal analysis framework that examines how strategic narratives evolve across multiple videos over time, revealing adaptation patterns and optimization mechanisms. This temporal approach enables identification of three strategic narrative types: core strategic narratives that maintain consistency across videos, adaptive strategic narratives that evolve based on audience feedback, and experimental strategic narratives that test alternative approaches. This framework suits digital propaganda environments where content creators can rapidly adjust narrative strategies in response to audience engagement patterns.

This theoretical integration enables the examination of propaganda not merely as static content but as dynamic strategic narratives operating within competitive information environments. By analyzing how propaganda characteristics function as strategic narrative elements and evolve over time, the study can identify which narrative strategies achieve dominance, which adapt through audience feedback, and which remain experimental, providing insights into the sophisticated strategic communication frameworks employed in digital conflict contexts.

Method

This study employed a quantitative approach to examine audience perceptions of Chinese TikTok propaganda related to the South China Sea conflict. Research participants from Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta were shown a sequence of five Chinese TikTok videos sourced from Chinese state-controlled media accounts addressing the South China Sea dispute. A total of 100 participants were recruited using stratified random sampling from students aged 18-25 years across different academic years and majors at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, who were regular TikTok users and provided informed consent.

The five Chinese TikTok videos were systematically selected from TikTok's verified Chinese state-controlled media badged accounts based on the following criteria: (1) direct reference to South China Sea territorial disputes, (2) duration of 15-60 seconds, (3) minimum 10,000 views indicating algorithmic promotion, and (4) presence of English subtitles or English-language content. Each video underwent preliminary content analysis to verify the presence of propaganda elements according to Walton's framework, with inter-rater reliability assessed using Cohen's kappa ($\kappa > 0.80$). Figure 2 presents the visual content that participants evaluated during the study.

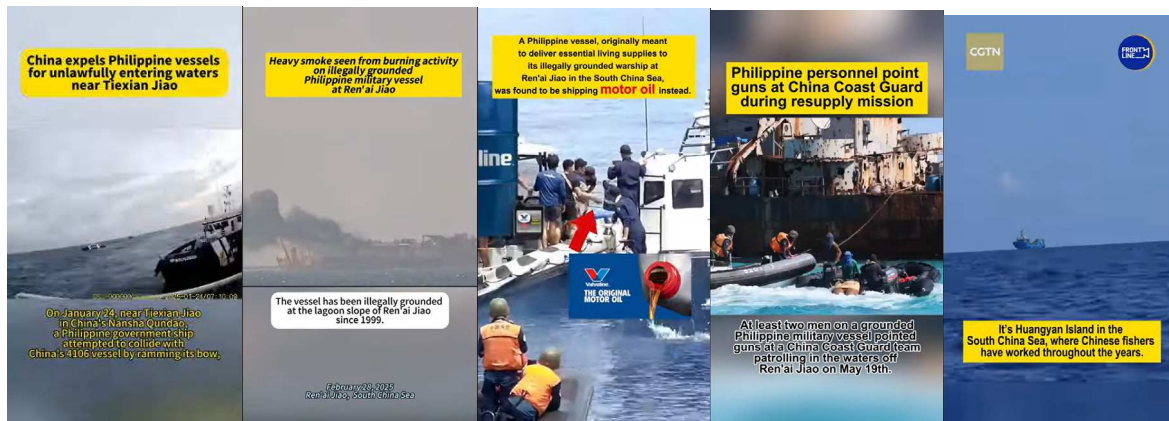


Figure 2. Covers of the Selected 5 TikTok Videos (Source: TikTok)

For each video, participants completed a survey instrument adapted from (De Leon & Ballesteros-Lintao, 2021) through the usage of Google Forms, which operationalized Walton's (1997) ten propaganda characteristics using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' (1) to 'Strongly Agree' (4). The survey underwent translation and back-translation from English to Indonesian, and pilot testing with 30 students. Reliability analysis showed acceptable internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha > 0.70 for each propaganda characteristic subscale.

Data analysis occurred in two phases. First, quantitative survey responses underwent statistical treatment using weighted means and percentages to identify the prevalence and effectiveness of each propaganda characteristic across videos. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, confidence intervals) were calculated for each propaganda characteristic per video.

Second, these results were interpreted through Strategic Narrative Theory (Miskimmon et al., 2014) combined with a temporal analysis framework developed for this study, examining how propaganda characteristics function as strategic narrative elements that evolve across the video sequence. The temporal analysis examined patterns of continuity and change in propaganda characteristics across the video sequence, identifying strategic narrative adaptation mechanisms in response to perceived audience engagement. This analysis focused on identifying: (1) characteristics that showed significant variation across videos, suggesting experimental strategic narratives; (2) characteristics that remained stable, suggesting core strategic narratives; and (3) characteristics that demonstrated systematic improvement patterns, revealing adaptive strategic narrative learning over time.

By maintaining Walton's framework for data collection while applying Strategic Narrative Theory for analysis, this methodology enabled the examination of both the individual propaganda characteristics and the dynamic strategic narrative processes that governed their evolution over time. The findings were limited to Indonesian university student perspectives and may not generalize to other populations. The analysis was constrained to TikTok's specific format and affordances, and the five-video sequence may not have captured longer-term propaganda evolution patterns.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the comprehensive descriptive statistics from 100 university students who evaluated five Chinese TikTok videos addressing the South China Sea conflict using Walton's (1997) ten propaganda characteristics. All participants provided complete

responses across all five videos, resulting in 500 individual video evaluations and 5,000 total item responses.

Descriptive Statistics of Propaganda Characteristics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for each propaganda characteristic across the five-video sequence, revealing both within-video participant consensus levels and temporal variation patterns that distinguish between stable core propaganda strategies and adaptive strategic elements. The comprehensive dataset demonstrates consistent participant engagement across all videos, with complete response rates ensuring robust statistical reliability for subsequent temporal analysis.

	Video 1		Video 2		Video 3		Video 4		Video 5		Average	
	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>
<i>PC1</i>	3.48	0.66	3.42	0.70	3.41	0.61	3.52	0.59	3.34	0.64	3.43	0.07
<i>PC2</i>	3.22	0.76	3.2	0.75	3.29	0.69	3.29	0.72	3.33	0.76	3.27	0.05
<i>PC3</i>	3.47	0.50	3.45	0.56	3.44	0.52	3.38	0.51	3.43	0.50	3.43	0.03
<i>PC4</i>	3.52	0.50	3.52	0.58	3.45	0.52	3.57	0.52	3.57	0.52	3.53	0.05
<i>PC5</i>	3.15	0.83	3.17	0.81	3.09	0.79	3.19	0.76	3.11	0.71	3.14	0.04
<i>PC6</i>	3.49	0.50	3.45	0.54	3.44	0.50	3.47	0.58	3.49	0.56	3.47	0.02
<i>PC7</i>	3.2	0.75	3.16	0.81	3.2	0.77	3.34	0.69	3.26	0.72	3.23	0.07
<i>PC8</i>	3.51	0.50	3.48	0.56	3.47	0.52	3.46	0.52	3.44	0.57	3.47	0.03
<i>PC9</i>	3.35	0.58	3.41	0.57	3.4	0.60	3.33	0.59	3.34	0.67	3.37	0.04
<i>PC10</i>	2.99	0.93	3.11	0.86	3.22	0.72	3.22	0.68	3.19	0.73	3.15	0.10

Verbal Interpretation: 3.25 – 4.00 (Strongly Agree), 2.50 – 3.24 (Agree), 1.75 – 2.49 (Disagree), 1.00 – 1.74 (Strongly Disagree)

Table 1. Survey Results per TikTok Videos

(Source: Obtained from Survey Data)

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for each propaganda characteristic across the five-video sequence, revealing both within-video participant consensus levels and temporal variation patterns that distinguish between stable core propaganda strategies and adaptive strategic elements. The comprehensive dataset demonstrates consistent participant engagement across all videos, with complete response rates ensuring robust statistical reliability for subsequent temporal analysis.

Video 1 established baseline performance metrics, with PC8 (Justified by Results) achieving the highest recognition score ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.50$) alongside PC4 (Involvement of Social Groups, $M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.50$). These characteristics exhibited low standard deviations, indicating immediate audience identification with results-oriented messaging and social group positioning strategies. Conversely, PC10 (Eristic Aspect) recorded the lowest score ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.93$), falling within the “Agree” rather than “Strongly Agree” category while displaying the highest variance, suggesting substantial participant disagreement regarding competitive argumentative elements.

Video 2 maintained established performance hierarchies, with PC4 ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.58$) and PC8 ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.56$) sustaining elevated recognition levels. PC10 demonstrated initial improvement ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.86$) while retaining considerable variance, indicating that competitive narrative aspects require extended exposure for audience comprehension development. This pattern supports theoretical frameworks emphasizing narrative familiarity processes in digital communication contexts.

Video 3 marked PC10's transition into the "Strongly Agree" range ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.72$) with diminishing participant disagreement, evidencing enhanced consensus through repeated exposure. Simultaneously, PC5 (Indifference to Logical Reasoning) reached its sequence minimum ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.79$), suggesting either increased rational argumentation employment or heightened participant sensitivity to logical reasoning elements.

Video 4 represented a convergence point where multiple characteristics achieved peak effectiveness. PC4 attained its maximum score ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.52$), while PC7 (Involvement of Persuasion Dialogue) exhibited substantial improvement ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.69$) with enhanced agreement levels. This simultaneous optimization across diverse propaganda techniques indicates sophisticated strategic coordination within content creation frameworks.

Video 5 demonstrated stabilization dynamics, with PC4 maintaining peak performance ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.52$) and PC10 sustaining improved consensus ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.73$). These patterns suggest that effective narrative strategies achieve sustainable recognition levels beyond initial novelty effects, supporting theories of narrative durability in extended communication campaigns.

Aggregate analysis revealed distinct characteristic profiles. PC4 (Involvement of Social Groups) achieved the highest average recognition ($M = 3.53$) with minimal temporal fluctuation ($SD = 0.05$), establishing its role as a core strategic element transcending cultural boundaries. PC6 (One-sided Argumentation, $M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.02$) and PC8 (Justified by Results, $M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.03$) exhibited comparable effectiveness with exceptional stability, confirming their status as fundamental propaganda components independent of content variations.

PC10 (Eristic Aspect) displayed the most pronounced evolutionary trajectory, advancing from initial underperformance to sustained effectiveness by Videos 3-5, reflected in its highest temporal variance ($SD = 0.10$). This progression provides empirical evidence for audience learning mechanisms in strategic narrative reception. PC7 demonstrated moderate instability ($SD = 0.07$), suggesting ongoing experimentation with persuasive dialogue structures, while PC5 maintained consistent moderate effectiveness with limited temporal variation ($SD = 0.04$).

All characteristics sustained scores exceeding 3.0, confirming systematic participant recognition of propaganda elements throughout the sequence. The overall aggregate mean of 3.35 across all characteristics and videos indicates substantial effectiveness of Chinese strategic narrative projection within the Indonesian university student demographic, demonstrating successful cross-cultural influence achievement despite linguistic and cultural disparities.

Temporal Pattern Analysis of Propaganda Characteristics

Figure 3 reveals three distinct temporal patterns across the propaganda characteristics, providing empirical evidence for differentiated strategic narrative functions within Chinese digital communication frameworks. These patterns offer insights into the sophisticated mechanisms governing audience engagement and narrative optimization processes across extended video sequences.

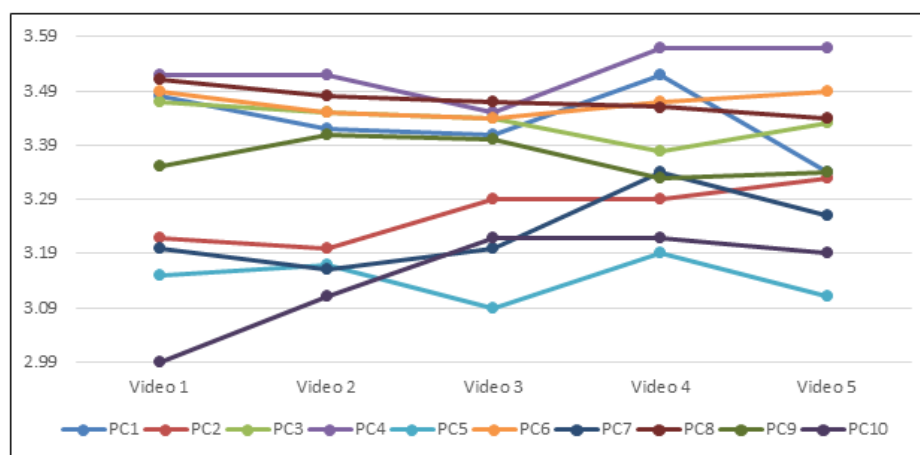


Figure 3. Temporal Pattern Analysis of Propaganda Characteristics (Source: Survey Data)

The most pronounced evolutionary pattern is exemplified by PC10 (Eristic Aspect), which demonstrates a systematic ascending trajectory from Video 1 through Video 3, followed by plateau stabilization in Videos 4-5. This progression indicates developmental enhancement in participants' recognition of competitive narrative positioning elements, suggesting that adversarial communication strategies require cumulative exposure for effective audience comprehension. The initial low performance followed by sustained improvement provides compelling evidence for strategic narrative learning curves, where complex argumentative techniques achieve effectiveness through iterative exposure rather than immediate recognition.

The predominant pattern encompasses characteristics PC3 (Goal-directed Structure), PC4 (Involvement of Social Groups), PC6 (One-sided Argumentation), PC8 (Justified by Results), and PC9 (Emotive Language and Persuasive Definition), which maintain relatively stable trajectories throughout the sequence with minimal deviations from established baselines. These characteristics demonstrate consistent narrative recognition levels independent of temporal positioning, suggesting their function as core strategic elements that achieve immediate audience identification and sustain effectiveness across diverse content variations. The stability observed in this cluster indicates mature propaganda techniques that have achieved optimal formulation for cross-cultural digital environments.

A third distinctive pattern characterizes PC1 (Dialogue Structure), PC2 (Message Content), PC5 (Indifference to Logical Reasoning), and PC7 (Involvement of Persuasion Dialogue), which exhibit irregular fluctuation patterns with pronounced variations during the middle video sequence. These characteristics display experimental behavior suggesting ongoing strategic testing and refinement processes. The variability observed in PC1 and PC7 particularly indicates active exploration of dialogue and persuasion frameworks, while PC2 and PC5 variations suggest adaptive content structuring and logical reasoning manipulation techniques. This experimental cluster provides evidence for dynamic strategic communication approaches where content creators continuously adjust structural and persuasive elements based on perceived audience responses.

The temporal analysis further reveals convergence and divergence dynamics across the sequence. Videos 1-2 demonstrate establishment phases where characteristic hierarchies become apparent, Videos 3-4 represent optimization periods with peak performance achievements for multiple characteristics, and Video 5 indicates consolidation where effective strategies maintain performance while experimental elements either stabilize or

continue variation. This three-phase progression suggests systematic strategic narrative deployment rather than random content variation.

Cross-characteristic comparison reveals inverse relationship patterns, where PC10's ascending trajectory contrasts with PC5's moderate decline, indicating potential strategic trade-offs between competitive argumentation and logical reasoning manipulation. Similarly, the stability of PC4 and PC6 provides foundational effectiveness that enables experimental variation in other characteristics without compromising overall persuasive impact.

The temporal patterns collectively demonstrate sophisticated portfolio management strategies where Chinese content creators balance proven effective techniques with experimental innovation. The simultaneous deployment of stable, adaptive, and experimental narrative elements indicates advanced understanding of audience psychology and strategic communication optimization processes, providing empirical support for theories proposing that contemporary digital propaganda operates through complex systematic frameworks rather than isolated persuasive attempts.

Further Discussions

The temporal patterns observed in Chinese TikTok propaganda reveal sophisticated strategic narrative management that extends current understanding of how political actors deploy narratives in digital environments. The identification of three distinct narrative evolution patterns—stable, adaptive, and experimental—provides empirical evidence for the dynamic nature of strategic narrative deployment in contested information spaces, advancing theoretical frameworks beyond static narrative analysis toward dynamic strategic communication models.

The stability demonstrated by PC4 (Involvement of Social Groups), PC6 (One-sided Argumentation), and PC8 (Justified by Results) with minimal temporal variance indicates the establishment of what can be termed “core strategic narratives” within Chinese digital communication frameworks. These findings align with strategic communication literature, suggesting that effective influence campaigns require consistent identity positioning and authority establishment (Cornish et al., 2011). The temporal stability of social group involvement particularly supports research on in-group/out-group narrative construction in digital conflicts, where sustained identity positioning becomes essential for maintaining audience allegiance across extended communication campaigns (Bjola & Pamment, 2018).

The temporal evolution of PC10 (Eristic Aspect) provides compelling evidence for strategic narrative adaptation mechanisms in digital propaganda environments. Its systematic progression from moderate effectiveness ($M=2.99$) to sustained high performance ($M = 3.22$) demonstrates what Archetti (2013) describes as “narrative learning” within strategic communication contexts. This adaptive pattern suggests that Chinese content creators employ feedback mechanisms to optimize competitive positioning narratives, indicating a sophisticated understanding of audience reception dynamics and narrative contestation processes. The stabilization achieved in later videos supports theoretical frameworks proposing that successful strategic narratives undergo iterative refinement until achieving optimal audience resonance (Antoniades et al., 2023).

The experimental variations observed in PC1 (Dialogue Structure) and PC7 (Involvement of Persuasion Dialogue) reveal ongoing strategic narrative innovation within Chinese digital communication strategies. This variability indicates what can be conceptualized as “narrative experimentation zones” where content creators test alternative approaches to structural and persuasion elements. Such experimental behavior aligns with

digital media research, suggesting that platform-specific environments enable rapid testing of communication strategies through real-time audience feedback mechanisms (Freelon & Wells, 2020). The persistence of these experimental patterns across the video sequence suggests that optimal narrative structures for dialogue and persuasion remain contested within Chinese strategic communication frameworks.

The moderate but stable performance of PC5 (Indifference to Logical Reasoning) presents important insights into strategic narrative constraints within credibility-dependent digital environments. This consistent moderate effectiveness suggests strategic recognition of what Woolley & Howard (2019) describe as “authenticity boundaries” in digital influence operations, where overtly manipulative techniques risk audience rejection. The stability of this characteristic indicates a deliberate strategic choice to maintain rational credibility while employing emotional persuasion techniques, supporting research on balanced approach strategies in contemporary propaganda (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2019).

These findings collectively demonstrate what can be termed “strategic narrative portfolio management” within digital conflict communication. The simultaneous deployment of stable core narratives, adaptive competitive elements, and experimental structural components indicates a sophisticated understanding of narrative diversification strategies. This portfolio approach supports theoretical frameworks proposing that effective strategic communication requires multiple narrative functions operating simultaneously (Pamment, 2015). The balance between consistency and adaptation observed in Chinese TikTok content suggests mature strategic narrative capabilities that enable both audience retention through familiar elements and competitive positioning through innovative techniques.

The temporal progression patterns reveal strategic narrative evolution mechanisms that advance understanding of how political actors optimize communication effectiveness in digital environments. The systematic improvement demonstrated by adaptive characteristics, combined with the stability of core elements, indicates strategic learning processes operating within Chinese digital communication frameworks. This evidence supports research proposing that contemporary digital propaganda employs sophisticated feedback mechanisms enabling real-time strategy adjustment (Sanovich et al., 2018).

The high overall effectiveness scores (all characteristics >3.0) across diverse propaganda elements suggest successful strategic narrative projection within the Indonesian university student demographic. This broad recognition pattern indicates effective cross-cultural narrative translation, supporting research on strategic narrative universality within globalized digital environments (Ingram, 2017). The consistent audience recognition across diverse propaganda characteristics suggests that Chinese strategic narratives effectively transcend cultural boundaries, achieving what Miskimmon et al. (2014) describes as a successful narrative reception across different cultural contexts.

The emergence of distinct temporal patterns across propaganda characteristics provides empirical evidence for strategic narrative theory’s proposition that effective political communication operates through multiple narrative layers serving different strategic functions. The identification of core, adaptive, and experimental narrative elements supports theoretical frameworks proposing that contemporary strategic communication requires sophisticated narrative architecture, enabling both consistency and flexibility (Roselle et al., 2014).

These findings advance strategic narrative theory by providing empirical evidence for dynamic narrative processes in digital environments. The temporal analysis reveals that strategic narratives function not as static message frameworks but as evolving

communication systems capable of adaptation while maintaining core identity elements. This understanding contributes to theoretical frameworks proposing that digital strategic communication represents fundamentally different phenomena from traditional broadcast propaganda, requiring analytical approaches capable of capturing dynamic narrative interactions rather than static content analysis.

The sophisticated strategic narrative management revealed in Chinese TikTok propaganda indicates a mature understanding of digital communication dynamics and audience psychology within contested information environments. The successful balance between narrative stability and adaptation suggests that effective digital influence operations require comprehensive strategic frameworks incorporating multiple narrative functions and evolution mechanisms, advancing theoretical understanding of strategic communication in contemporary digital conflict contexts.

Conclusion

The identification of strategic narrative portfolio management in Chinese TikTok propaganda fundamentally challenges existing theoretical frameworks that treat digital influence as static messaging campaigns. This study's empirical evidence that propaganda characteristics function as dynamic, evolving strategic elements operating simultaneously across core, adaptive, and experimental dimensions necessitates a paradigm shift in how scholars, policymakers, and practitioners approach digital influence analysis. The successful cross-cultural narrative projection demonstrated here indicates that contemporary state actors possess far more sophisticated communication capabilities than previously recognized, requiring correspondingly advanced theoretical models and analytical tools.

These findings carry profound implications for democratic governance and information integrity in an era where strategic narratives transcend cultural boundaries with unprecedented effectiveness. The demonstrated ability of state actors to optimize persuasive strategies through systematic learning mechanisms while maintaining narrative consistency suggests that traditional approaches to media literacy, counter-propaganda, and information warfare are fundamentally inadequate. Future policy frameworks, educational initiatives, and democratic defense strategies must account for this new reality of dynamic, adaptive digital influence operations that operate with the precision and sophistication revealed in this research.

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