

China's International Communication Centers as Vehicles of Soft Power on Social Media

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Abstract

Seeking to expand its outward soft power strategy, China has rapidly grown its International Communication Centers (ICCs), media institutions whose work is carried out by local and regional departments to enhance international familiarity with local regions and the collective shaping of China's national image. While previous studies recognize the unique role ICCs play in exerting soft power to both domestic and international audiences, there has been limited attention on the methods in which they do so, particularly online. This paper addresses this gap by examining how ICCs have adopted Western social media platform X/Twitter and use digital modes of communication to reach external audiences. A 1-month content analysis of three overtly active provincial-level ICCs enabled a comparative examination of their communicative characteristics and behaviors. Findings reveal that the state continues to operationalize Chinese soft power while continuously reinventing the methods through which it attracts and persuades audiences.

Keywords

China, soft power, social media, international communication center (ICC)

Introduction

In his first major speech on propaganda policy in 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for Communist Party victory in the “public opinion struggle,” referencing the pre-reform era and the

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need to raise China's voice on a global stage (Xi, 2022, para. 11). China has since significantly reformed its outward facing soft power strategy, placing increasing emphasis on "discourse power," an active effort to shape the country's global image and amplify China's voice internationally, particularly through enhanced external communication strategies. In May 2021, Xi called for the strengthening of a strategic communication system with "distinct Chinese characteristics" (Xinhua News Agency, 2021). Xi called on all regions and departments to leverage their respective characteristics and strengths to carry out their work and present a "rich, vivid, and three-dimensional image of China" (Xinhua News Agency, 2021). This directive led to the rapid development of new entities called International Communication Centers (ICCs), state media institutions whose remit is carried out by provincial, sub-provincial, city, county, and district-level governments across the People's Republic of China (PRC). ICCs have proliferated in the years since Xi's directive. Fang (2024) finds over 30 ICCs were established between May 2021 and December 2023, while Zhang (n.d.) reports this number had increased to more than 100 centers operating nationwide by 2025.

At a time when China's global image faces serious challenges over concerns ranging from trade disputes to human rights and the handling of the COVID pandemic, the timing of these centers is significant. They evidence how Beijing is drawing on more resources to expand its outward facing soft power strategy, seeking to enhance international familiarity with local regions, thereby contributing to the collective shaping of China's national image (Yang, 2024). More so, the rise of these media centers coincides with growing Western concerns about the PRC's attempts to influence the global digital landscape and disrupt the current global order (Global Engagement Center, 2023).

Whilst Chinese and international scholars recognize ICCs emit soft power to domestic and international audiences (Dahlberg, 2024; Herr, 2019; Wu, 2018), to date there has been limited attention on the methods in which they do so. This gap is particularly evident in the context of online influence activities conducted by adversarial authoritarian states on a Western social media platform where digital modes of communication are incorporated into multi-level outward-facing influence efforts. This paper addresses this gap by focusing on how ICCs are adopting digital modes of communication to reach external audiences. A content analysis is conducted of three ICCs active on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) that represent Chinese provinces. Although US-owned, the platform is of particular interest due to its international reach and visibility, with over 586 million monthly active users (Singh, 2026). In contrast to domestic restrictions, making the platform inaccessible to the average user in China without a VPN, X is widely used by Chinese state actors whose state-affiliated profiles have gone unchecked since it changed its moderation system to remove state-affiliated or government funded labels in April 2023 (Scott, 2023).

Based on public posts from selected ICCs over a 1-month period, the research questions guiding this paper are as follows:

- (RQ1) How are accounts overtly affiliated with ICCs present on X?
- (RQ2) What techniques and tactics do they use to communicate with Western audiences, predominantly in English?
- (RQ3) What does this tell us about the role ICCs play in China's contemporary outward-facing soft power strategy?

This paper first reviews the existing literature on Chinese soft power, its digital dissemination to external audiences, and the organization and structure of ICCs. It then outlines the content analysis

methodology before presenting key findings on the ICCs' digital presence and their external communication. Finally, the paper situates ICCs on X within a discussion of China's broader digital soft power strategy.

Conceptualizing Chinese Soft Power

The concept of "soft power," first articulated by Joseph Nye in 1990, denotes the capacity to "influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2008, p.94). Nye identified culture, political values, ideology, and foreign policy as its principal sources, distinguishing it from hard power, or use of economic and military carrots and sticks to bend others to one's will (Nye, 2003). Within China, Nye's framework has drawn sustained attention from political leaders, policymakers, academics, and media commentators (Edney, 2012), affording "a new way to conceptualize and exercise power" (Wang & Lu, 2008, p. 442).

However, before the term "soft power" made its appearance, Chinese scholars had already recognized that national strength rested on more than military or economic might. China's Comprehensive National Power (CNP) framework, established in 1984 under Deng Xiaoping, incorporated "soft variables" into its mathematical formulas used to measure a nation's comprehensive power. As Zhang (2010) contends, this framework did not signify a departure from China's hard power ambitions. Rather, it positioned soft variables, such as culture, as integral to fostering "an external environment conducive to China's rise as an economic and military power" (Lee, 2009, p.3). Soft power was viewed as a necessary complement to hard power, helping to "diffus[e] perceptions of China as a threat" (Lee, 2009, p. 3).

It was not until October 2007 that President Hu Jintao formally incorporated the concept into top-level policy documents, emphasizing the need to strengthen "culture as part of the soft power of our country" and describing it as a "significant factor in the competition of national comprehensive power" (Zhang, 2010, p. 383). This catalyzed a sharp increase in academic and media interest in soft power in the years that followed (Shambaugh, 2013). Hu's administration folded soft power as a shorthand for its cultural dimension under its "four-in-one" formula for national development, spanning economic, political, cultural, and social development (Zhang, 2010, p. 383). The term "cultural soft power" became a strategic national objective aimed at boosting China's global cultural competitiveness and reinforcing domestic cohesion, that worked alongside hard power instruments to expand the country's cultural industries (Zhang, 2010). It was framed as part of a broader "cultural renaissance" that would help China reclaim its status as a leading global power, reflecting the belief that domestic strength and cohesion are preconditions for earning respect and exercising leadership on the world stage (Zhang, 2010, p. 398).

Soft power as a national objective therefore points to a fundamental difference between Nye's and Chinese conceptualizations. While Nye understood civil society and non-state actors as the foundations for exercising soft power (Nye, 2017), China emphasizes the role of the state. This divergence also underlies the criticism China's formulation of soft power has received globally, particularly with Western audiences, that view China's state-centered approach as a form of propaganda rather than soft power. Shambaugh (2013, p. 209) points to this in their assessment of China's global diplomatic presence, asserting that China employs 'public diplomacy' rather than soft power as it's an "instrument in the hands of the government." As Han and Cappelletti (2025,

p. 2) discuss, these conceptualizations reflect the inherently “political nature of soft power” and underscore the “strategic complexity of its global application.”

Transmitting Soft Power Through External Communication

Resources, like culture, do not confer influence alone; rather, they must be effectively converted into realized soft power through mechanisms of dissemination and reception (Liu, 2011). A state’s cultural capital remains undeveloped unless it can be strategically mobilized to shape perceptions and attitudes among domestic and foreign audiences. Liu emphasizes the pivotal role of “external communication” in advancing China’s soft power globally. This concept, which draws on both international communication and external propaganda, seeks to occupy an intermediate position. International communication encompasses broad forms of global exchange, including people-to-people interactions, and is deemed overly expansive for the specific purposes of soft power. Conversely, the notion of external propaganda focuses on persuasive intent, but is burdened with negative associations of manipulation and hostility. To address this tension, Liu (2011, p. 7) recognizes the unique role of external communication,

a series of communicative practices that demonstrate in common the following features: (1) the transmission of information across national boundaries, (2) the intent to persuade the target people and influence their perceptions of and attitudes toward the initiator of communication, and (3) that such communication serves the diplomatic benefits of the initiator.

China has increasingly adapted its soft power strategy to prioritize external communication. This shift became particularly pronounced under Xi Jinping, who has pursued a more assertive approach by expanding China’s “discourse power,” an effort to actively broadcast China’s voice to the world. According to Lynch (2020, p.46), China’s growing material and economic capabilities have enabled it to challenge Western dominance over global discourse and “use that discourse power to reshape information flows to convey the truth about China, thereby automatically increasing its soft power.” The pursuit of discourse power therefore represents an evolution in China’s soft power strategy, moving beyond passive attraction towards a more proactive effort to shape international perceptions and manage China’s global image (Lynch, 2020). This shift was formalized in 2016 when Xi called for a “discourse for external communication,” emphasizing the need to strengthen China’s communication capacity to “tell China’s story well, spread China’s voice effectively, and explain China’s characteristics clearly” (Xinhua News Agency, 2021). Reflecting this strategic shift, China has invested heavily in expanding its external communication apparatus, integrating instruments such as state media, public diplomacy, and other channels into its broader soft power strategy.

Chinese Soft Power and Digital Media

China’s strategic emphasis on expanding external communication to project soft power adopts a range of communicative means. Notable examples include the establishment of Confucius Institutes (CIs) to promote language and culture, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that alters global communications by “bolstering people-to-people connections by cultivating student, expert, and cultural exchanges and tourism” (China Power Team, 2024, para. 3). However, it is the media that has remained central to these efforts. As Liu (2011, p. 30) asserts, “Chinese policymakers are convinced that the media, especially those overseas-oriented ones, offer one of the most powerful

means to express China's voice and thereby strengthen China's soft power on the global stage." This conviction is reflected in China's significant financial investment (Kumar, 2021) and restructuring of the media sector, media partnerships and content-sharing agreements with a vast number of countries around the world, building relationships with foreign journalists, and broadcasting its state media internationally (Shats & Singer, 2022) and in multiple languages (CGTN, nd). Kurlantzick (2023) describes the media as a significant tool of China's "charm offensive" or strategic use of soft power, which has involved tailoring media to local industries, expanding its presence in foreign languages, and strengthening its social media reach. China's expansion of its global media, however, has not guaranteed influence. As previously discussed, the divergence between Nye's and the Chinese understanding of soft power lies in the principal actor responsible for its dissemination. Zhang (2020) suggests the state plays an active role at every level of its soft power campaign, calling them the "visible hands." Zhang points to the media as a key example, arguing that extensive state involvement has undermined the ability of Chinese media outlets to reach European audiences, where media credibility is grounded in "independence and deliberative public discourse" (Zhang, 2020, p.162) Similarly, Shambaugh (2013, p. 233) contends that regardless of how China packages its soft power campaign, "if the content continues to reveal Chinese government bias and propaganda overtones, it will not be competitive (or persuasive) in the highly competitive global media market."

Moreover, Western democracies are increasingly cautious of China's efforts to expand its external communication apparatus. The National Endowment for Democracy (Walker & Ludwig, 2017) coined the term "sharp power" to conceptualize the influence of authoritarian regimes that manipulate and distort the political and information environments of target countries. Chan and Fung (2021, p. 64) highlight the "unequal information flows" between authoritarian regimes and the open systems of democracies. This imbalance enables authoritarian regimes to promote their own agendas within democratic societies by controlling information flows, while simultaneously censoring unfavorable foreign information within their own countries. Walker and Ludwig (2017, p. 6) contend that although these mechanisms may operate under the guise of soft power, they can instead function as means of suppressing "political pluralism and freedom of expression," both domestically and abroad, to secure and protect state interests.

At the same time, technological advances have transformed external communication, with direct implications for how states exercise influence. Nye's article *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power* (2008) highlights the role advanced communication technology plays in exposing large parts of the world to soft power by dramatically lowering the cost of information transmission. Digital platforms now play a crucial role in soft power strategies, enabling states to adapt, innovate, and strengthen their nation-branding efforts. Alden and Chan (2021, as cited in Dahlberg, 2024, p. 32) similarly emphasize how evolving technologies and shifting user behaviors require experimentation with new tactics and digital tools to remain relevant. For China, this shift has facilitated a move from top-down government-led messaging toward ostensibly more participatory forms of communication that broaden its audience reach, ultimately adapting its external communication to align with the digital landscape.

Although China's domestic stance remains dominated by information control, firewalls, and strict content curation towards international social media domestically, Bradford (2023, p. 25) shows that even within this tightly regulated system, "significant breakthroughs can emerge." Chinese officials and state media make strategic use of global social media platforms to disseminate pro-government narratives, both overtly and covertly, with continued growth on emerging platforms. Schliebs et al. (2021) documented a sharp rise in Chinese diplomatic accounts on Twitter between 2019 and 2021 alongside the global expansion of state media outlets across international

social media platforms. These breakthroughs extend to the more nefarious aspects of China's digital modes of communication. Most notably, the covert, state-run *Spamouflage* network which operates thousands of fake accounts across multiple social media platforms, including X, disguises its promotion of CCP narratives by interspersing them with non-political content (Nimmo et al., 2021). This information operation has often been characterized as a malign attempt to undermine democratic processes in the West, discredit and target Chinese dissidents, and sow public dissent (Mandiant Intelligence, 2022; Nimmo et al., 2019).

The breakthrough of ICCs onto X and their role in expanding China's digital footprint abroad are because they occupy a space between the Chinese state's overt and covert communication on the platform. They openly discuss Chinese affairs yet often obscure their direct affiliation with the state. Nevertheless, the top-down hierarchy of ICCs suggests that, while the globalization of China's media system may appear to signal a move toward international integration, the country's external communication strategies remain deeply rooted in serving as the "throat and tongue of the Party" (Sun, 2015; as cited in Huang & Wang, 2019, p. 2987).

A New Instrument of Soft Power: The International Communication Center

The following statement is referenced in a 2025 report published by the Chinese International Communication Journal, signaling the pivotal role ICCs play in advancing China's soft power goals:

The construction of an international communication center is not only the establishment of a platform, but also an important way to enhance the country's soft power and expand its international influence. In the context of globalization, international communication centers should not only tell Chinese stories well but also show the value of Chinese culture to the world, integrate into the global communication system, and achieve effective information dissemination.¹(Tang & Chen, 2024, p. 66)

One way China has adapted to the evolving digital landscape is by increasingly integrating digital media with offline efforts. This extends to the establishment and operation of an extensive social media network of ICCs. The *Insikt Group* (2024, p. 6) suggests "there are very likely thousands of social media accounts on foreign platforms run by ICCs." They estimate that "one ICC alone runs 106 foreign social media accounts." The Chongqing ICC (CICC) was the first to be established in 2018. Local Chinese news site, Zhejiang Online observes ICCs have since "sprung up like bamboo shoots after a rain" (Zhejiang Publicity, 2024, para. 12). According to the China Media Project, a leading source documenting ICC activity in both domestic and international contexts, 28 provincial-level ICCs have been established alongside a growing number at local level which have nearly tripled in just 1 year (Colville & Bandurski, 2025). Sourced from the China Media Project, Figure 1 displays the number of identified ICCs, either at the local or provincial levels, established from 2019 to 2024 (Colville & Bandurski, 2025).

This expansion can be understood as part of a strategic shift from a centralized communication model to one of multi-party collaboration, where the central government has extended resources to local levels while still maintaining a vertical hierarchy of control. Driven by China's vast geographical expanse and significant variation in regional economic policies and cultural practices, Fang regards this process as *lobalisation* or *local globalization*, in which local assets "possess attributes and possibilities for global recognition and acceptance" (Fang, 2024, p. 573). For Fang "local" refers to sub-administrative units within China's national system, namely local media and

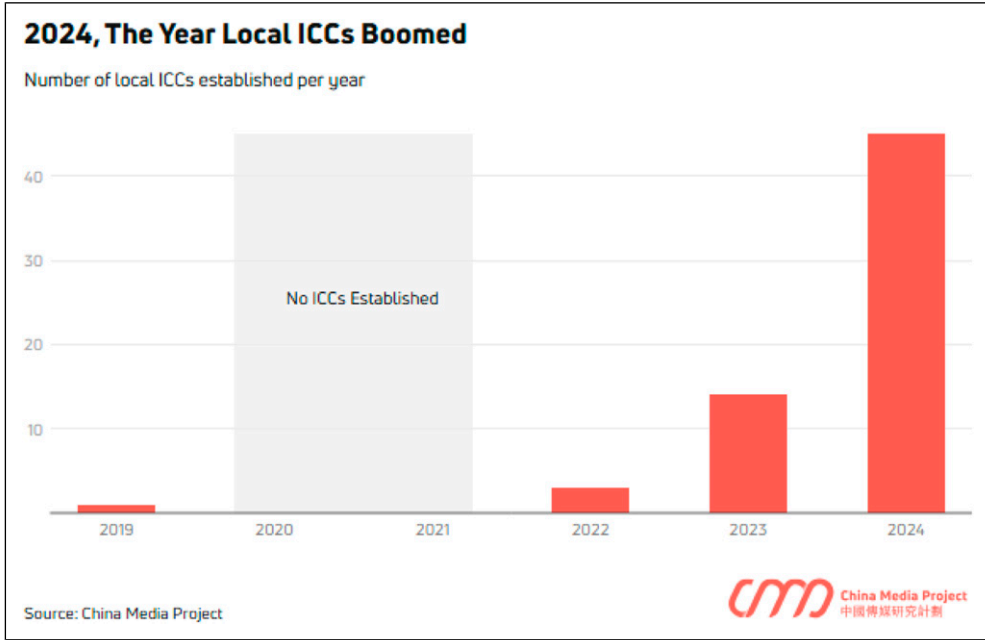


Figure 1. 2024, The year local ICCs boomed. Image credit: Colville & Bandurski. (2025), China media project (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

external propaganda organizations such as provincial, municipal, and county-level mainstream outlets. By mobilizing local-level expertise, cities can present international audiences with multiple isolated positive impressions, which will eventually converge into a unified public understanding of China. At the same time, Fang cautions that to achieve this, ICCs must balance the preservation of local knowledge and culture with the adoption of a global outlook.

Synthesizing several reports and studies by both international and Chinese scholars, the online and offline responsibilities of ICCs can be summarized as follows:

- Spread diverse regional images through indigenous knowledge, cultural features and historical narratives that attract overseas Chinese and international audiences;
- Counter negative perceptions about China such as the China threat theory;
- Rehabilitate the image of contentious regions;
- Promote dialogue with neighbors and “good neighborhood” policy;
- Organize events and exhibitions to foster international cooperation and promote these online.

ICCs utilize multiple resources to pursue these objectives. These include managing media matrices comprising websites and social media accounts on both international and domestic platforms. Typically, ICCs maintain a network of accounts across major foreign social media platforms, often complemented by English-language websites operated either by the ICC itself, or its parent organization. Accounts may be branded under a unified institutional identity or operated as separate entities. In addition, these efforts extend to leveraging cultural resources, recruiting personnel with cross-cultural communication skills including both Chinese nationals and foreigners; utilizing advanced technologies such as AI; forging partnerships with overseas media;

collaborating with educational and research institutions; and training staff to adopt international thinking, such as adapting to local customs in target countries (Zeng & Huang, 2024). While ICCs employ these resources collectively, this study focuses on ICC’s utilization of social media.

Methodology

Content Analysis

Three ICCs active on X were sampled as units of analysis, allowing for a comparative examination of their communicative characteristics and behaviors. A persistent challenge, however, is the lack of transparency, as some ICCs fail to identify themselves as state-affiliated, making it difficult to attribute certain accounts directly to ICC operations (Insikt Group, 2024). The accounts in this study were selected because they have been publicly linked to the ICC network. They represent different regions of China, making them a unique case study into how China leverages various ICCs across distinct regional contexts. It must be noted, however, that a limitation of this study is its content analysis being limited to only three ICCs, all of which are inland, regional, and heavily populated by minorities. Given that this study is exploratory in nature, future research would benefit from examining ICC accounts reflective of other parts of China, such as those in more coastal, cosmopolitan regions. The names of the ICCs were anonymized and are reported as Centers “A,” “B” and “C” due to their connection with the Chinese state, as research on such institutions can be politically sensitive. Based on their social media behavior, the analysis investigates each center’s construction of themes, visual strategies and content sourcing using qualitative and quantitative research techniques.

Data Collection

An open-source investigation was undertaken to understand the scope and scale of the current ICC network on X and their presentation on the platform. Several were identified through the ICC’s official websites, however, due to lack of affiliation, many relied on manual identification by the author. From a total of 30 provincial-level ICCs, 23 of their corresponding X accounts were located.

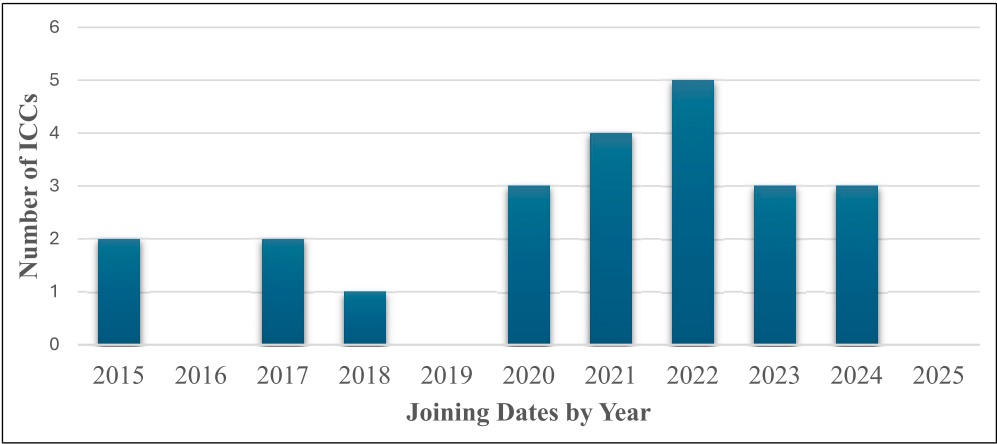


Figure 2. Total number of accessible ICCs and their creation dates on X between 2015 and 2025

Figure 2 shows their joining dates, ranging from 2015 to 2025. This figure is striking because it shows four accounts predate the official establishment of the first ICC in 2018, an indicator that these are repurposed X profiles. As of October 2024, the average following across this sample on X was 43 K.

Social media posts were collected between 1 March and 1 April 2025 using the commercial social media analytic tool, Brandwatch, a UK-based social intelligence company that provides services for social listening and market research. This tool provides access to X’s historical search application programming interface (API). The selected timeframe was chosen at random to minimize selection bias and to ensure feasibility within the limitations of manual coding capacity. All original posts, quote reposts, retweets and replies were extracted over this timeframe. However, replies were subsequently removed as they accounted for only 11% of the dataset, showing that ICCs primarily communicate by publishing original content. Available metadata including mentioned and thread authors, post type (original, quote, and reposts), and engagement metrics (impressions) were collected and utilized for further analysis. This yielded a total sample of 301 posts, 80% from Center A, 14% from Center B, and 6% from Center C, demonstrated in Figure 3.

Coding Framework and Procedure

To investigate how ICCs communicate soft power through public posting on X, the study applied a conventional content analysis approach, where coding categories emerged directly from the dataset (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Content. Graneheim and Lundman (2004 as cited in Guo, 2023, p. 14) define themes as “patterns related to the research question in a set of data on an interpretative underlying level.” Similar to Guo and his research on China’s soft power narratives in state-owned media, this paper applies Braun and Clarke’s (2016 as cited in Guo, 2023, p. 14) six-phase framework to identify a set of recurring thematic categories “(a) familiarization with the data; (b) generation of initial codes; (c) exploration of themes; (d) review of themes; (e) definition and naming of themes; and (f) reporting.” Social media posts were categorized based on presence of themes as either 0 = theme not present, or 1 = theme present. Each post was manually coded to facilitate nuanced interpretation. To strengthen reliability, coding was conducted by the author and repeated a month after collection. Overlapping themes were assigned multiple codes (Table 1).

ICC Center	Total Number of All Existing Timeline Posts	% of All Existing Timeline Posts
Center A	240	80%
Center B	41	14%
Center C	20	6%
Total =	301	100%

Figure 3. Total number and percentage of existing timeline posts for Center A, B, and C from 1 March to 1 April 2025

Table 1. Description of Themes

Theme	Description ^a
Political affairs	Coded as present if covered activities, commemorations, and official statements tied to political milestones or governance.
Environmental protection	Coded as present if messages surrounded conservation and awareness efforts to protect natural environments, unique ecosystems, and biodiversity.
Tourism and regional promotion	Coded as present if messages relate to efforts to attract visitors and strengthen regional identity through landscapes, tourism development, traditional arts, crafts, food, and celebrations unique to the region, cultural festivals, and heritage commemorations.
Economic development, trade and connectivity	Coded as present if messages relate to projects and industries that stimulate economic development, statements on regional economic growth and development, trade and transport infrastructure and market or expo events.
Humanitarian development	Coded as present if messages cover emergency response measures and relief efforts, ongoing social improvement work including healthcare, social welfare and education programs.
Sporting events	Coded as present if messages cover any sporting activities or commemorate athletes.
Science and technology	Coded as present if messages include any mentions of innovations in science or technology, use of technology or innovations in humanitarian efforts.

^aPosts were multiply coded if more than one theme was present.

Visual Strategies. Visuals can enhance engagement, clarify messages, and elicit emotional responses in audiences. Research indicates tweets with images receive 18% more clicks and 150% more retweets than those without (Wang et al., 2020). While much of the literature on supplemental use of visuals in social media focuses on digital marketing, recent studies have demonstrated their significance in state-led propaganda on X. For instance, Wang et al. (2020) found text-image combinations convey more powerful messages than text alone. They note text-images are an “important arena of information operations” as they “catch users’ attention,” disseminate more information than allowed for in the limited space of a tweet, and “provide a “free and less-regulated space for state-led accounts to spread favorable narratives on social platforms” (Wang et al., 2020, p. 473). Visual elements were investigated in a random 10% sample of posts from the ICC sample. This includes photos, infographics, memes, videos, and live streams, but not emoticons (Table 2).

Distribution of Information Sources. Informed by Guo’s (2023) research which identified both state and non-state actors as contributors to media narratives, the sources of content ICCs disseminated were investigated. Zhao (2003 as cited in Guo, 2023) further emphasizes the importance of source analysis in content studies, noting attribution patterns can reveal underlying messaging strategies. Brandwatch metadata was first used to classify posts as original content (65%) or non-original content (35%) and subsequently split into quote reposts and retweets. The sample of non-original posts were then qualitatively examined to determine whether ICCs sourced content from state, state-affiliated, or non-state actors.

Table 2. Description of Visual Dimensions

Visual dimension	Description ^a
Type of visual	Posts were coded as either photo, infographic, meme, or video, live stream or visual not present
Associated theme	Thematic category under which the post was coded
Actors depicted	Posts were coded for the presence of officials, citizens, landmarks, cultural symbols, or foreigners. Details including names of these visual elements were also noted.
AI generated	Posts were coded as AI or not AI-generated, decided by either platform label or by account recognition of AI use.

^aPosts were multiply coded if more than one description was present.

Audience Engagement. The impact of Chinese soft power depends on reach and engagement, and therefore, X’s role as an international information marketplace makes it a natural site for projecting China’s national image outward. While global indices (MacDonald & Murray, 2026; McClory, 2015) rank China relatively low in overall soft power performance, there has been growing efforts to quantify China’s soft power in ways that challenge the dominance of conventional Western instruments. Yecies et al. (2019, p. 212) argue that existing metrics tend to rank China poorly because they prioritize liberal-democratic values such as pluralism and press freedom while failing to account for China’s “unique techno-cultural systems.” They highlight China’s efforts to reclaim the discursive high ground by developing its own standards for evaluating soft power and propose new methodological approaches that better capture the rise of “Digital China.” Rather than relying on conventional indicators, they advocate measuring China’s digital influence by examining how global audiences engage with Chinese culture across online platforms.

While recognizing the complexities in measuring Chinese soft power, this article seeks to understand how digital users engage with ICC content. As proxy indicators, this paper examines the follower size of each account and “impressions” metrics, or the total number of times an individual post is displayed on a screen (including multiple views by the same user) across Centers A, B and C.

Findings & Discussion

Constructing a Digital Presence

Figure 3 shows² Center A was disproportionately the most active during the month, producing 240 tweets, retweets, or quote tweets that accounted for 80% of all posts collected across the three centers. Center B accounted for 14% ($n = 41$) of posts while Center C was the least active, at 6% ($n = 20$) of posts.

Center A’s account was launched 1 month after the center’s creation and is regarded as a successful model for up-and-coming centers (Duan, 2023; Jiang & Zhang, 2023). This is reflected in its overt presence on X, including its early creation date, sizable following, higher engagement, and comparatively high posting activity. Center A has gained significantly more followers than any other identified ICC account with over 188,000 followers, followed by Center C and B. As demonstrated by Figure 4, Center A’s posts also received the highest average number of impressions of the study timeframe, followed by Center B and C.

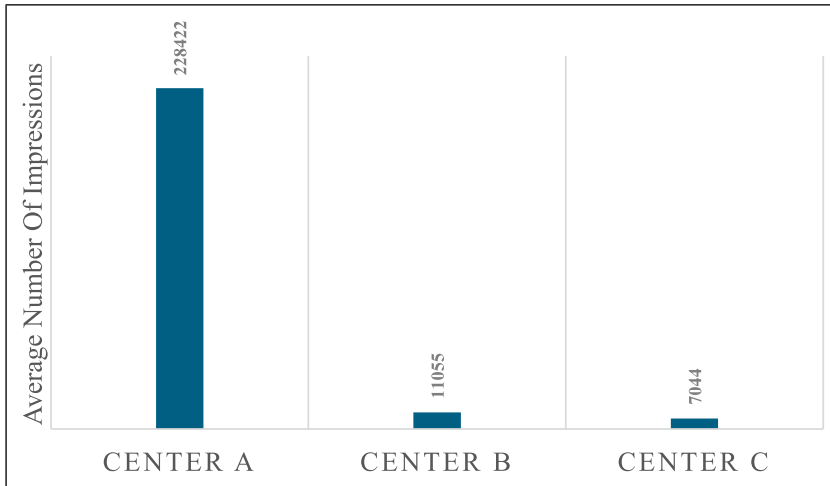


Figure 4. Average number of impressions across Centers A, B, and C between 1 March and 1 April 2025

Center B’s account was created in May 2024, exactly 2 years after its establishment and has the least number of followers at 668. At the time of data collection, the account had been active for less than 1 year. Center C, on the other hand, was established in September 2024 and has over 6,000 followers. Its X account predates its establishment, signaling what [Elmas et al. \(2023, p. 209\)](#) regards as *misleading repurposing*, where follower counts may be misinterpreted as a proxy for credibility. It was the least active of the three centers and its posts received the lowest number of impressions in the ICC sample.

Consolidating Identity and Network Linkages. There are recognizable similarities in the ways Centers A, B, and C present themselves on X. Each presents its official brand logo as a profile image, paired with cover photos depicting striking cityscapes, historical architecture, and local ethnic groups. Their biographies include links to official ICC websites and reference a Chinese location, either the provincial name or its capital city. None of the accounts display an overt affiliation the state. The [Insikt Group \(2024\)](#) observed this lack of affiliation on other social media platforms as only one of 19 ICC accounts identified on Facebook and YouTube labeled itself as state-sponsored or affiliated. Despite this, these similarities suggest a degree of networked linkage among ICCs as a cohesive entity.

Platform affordances further complicate this obfuscation. In 2023, X revised its labeling practices, removing designations for state-affiliated media, journalists, and government officials. According to [Blablová \(2023\)](#), the platform instead introduced a “grey checkmark” to identify multilateral and governmental institutions along with affiliated officials, though none of the ICC accounts on X have this labeling. Centers A and B adopt a “blue checkmark” meaning the accounts have “an active subscription to X Premium and meets eligibility requirements” as either an individual or organization while Center C operates under a “gold checkmark,” implying the “account is an official organization account through verified organizations” ([X, n.d.](#)).

Tailoring Profiles for Specific Audiences. All three centers engage in concerted efforts to tailor their digital profiles for external audiences. This is evident not only by their presence on a global US-

owned social media platform, inaccessible to domestic Chinese users, but also their use of English-language communication. While it is well known ICCs publish in multiple languages, even within the medium of English, centers adapt their accounts to specific audiences. Describing itself as being at the “forefront of the Belt and Road Initiative and opening its doors to the world,” Center A explicitly positions as a strategic hub for China’s BRI. Likewise, Center B adopts an outward-facing approach, but its geographic targeting is more explicit across its account. Its biography describes it as a “frontier for China’s opening-up to South & Southeast Asia.” This is further reinforced by the phrase “Bridging South & Southeast Asia,” that appears both in its cover image and as part of its account name. In contrast, Center C’s showcases the region’s natural scenery and local architecture.

Themes

Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of themes across Centers A, B, and C. The theme *tourism and regional promotion* was the most prominent theme for both Centers A and B. In Center A, 42% of posts fell under this category while *tourism and regional promotion* was even more prevalent across Center B, accounting for 59% of posts. By contrast, the dominant themes in Center C were *humanitarian development* and *political affairs*, each accounting for 31% of posts. It is important to reiterate some posts were coded under multiple themes, particularly in Center A, where a significant proportion overlapped between *tourism and regional promotion* and *innovation and technology*. *Environmental protection* was minimally represented, accounting for less than 10% of posts across centers. *Economic development* similarly comprised under 10% of posts in Centers A and B, while *sporting events* appeared in only 5% of Center C’s posts.

Soft Content at the Core. Reflected across themes, particularly in Centers A and B, is a consistent emphasis on soft content. In their study on the politics of soft content, [Bouvier and Way \(2021\)](#) conceptualize “soft content” as the relatively “mundane” every day, non-political material. They contend this content is different from political content in a formal sense, in that soft content is inherently ideological and political, conveying ideas and values about how people should act, what priorities they should hold, and how others should be evaluated.

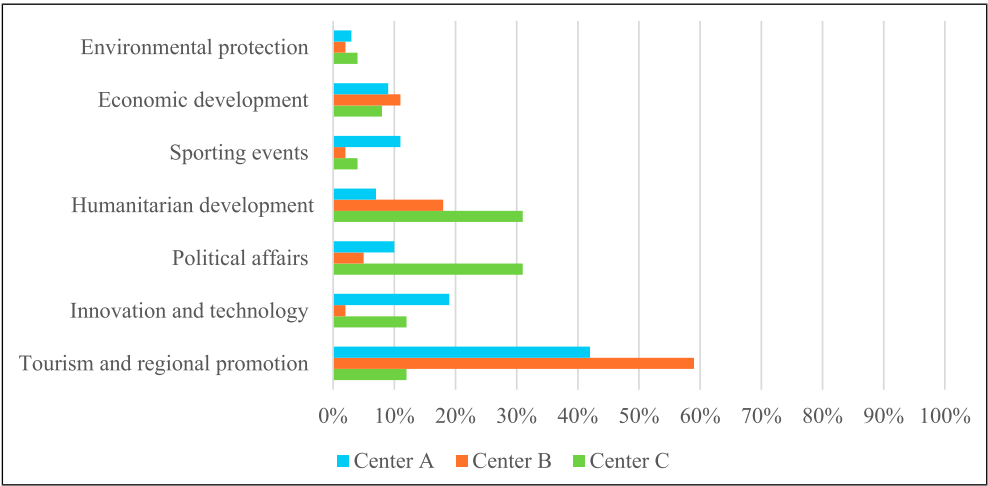


Figure 5. Relative frequency (%) of coded themes by Center A, B, and C between 1 March and 1 April 2025

Across Centers A and B, soft content is primarily constructed through *showing* rather than *telling*, that is reflected in texts highlighting regional characteristics such as festivals, cultural traditions, sporting events, cuisine, and landscapes. And while such content may initially appear apolitical, it can also signal ulterior motives of the state. Grounded in psychology and media studies (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Green & Brock, 2000; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), the idea is that by repeatedly exposing audiences to stories and messages, they can gradually shape beliefs. For example, applying Gerbner and Gross's (1976) cultivation theory suggests sustained dissemination of soft content could, over time, shape users' perceptions of reality and gradually reconfigure international views of China by softening negative preconceptions.

For instance, several posts coded under the theme *tourism and regional promotion* by Center A highlight the travels of a U.S. YouTube influencer during his trip across China. Rather than amplifying the YouTuber's personal statements about the country, these posts describe his experiences, showcasing his cultural collaborations with Chinese pop icons, visits to local landmarks, and tastings of regional cuisine. As the *Global Times* aptly summarized, "Unlike the bleak and even grim pictures often painted by some Western media, [Youtuber name] unedited and unscripted shows reveal a China that is perky, diverse, hospitable, and prosperous" (Global Times, 2025). Nevertheless, the amplification of foreign proxies in this way reveals China's expanding efforts to connect with global audiences that "feels more genuine and relatable" (Aini, 2025, para. 2). Here, ICC soft content not only repeatedly exposes audiences to his positive experiences in China but attempts to engage wider audiences with this content. For example, one post detailing his arrival in Chongqing received over 382,000 impressions, a figure considerably outperforming the center's average.

Tailoring Content for External Audiences. All three Centers engage in concerted efforts to tailor content for external audiences. Center B promotes *tourism and regional promotion* but places emphasis on the region's cross-cultural exchanges with South and Southeast Asia. This outward-facing communication aligns with what Fang (2024, p. 576) regards as "peripheral communication," whereby ICCs draw upon geographical, cultural, and historical commonalities with neighboring states. This practice reflects China's broader "neighborhood diplomacy" strategy, designed to strengthen relations with nearby Asian countries. As Wu (2018) notes, cultural activities play a pivotal role in fostering such ties. Center B illustrates this, promoting cross-cultural exchanges such as highlighting shared traditions with Myanmar during cultural festivals and amplifying the launch of a handicraft market to celebrate "the vibrant cultures of the [name of river] region." As Obaidullah (2024) observes, when a nation highlights cultural practices that promote shared values and interests, it cultivates relationships that are not only appealing but also obligational, thereby increasing the likelihood of achieving strategic objectives. For China, nurturing these relationships strengthens its regional standing.

Under the theme of *humanitarian development*, Centers A and B frequently highlight regional relief efforts, such as providing medical and rescue supplies to Myanmar following its earthquake on March 28. This theme was the second most prominent theme for Center B, accounting for 18% of posts that documented the region's supply of emergency medical and rescue resources. Accenting China's crisis response and humanitarian aid functions as a key component of its broader objective to project itself as a "good neighbor." As Ramzan (2021) argues, such aid not only fulfills urgent needs, but also consolidates Chinese influence in recipient nations.

Themes of *humanitarian development* and *political affairs* highlight Center C's more inward focused messaging on the region's role in political affairs and improved well-being under

democratic reforms and CCP rule. Under increasing pressure from the West over human rights abuses and efforts to suppress regional identity (Gyalpo, 2024; Yang, 2024), this Center appears to be adopting a different strategy from A and B. Reiterating this messaging shows how positively CCP reforms have improved regional well-being and transformed the country, reinforcing Chinese governance and control over the region. Moreover, by focusing primarily on internal affairs, the Center seeks to indirectly counter contentious narratives from the West and reconstruct the region's image as politically stable and socially progressive.

Visuals

Every sampled post contained a visual component, whether in the form of a static image, video, live stream, or a combination of image and video. Across the dataset, still images were the most frequently employed type of visual, followed by videos. Findings indicate only one visual across the randomized sample, a video selected from Center A, utilized AI technology. It should be noted, however, that with recent advancements and more sophisticated approaches that make AI-generated content harder to detect, detections by the platform may not be accurate.

Enhancing Soft Content Through Visuals. Examining the distribution of visual types and their associated themes, they were predominantly used to reinforce *tourism and regional promotion*. To examine how visuals enhanced this theme, three visuals were selected from each center. Given this theme primarily amplifies soft content, the extensive use of visuals can be understood as a strategic effort to enhance the persuasive appeal of such messaging. The consistent pairing of visuals with soft messaging further reinforces the idea that ICCs prioritize *showing* rather than *telling*. The consistent use of supplemental visuals across all sampled posts evidence ICCs rely heavily on visual content to enhance textual messages, likely to increase audience engagement.

A video posted by Center A features an AI-generated depiction of the capital city, highlighting temples alongside modern train stations and framing the region as a space where tradition and modernity converge. The use of AI technology to showcase local attributes further reinforces this dual framing. By contrast, Center B, showcases a collage of festival images depicting participants in traditional attire welcoming guests from Myanmar, emphasizing cross-border cultural exchange and the center's strong connections to Southeast Asia. These visuals reinforce Center B's outward-facing orientation and regional engagement. Meanwhile, Center C features a video sourced from the state media outlet *China Daily* that highlights the relationship between local customs and China's Two Sessions, the annual meetings of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). With both English and Chinese subtitles, the video follows a foreign speaker touring regional landmarks, situating local culture within a broader national political agenda. In this case, Center C foregrounds regional attributes using foreign proxy messengers while simultaneously promoting a national political event, the *Two Sessions*.

Certain visual elements reinforced soft textual content across the broader sample. Approximately half ($N = 13$) of posts featured local landscapes, including skyscrapers, rice terraces, palaces, and mountains. While these visual elements appear distinct when considered individually, taken together they reflect a broader ICC soft content strategy. These visual elements not only "paint" a positive image of the nation, either intentionally or unintentionally dispelling myths propagated about China, but also amplify regional narratives in ways designed to increase engagement and evoke emotional responses.

Moreover, the dissemination of digital soft textual and visual content may simultaneously contribute to national image building while advancing China's hard power objectives. In particular,

the digitalization of soft content through the promotion of *tourism and regional promotion* can serve as a mechanism for stimulating economic development. Cheng (2026) argues that China's advancements in the digital economy are positively linked to tourism performance. Similarly, Giovannini (2026) suggests that Western social media platforms, such as X, not only reshape how international audiences discover Chinese destinations but also influence international perceptions in ways that can "influence economic cooperation, educational exchanges, and business confidence" (Giovannini, 2026, para. 8). This is particularly relevant to the cases examined in this study. Mei and Gao (2026) demonstrate that the integration of culture and tourism has become a key strategy for promoting regional growth in China's ethnic regions. Given that all three cases are inland and heavily populated by minority groups, digital platforms such as social media provide a low-cost channel for centers to showcase their distinctive cultural and regional characteristics to external audiences. This reflects the growing integration of digital platforms into China's digital economy, whereby the promotion of regional identities and tourism can support local economic development.

Content Sourcing

Weaving in Political Sources to Promote National Agendas. Closer examination of the sourcing of non-original posts reveals that a substantial proportion originates from state or state-affiliated accounts. For Center C, all non-original posts ($N = 5$) were sourced exclusively from such accounts, including official spokespeople and state media. Center B exhibited a similar pattern, reposting content from Chinese embassies, media outlets, and officials ($N = 18$). Several posts, for example, amplified President Xi's comments during a local visit to the region, emphasizing cultural practices and regional towns. This reflects a broader pattern across all three Centers in which leaders' statements are circulated through official intermediaries, often to promote local characteristics.

In many cases, however, ICCs appear to selectively repost state content that advances more explicitly political narratives aligned with national objectives. While this approach suggests a strategic preference for prioritizing soft, localized content over overt political messaging, it also likely enables ICCs to engage wider audiences and cultivate trust. Previous research suggests, "more subtle, sleek and soft propaganda that is emotionally appealing or validated by reality can induce persuasion and improve opinion" (Chen, 2018; Mattingly & Yao, 2022; as cited in Huang et al., 2024, p. 2). Therefore, once audience engagement and trust are established through soft content, ICCs may be better positioned to weave in more direct political narratives by selectively sourcing material from state-affiliated accounts. For example, Center A diverged from its typical soft content by delivering a more explicit political message sourced from a state official. It reposted a video from the Cultural Counsellor of the Embassy of China in Pakistan, Zhang Heqing, who commented "China that those USAID-funded 'independent' media want you know and the real China now." The video juxtaposed Western media depictions with images of a modern, scenic China. This strategy was further evident in the event-driven thematic coordination surrounding content related to China's *Two Sessions*. All three centers relied heavily on reposting content from official state accounts to promote the meetings and align their messaging with China's broader development objectives for 2025. These accounts primarily used the "quote repost" function to circulate state-produced content while adding localized captions tailored to the region.

Recycling Content and Amplifying the Network. Center A's sourcing pattern was more diverse, drawing from both state-affiliated and non-state accounts. Of its non-original content, 86% came from state or state-affiliated sources, while 14% originated from non-state accounts. Non-state sourcing posts appear to originate from international sports accounts and influencers who publish

pro-China content, such as one self-described “social media influencer” whose posts promoted new technologies in Chongqing.

Notably, Center A repeatedly reposted other ICC content or recycled its own post. For instance, in early March, the center would consistently respond to an earlier post about a local marathon by reposting it and captioning it with an update. Though coded as “non-original,” this practice effectively indicates the center is repackaging its own material. Center A also quote posted three posts from other ICC accounts on the platform identified earlier. As a dominant center of activity, Center A is engaging in efforts to boost other ICC accounts and their visibility, all of which have smaller followings. This behavior also suggests Center A engages in both horizontal and vertical reposting, sharing content not only vertically in a top-down manner from state or state-affiliated accounts, but also horizontally across the ICC network.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates how overt ICCs function as vehicles of China’s outward soft power strategy on social media through an assessment of three centers, their digital profiles, and the ways in which they construct themes, visuals, and sourcing practices on X. Findings address RQ1 in that while accounts do signal linkages to ICCs, none display an overt affiliation with the Chinese state. Moreover, findings inform RQ2 by outlining a series of tactics and techniques used to communicate with Western audiences, whether through the consistent promotion of soft textual and visual content, employment of foreign proxies as seemingly credible intermediaries, the tailoring of profiles and content, or the selective integration of content sourced from state or state-affiliated accounts. These findings ultimately contribute to RQ3, concerning the role ICCs play in China’s contemporary outward-facing soft power strategy.

Over the past three decades, this strategy has evolved and expanded, with China’s “charm offensive” seeking both to reframe its international image in a positive light and counter external criticism. Under Xi Jinping’s leadership, this evolution has engaged a more active, state-driven approach involving a wide range of domestic institutions in more ostensibly participatory communication practices, like the use of international social media platforms. ICCs are a clear product of this transformation. The construction of the ICCs’ burgeoning digital presence reflects how the state continues to operationalize Chinese soft power while simultaneously reinventing the methods through which it attracts and persuades external audiences. Evidence collated and analyzed in this study suggest this strategy represents a deliberate effort to adapt China’s external communication practices to the contemporary digital landscape. It uses the affordances of social media to fulfill the responsibilities of ICCs in contributing to Xi’s expansion of “discourse power” by “telling Chinese stories well” and thus, enhancing China’s overarching soft power goals.

As observed in this study, this includes indirectly countering Western criticism through the promotion of positive regional portrayals, strengthening regional influence by emphasizing shared geographic and historical ties with its neighbors, and promoting major national political events. However, ICCs assume distinct communicative roles that collectively advance these broader soft power objectives. The approach appears to constitute a long-term strategy aimed at repeatedly exposing audiences to favorable portrayals of China, with the expectation that, through the normalization of these impressions on a Western platform, they will gradually coalesce into a more unified understanding of the nation.

At the same time, the social media platform X enables the state to engage in a non-traditional mode of communication, providing ICCs with a direct channel to reach and engage global audiences through the rapid transmission and sustained exposure of tailored messages. It provides a low-cost conduit for exerting soft power. The principle of *showing* rather than *telling* is particularly

salient, as the platform affords ICCs the capacity to rapidly and consistently disseminate entertaining, shareable text and visuals projecting positive images of local regions and the nation.

This notwithstanding a limitation and criticism of China's soft power efforts lie in their government-centered nature and lack of independent civil society participation, both of which undermine credibility and attractiveness. While traditional forms of soft power have historically remained closely tied to the state, the findings of this study indicate that ICCs do not explicitly reveal their top-down communication structure, as demonstrated by their omission of state affiliation. This suggests a novel; strategic shift aimed at decoupling ICCs from the visible identity of the Chinese state. Doing so helps shield ICCs from international criticism that has characterized other Chinese external communication practices in the past, criticism that has had significant implications for China's global image and the broader dynamics of international relations.

Furthermore, this study acknowledges that it is confined to only three publicly identifiable ICCs and their corresponding profiles on a single platform, X. This limitation is partly attributable to the deliberate obfuscation of ICCs on the platform. As a pervasive network, ICCs operate across X and other social media platforms with varying degrees of overt state affiliation, meaning that many likely remain unnoticed. The wider implications of these findings suggest that this obfuscation, coupled with their rapid proliferation both online and offline, affords ICCs the capacity to pivot, adopt new communicative practices, and develop evolving techniques. Ultimately, this underscores how emerging vehicles of Chinese soft power communication are becoming increasingly difficult to identify, trace, and study.

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Ethical Considerations

This research did not contain any studies involving animal or human participants, nor did it take place on any private or protected areas. The study was approved by Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to scraping from third party services and privacy surrounding potential politically sensitive data but are available from the corresponding author on request.

Notes

1. This statement has been translated by the author using a translation tool.

2. This figure is shown previously.

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