

‘We’re here to spite our government’: Intertextuality and comparative representations of TikTok migrants in Chinese and Western news discourse

Abstract: Drawing on Fairclough’s model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and intertextuality, this study examines how Chinese and Western media represent TikTok migrants in response to US digital platform restrictions. Through a comparative analysis of news coverage from Chinese outlets (*China Daily*, *Xinhua*, and *Global Times*) and Western outlets (*BBC*, *CNN*, *Reuters*, and *Associated Press*), this study identifies divergent discursive strategies and underlying ideological functions. Chinese media represent TikTok migrants as victimized refugees, welcomed guests, or cultural participants, reinforcing a narrative of inclusivity and cross-cultural engagement. However, Western media depict them as naive digital consumers, censored subjects, or rebellious libertarians, aligning their representation with discourses on digital sovereignty and ideological control. The contrasting portrayals underscore the broader geopolitical tensions between China and the West concerning platform governance and information sovereignty. This study contributes to critical media discourse analysis by revealing how news discourse functions as a site of ideological struggle in the context of global platform politics.

Keywords: Intertextuality, news discourse, media representation, TikTok, digital migrants

Introduction

The escalating contest over digital sovereignty and platform regulation has become a focal point of contemporary geopolitical tension, increasingly reflected in global media discourse (Kumar & Thussu, 2023). When the US government announced plans to ban TikTok since January 19, 2025, citing national security concerns, the decision reignited long-standing tensions over data governance (Hamilton, 2025). In response, a surge of American TikTok users migrated to RedNote, a Chinese social media platform,

propelling it to the top of the US App Store rankings (Cheung et al., 2025). While this shift began as a pragmatic response to platform restriction, it rapidly evolved into a discursive flashpoint. Chinese and Western media framed the migration in contrasting ways, invoking narratives of digital displacement, ideological resistance, and geopolitical subversion.

Building on this point, media discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of digital migration (Baker & McEnery, 2005). Digital migration refers to the symbolic relocation of users across national or ideologically distinct platforms (Leurs & Smets, 2018). However, prior studies focus on representations of transnational or labor migrants (Soboleva, 2025; Phanthaphoommee & Dounghummes, 2025), leaving the discursive construction of digital migrants largely unexplored. Additionally, media discourses typically frame migrants in contrasting ways: as victims of humanitarian crises (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017), or as ideological threats (Jontes & Vehovar, 2024; Yilmaz et al., 2023). Such analyses are often limited to domestic contexts, overlooking how oppositional frames function across the transnational mediascape.

To address this gap, this study examines how Chinese and Western media outlets construct competing representations of TikTok migrants. This analysis unfolds within the context of escalating US–China platform rivalry—a geopolitical contestation manifested through clashes over technological hegemony and platform governance norms (Rolf & Schindler, 2023). Meanwhile, TikTok migrants are defined as users who relocate their digital presence from TikTok to RedNote. Their representations critically function as discursive realizations of core tensions in this rivalry (Gray & Suri, 2019). To unpack these representations, this study integrates intertextuality and critical discourse analysis (CDA) as complementary analytical frameworks. Intertextuality emphasizes how texts embed, or transform fragments of other discourses, allowing journalists to selectively recontextualize voices (Fairclough, 1992; Van Leeuwen, 2008). CDA views language as a socially situated practice that reproduces or challenges relations of power and ideology (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 2008). This dual

framework enables a comparative examination of how global narratives are discursively constructed and ideologically positioned across media systems.

Furthermore, this study purposively selected seven prominent news outlets from China and the West, including *China Daily*, *Xinhua*, *Global Times*, *BBC*, *CNN*, *Reuters*, and *Associated Press (AP)*. The dataset was then coded to identify intertextual voices and discursive patterns, which were analyzed using Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional CDA model. Accordingly, this research addresses the following questions: (1) How do Chinese and Western media represent TikTok migrants through intertextual discourse? (2) What ideological and power relations are reflected in the media representations of TikTok migrants? By revealing the discursive strategies embedded in media representations of TikTok migrants, this study advances theoretical understanding of platform geopolitics and contributes empirical insight into the evolving landscape of transnational media discourse.

Literature review

Existing scholarship on media discourse and migrant identity has been extensively explored. One dominant strand highlights the humanitarian framing of migrants, portraying them as helpless, voiceless, or marginalized subjects within victimization narratives (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Phanthaphoommee & Dounghummes, 2025). Another emphasizes the securitization of migration, wherein media narratives align with state agendas by presenting migrants as threats to national identity, thereby justifying discrimination, exclusion, or even xenophobic responses (Jontes & Vehovar, 2024; Pruitt, 2019; Yilmaz et al., 2023). While these studies focus on physical migrants, the discursive mechanisms they identify are also applicable to digital migrants, who similarly traverse cultural boundaries and undergo processes of re-identification, inclusion, or exclusion.

In parallel, another strand of literature has examined the intersection of media discourse and the politics of digital sovereignty. Scholars such as Fuchs (2022) and Flew et al. (2019) demonstrate that state interventions in digital platforms are often

legitimized through media narratives emphasizing citizens' data and national security. Moreover, digital platforms themselves are increasingly viewed as quasi-sovereign entities that exercise content regulation and algorithmic curation (Gillespie, 2018; Heylen, 2024; Kumar & Thussu, 2023). Through these mechanisms, platforms function as discursive actors, actively influencing speech norms, and political expression (Zuboff, 2019). Most studies successfully analyze macro-structural dynamics such as platform governance and state-tech relations. However, it overlooks how users, especially those migrating across platforms, are discursively represented.

Theoretical framework

Intertextuality

Intertextuality, originally conceptualized by Kristeva (1980) and later developed by Fairclough (1992, 2003), constitutes a foundational concept in the construction of media discourse. Fairclough (1992, p. 84) defines it as “the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts,” which may be integrated, contradicted, or echoed within new textual configurations. This perspective highlights that texts are not isolated utterances but are formed through the incorporation and transformation of prior discourses.

Subsequently, scholars have emphasized how intertextuality enables the recontextualization of voices to serve ideological purposes. As Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 6) notes, discourse represents social practice, and intertextual fragments can be strategically mobilized to “serve the contextually defined purpose.” It involves the strategic selection, omission, and reframing of voices, allowing media institutions to legitimize dominant narratives while marginalizing others (Gong et al., 2023; Hashmi et al., 2023). In this sense, journalists are not passive conveyors of information but active agents in the structuring of ideological meaning through the voices they choose to include or exclude.

In this study, intertextuality serves to reveal how quoted voices are used to position

TikTok migrants within larger ideological frameworks. Here, ideological positioning denotes the way media discourse aligns groups or nations with value systems and political agendas (Don & Lee, 2014). These ideological stances reflect the geopolitical narratives of the media system in which they are embedded (Fairclough, 1992; Van Leeuwen, 2008). In other words, intertextual selections are not just stylistic choices but mechanisms through which media construct competing visions of digital order, platform governance, and international relations.

Fairclough's 3D CDA

To analyze how these intertextual choices operate ideologically, this study draws on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional CDA model, which connects textual analysis, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. It can be used to examine the ways texts hegemonize and legitimize one's position (and others) in a social hierarchy (Yoong et al., 2013). As Fairclough (1995, p. 133) explains, "the connection between text and social practice is seen as being mediated by discourse practice". That is, media texts are not only shaped by their broader social contexts but also reproduce these structures through linguistic choices and intertextual cues.

At the textual level, this study examines how lexical choices and metaphors construct TikTok migrants' identities. At the discourse practice level, it investigates sourcing practices and the recontextualization of external voices, revealing how news producers selectively amplify or silence certain perspectives. Finally, at the sociocultural level, the analysis situates media narratives within broader ideological struggles over digital sovereignty. China's assertion of platform autonomy and data governance reflects not merely a push for technical self-reliance, but a deliberate challenge to Western-centric models of digital order (DeNardis, 2014). Crucially, this ideological divergence is inseparable from intensifying geopolitical competition between China and the West. In this context, control over digital infrastructure has become a proxy for soft power, technological autonomy, and global strategic influence (Kumar & Thussu, 2023). Given these ideological stakes, this multi-layered approach enables a critical understanding of

how competing media systems discursively frame the same actors in divergent ways.

Methodology

Data collection

This study selected news reports from seven globally influential news outlets based on their institutional affiliations and international visibility. The dataset includes three Chinese state-affiliated media outlets (*China Daily*, *Xinhua* and *Global Times*), and four Western media outlets (*BBC*, *CNN*, *Reuters* and *AP*). All articles were retrieved directly from the official websites of these media organizations using a purposive sampling strategy.

China Daily is widely recognized as the “official mouthpiece” of the Chinese Communist Party and serves as a central instrument of China’s international public diplomacy (Liu & Li, 2017). *Xinhua*, China’s official state news agency, performs a dual role as both domestic information source and external propaganda channel (Wasserman, 2016). *Global Times*, a tabloid-style subsidiary of *People’s Daily*, is regarded as an unusual official newspaper (Soboleva, 2025). Targeting a mass audience rather than political elites, it adopts a popular orientation that allows for comparatively greater editorial flexibility (Zeng & Sparks, 2020). These Chinese outlets function within a state-aligned media system characterized by ideological conformity (Kuang, 2020).

Meanwhile, *BBC* operates as the public service broadcaster of the UK, long regarded as a benchmark for journalistic independence and international broadcasting standards (Cushion, 2022, p. 4). *CNN*, a privately-owned American cable news network, commands a global audience and plays a prominent role in shaping public opinion (Hamas Elmasry, 2024). Finally, *Reuters* and *AP*, both international wire agencies, are known for wide syndication and fact-based reporting (Baum & Groeling, 2008). Variations in ownership and editorial mandates notwithstanding, these Western media outlets tend to discursively align with national interests in platform geopolitics (Hallin

& Mancini, 2004). Although the China–West binary inevitably simplifies internal variation, it remains analytically valuable for revealing structural asymmetries in digital migration discourse.

To construct the dataset, a systematic keyword search was conducted. Search terms included “TikTok ban,” “RedNote migration,” “TikTok refugees,” and “TikTok migrants”. Boolean search operators (e.g., “RedNote” OR “Xiaohongshu” AND “TikTok migrants”; “RedNote” OR “Xiaohongshu” AND “TikTok ban”) were applied to ensure thematic relevance. The search targeted articles published between January 15, 2025, and March 5, 2025, a period marked by intensified legislative debate in the US regarding TikTok’s potential ban, and a surge in American user migration to RedNote. Moreover, the selection excluded editorials, opinion pieces, and blog posts, focusing on hard news reports (i.e. brief, fact-focused coverage of this events) to ensure consistency in news discourse analysis. The final dataset consists of 26 articles—13 articles from Chinese media and 13 from Western media—providing a balanced comparative corpus of key developments, expert analyses, and public reactions. Although modest in number, the dataset was sufficient to support in-depth qualitative analysis of discursive strategies and intertextual representations. **Table 1** summarizes a selection of key news articles from the dataset.

Table 1: Key news articles about TikTok migrants.

Media	Date	Title	Main Focus
<i>China Daily</i>	2025/01/15	‘TikTok refugees’ migrate to RedNote amid ban fears	Framing users as refugees
<i>Xinhua</i>	2025/01/18	Cultural exchanges being boosted as US TikTok migrants migrate to alternative Chinese app	Emphasizing cross-cultural interactions
<i>Global Times</i>	2025/01/15	‘Cat taxes’ showcase openness, humor of Chinese netizens as ‘TikTok refugees’ flood RedNote	Emphasizing cross-cultural interactions
<i>BBC</i>	2025/01/18	Americans and Chinese share jokes on ‘alternative TikTok’ as US ban looms	Emphasizing cross-cultural interactions

<i>AP news</i>	2025/01/15	US TikTok migrants flock to Chinese app RedNote in protest with TikTok ban looming	Highlighting US government policies
<i>CNN</i>	2025/01/16	As US TikTok migrants move to RedNote, some are encountering Chinese-style censorship for the first time	Highlighting concerns over censorship
<i>Reuters</i>	2025/01/17	Chinese app RedNote gained millions of US users this week as ‘TikTok refugees’ joined ahead of ban	Focusing on RedNote platform

Data analysis

To examine how TikTok migrants are represented in news discourse, this study first identified and categorized quoted voices, including individuals, organizations, or institutions cited for information or opinion. This process allows for an assessment of whose perspectives are foregrounded or marginalized in shaping media narratives. Building on this mapping of source distribution, the study then selected 15 intertextual excerpts for close analysis. Intertextual passages are privileged because they are both abundant and decisive in the corpus. These excerpts were chosen based on explicit intertextual moves, such as historical analogies, official quotations, or cross-story callbacks. On average, each article has 4.2 of these inserts. Drawing on Fairclough’s three-dimensional CDA framework, the analysis further explored how textual choices contribute to framing discourse, influencing public interpretation and reinforcing or contesting geopolitical and digital governance narratives.

By critically interrogating these intertextual elements, this study aims to reveal how Chinese and Western media construct competing representations of TikTok migrants. The study examines not only the explicit framing of TikTok migrants but also the underlying power relations embedded in these narratives, particularly in relation to the geopolitics of digital platforms and the ideological tensions between China and the West. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions on media hegemony, digital sovereignty, and intertextuality in global news discourse.

Findings

Voices of quoted news actors

Discourse is not a neutral reflection of reality but a means of constructing it, shaped by social relations, ideological positions, and institutional structures (Fairclough, 2013). In media discourse, this construction is often realized through the selection and attribution of quoted voices.

Table 2 categorizes the quoted news actors into seven distinct groups: (1) RedNote/TikTok netizens (Chinese media 25 actors; Western media 12 actors); (2) RedNote/TikTok celebrities (Chinese media 6 actors; Western media 11 actors); (3) US government officials (Chinese media 4 actors; Western media 4 actors); (4) US scholars and analysts (Chinese media 1 actor; Western media 3 actors); (5) Chinese government officials (Chinese media 2 actors; Western media 4 actors); (6) Chinese scholars and analysts (Chinese media 7 actors; Western media 6 actors); and (7) News media or institutions (Chinese media 7 actors; Western media 12 actors). These groups are further classified in **Table 3** into public and elite actors, following established criteria (see Couldry, 2010; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). Despite nongovernmental, celebrities are categorized as elite actors based on their media visibility and agenda-setting capacity.

Table 2. Voices of mentioned news actors.

Voices quoted	News actors quoted in Chinese media	News actors quoted in Western media
RedNote/TikTok netizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• @El Vampiro, American RedNote user (screen name)• Douglas ("neonhotel"), American RedNote user• Sarah Dale, blogger from Mississippi• Sarah Thrush, American user• Alex Zhee, 14, from New York• Mary Jo, 57, American RedNote user• Makeenie Robinson, graduate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sarah Fotheringham, 37, school canteen worker in Utah• Marcus Robinson, fashion designer in Virginia• Sydney Crawley, Tennessee tech worker• "Definitelynotchippy", RedNote user (screen name)• Alexis Garman, 21, in Oklahoma• "Amanda", American RedNote user (screen name)

	<p>student in early 20s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tito Colon, 20s, American user • Yannan Zhang, loyal user of RedNote in the US • Brecken Neumann, American user • “Rosie_in_Wonderland”, American RedNote user (screen name) • Tony Oswald, a freelance filmmaker based in New York • “Finnfinndog,” netizen from Michigan • Cristian, from the state of New York • “WakoGeek”, American RedNote user (screen name) • Nina, from Texas • David Urbinma, 30, linguistics teacher from Santiago • Marly, senior student from the University of Virginia • Amy, American user from Massachusetts • Isabel Adelia, RedNote user • Yuzijiang, Beijing-based RedNote user • Abe, Chinese user, English interpreter in Beijing • Unnamed user, from Sichuan • Unnamed user, from Guangdong Province • Chinese netizen surnamed Liu 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alejandro Flores-Munoz, catering business owner, in the Denver area • Katie Lawson, farmer in Tulsa, Oklahoma • Jeremy Fraga, father of three from Fort Worth, Texas • @Thiqydusty, TikTok user (screen name) • Jacob Hui, translator in the eastern Chinese city of Hangzhou
RedNote/TikTok celebrities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leah Saifi, influencer from New York • Emily Senn, singer with 347,600 followers • Charlie Puth, singer • Victoria Paris, singer with 1.9 million followers • Doecheii, singer • Meizijiang, Chinese RedNote influencer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terrell Wade, comedian, actor and content creator • Janette Ok, full-time content creator based in Los Angeles • Jordan Smith, former WNBA player • Heather Roberts, American artist • Jasmine Chiswell, TikTok influencer • Mike Gottschalk, TikTok content creator • Stormi Steele, TikTok content

		<p>creator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Molinaro, TikTok content creator • Mark Gaetano, TikTok content creator • Amber Marie, TikTok content creator • Dana Donnelly, TikTok content creator
US government officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US lawmakers • Donald Trump • Joe Biden administration • US Supreme Court 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President Joe Biden's administration • White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre • US Department of Justice • The White House
US scholars and analysts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adrien Halliez, political science professor at Drake University 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kelsey Chickering, principal analyst at Forrester • Elettra Bietti, assistant professor at Northeastern University • Jake Maughan, head of influencer marketing at advertising firm BENlabs
Chinese government officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China's Foreign Ministry • Pan Helin, member of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology's Expert Committee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beijing • Guo Jiakun, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson • China's Foreign Ministry • Chinese President Xi Jinping
Chinese scholars and analysts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cui Di, associate professor at Fudan University's School of Journalism • Xiang Debao, professor of international communication at Beijing Foreign Studies University • Zheng Chuang, research fellow at Shanghai International Studies University • Shi Anbin, professor at Tsinghua University • Wang Peng, researcher at the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences • Lyu Xiang, non-resident senior fellow at the Center for China and Globalization • Zhang Zheng, associate dean of research at Tsinghua University 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ren Yi, the Harvard-educated grandson of a former Chinese Communist leader • Liu Xingliang, Beijing-based independent industry analyst • Lao Zhou Heng Mei, former WeChat politics blogger • Rose Luqiu, journalism professor at Hong Kong Baptist University • Rush Doshi, expert on China and a former senior Biden administration official • Ivy Yang, China tech analyst and founder of consulting firm Wavelet Strategy

News media or institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Xinhua News Agency • Reuters • CNN • BBC • language-learning app Duolingo • TikTok • The New York Times 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reuters • Analytics firm Similarweb • People’s Daily • TikTok • San Francisco-based market intelligence firm Sensor Tower • Media intelligence firm PeakMetrics • Yangcheng Evening News • RedNote’s official website • The Information • Clapper • ByteDance • Neptune’s website
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Table 3. Distribution of public and elite actors.

Voices quoted		Chinese media		Western media	
		N	%	N	%
Public actors	RedNote/TikTok netizens	25	48.1%	12	23.1%
Elite actors	RedNote/TikTok celebrity	6	11.5%	11	21.2%
	US government officials	4	7.7%	4	7.7%
	US scholars and analysts	1	1.9%	3	5.8%
	Chinese government officials	2	3.8%	4	7.7%
	Chinese scholars and analysts	7	13.5%	6	11.5%
	News media or institutions	7	13.5%	12	23.1%
	Total	27	51.9%	40	76.9%
Total		52	100%	52	100%

The distribution reveals significant differences in sourcing strategies. Chinese media amplify public actors (48.1%, N = 25) at more than double the rate of their Western counterparts (23.1%, N = 12), reinforcing a stronger grassroots presence. Conversely, Western media heavily rely on elite sources (76.9%, N = 40) compared to Chinese media (51.9%, N = 27). This distribution underscores Western media’s emphasis on institutional authority and expert perspectives.

Among elite voices, Western media cite News media or institutions (23.1%, N = 12) and RedNote/TikTok celebrity (21.2%, N = 11) at considerably higher frequencies than Chinese media (13.5% and 11.5%, respectively). In contrast, Chinese media distribute elite voices more evenly across different categories, including government officials and scholars. These differences reflect broader media practices. Western media tend to

reinforce top-down agenda-setting by privileging institutional actors and digital influencers, whereas Chinese media adopt a comparatively participatory approach to news construction, incorporating both grassroots perspectives and diversified elite sources.

Having mapped the distribution of quoted voices, the next section turns to the discursive content attributed to each actor group, with attention to how their statements frame the TikTok migrant phenomenon in ideologically loaded terms.

Representation of TikTok migrants in Chinese media

TikTok migrants as victimized refugees. Chinese media frequently construct TikTok migrants as “refugees,” portraying their platform transition not as voluntary shift but as digital displacement caused by geopolitical coercion. The term “refugee” appeared more than 30 times across the sample, evoking narratives of helplessness, vulnerability, and exclusion. This framing aligns with victimization discourse, where subjects portrayed as powerless acquire moral legitimacy and emotional resonance (Baker & McEnery, 2005). By emphasizing migrants’ lack of agency, Chinese media position them as victims of unjust US policies, thereby implicitly criticizing American digital sovereignty claims.

Excerpt 1

“Hello everyone, my name is Ryan. I’m a TikTok refugee. The American government is banning TikTok, so we’re looking for an alternative... We’re very sorry to interrupt you here. Hope we don’t have to stay for too long.” (*China Daily*, Jan 16, 2025)

In ***Excerpt 1***, the user Ryan identifies himself as a “TikTok refugee”, reinterpreting digital platform migration as forced exile. His apologetic tone, “Sorry to interrupt,” further supports this displacement, casting TikTok users as reluctant intruders in an unfamiliar space. Rather than a neutral portrayal, Chinese media foreground such expressions to construct a discourse of exclusion and injustice. As Van Dijk’s (2008) states, discourse producers often privilege certain voices to reinforce institutional

critiques and legitimize alternative narratives.

Excerpt 2

“TikTok has become an integral part of infrastructure, deeply influencing social culture. Many users rely on it for their livelihood, and their strong attachment to the platform leads them to consider themselves ‘refugees’ displaced from their home,” Cui said. (*China Daily*, Jan 15, 2025)

Excerpt 2, attributed to an academic voice, elevates TikTok beyond a mere entertainment platform. The characterization of TikTok as “infrastructure” reframes the ban as a form of systemic disruption, not a regulatory decision. The phrase “displaced from their home” evokes emotional and existential dislocation, reinforcing the affective dimension of victimhood (Martin & White, 2005). By quoting a university-affiliated scholar, Chinese media lend institutional authority to this metaphor. As Fairclough (1995) suggests, expert discourse plays a legitimizing role in ideological framing. In this case, it naturalizes the victimhood narrative while presenting the US government as a perpetrator of digital injustice.

Through repeated references to “refugees,” Chinese media construct a binary opposition between “oppressive” US authorities and “displaced” TikTok migrants. This framing casts the US as a coercive power that undermines user freedom, while positioning China as a potential site of digital refuge. In doing so, it highlights China’s efforts to contest Western narratives of technological hegemony (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

TikTok migrants as welcomed guests. Chinese media construct TikTok migrants as welcomed guests in China’s digital space, emphasizing hospitality and cultural openness. This framing positions platforms like RedNote as inclusive and cosmopolitan, instead of politically contentious. By depicting TikTok migrants as voluntarily embracing Chinese digital culture rather than being displaced by geopolitical tensions, Chinese media subtly depoliticize the migration phenomenon.

Excerpt 3

“I heard the Chinese citizens of Red Note are asking for a pet tax from all new American refugees. Here's my submission to the pet tax. I hope it will suffice,” said @El Vampiro, a US user on RedNote, alongside a photo of his cats. (*China Daily*, Jan 15, 2025)

Excerpt 4

“Don't sweat it homie, Shenzhen's basically China's litty Miami -- we got palm trees, beaches and that 24/7 vibe,” one netizen from Guangdong Province, where Shenzhen is located, commented. “Come visit me, I'll buy you the best bubble tea,” remarked another. (*Xinhua*, Feb, 21, 2025)

In *Excerpt 3*, the notion of a “pet tax” functions as a humorous initiation ritual. Although the term “tax” typically implies coercion, it is reappropriated as a playful gesture of community bonding. This aligns with discursive inclusion strategies, wherein informal norms are employed to integrate newcomers and reduce social distance (Van Leeuwen, 2008). The user's submission of a cat photo becomes a symbolic act of cultural participation, signaling not just adaptation but reciprocal acceptance.

Similarly, *Excerpt 4* demonstrates how informal and localized discourse further performs the “guest” identity. The casual, colloquial tone, including phrases such as “homie,” “litty Miami,” and “bubble tea”, serves two discursive functions. Firstly, it reduces cultural distance, positioning the host country as accessible and familiar rather than foreign. Secondly, it reverses the power dynamic inherent in migration discourse, with local users extending invitations to digital newcomers. From a pragmatic perspective, this mirrors Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies, where informal bonding mechanisms serve to minimize social distance and maximize solidarity.

By quoting public actors, Chinese media frame these interactions as organic and grassroots. The power dynamic in migration discourse is subtly inverted—rather than gatekeepers of a closed system, Chinese users are positioned as generous hosts extending invitations to new digital neighbors. This softens the geopolitical tensions

embedded in the platform migration and positions RedNote as a site of intercultural engagement rather than geopolitical retreat.

TikTok migrants as cultural participants. Beyond portraying TikTok migrants as refugees or guests, Chinese media further construct them as cultural participants. This narrative emphasizes voluntary digital engagement, cross-cultural curiosity, and long-term adaptation. Rather than positioning TikTok users as transient or politically displaced, the media foreground their willingness to explore, connect, and integrate with Chinese digital communities.

Excerpt 5

“I really love the community you all have built here. I’m constantly in awe of how wonderful and joyous you are to each other. Thank you everyone for your acceptance and excitement.” (*China Daily*, Feb 5, 2025)

Excerpt 6

“This app opened my eyes to how hospitable the Chinese people can be. I’ve met some friends here and we sent pictures of our lives to each other. One of my friends sent me pictures of the Forbidden City and that was awesome,” Cristian added. (*Xinhua*, Feb 21, 2025)

In ***Excerpt 5***, the speaker expresses deep emotional attachment to the new digital environment, using positively charged language such as “love,” “wonderful,” and “acceptance.” According to Appraisal Theory, such evaluative language functions as a resource for building affiliation and reinforcing group identity (Martin & White, 2005). Here, TikTok migrants are no longer passive users or outsiders—they are positioned as emotionally invested members of a shared digital community. Chinese media’s amplification of these affective statements contributes to a discourse of mutual respect and belonging. ***Excerpt 6*** further reinforces the notion of digital platforms as cultural bridges. The user’s reference to “pictures of the Forbidden City” underscores not just social interaction but cultural learning. By foregrounding this symbolic interaction, Chinese media reframe RedNote as a platform for intercultural connection, where American users are not only accepted but also enriched by Chinese history and values.

The migrant is thus cast as a learner, not a dissenter, a participant in a mutually beneficial process of discovery.

Excerpt 7

Marly, a senior student from the University of Virginia, also told the *Global Times* that she wouldn't mind learning Chinese to use the app and studying the language is now on her 2025 to-do list. (*Global Times*, Jan 13, 2025)

In *Excerpt 7*, the user's intention to learn Mandarin signals a deeper level of commitment. Language acquisition represents not just cultural interest but a willingness to adapt one's identity in response to a new digital environment. Rather than being portrayed as someone fleeing regulation, she is framed as a proactive cultural explorer. From a discourse perspective, this reflects discursive inclusion, the framing of foreign users not only as permitted participants but as those who align with local norms and values through personal initiative (Fairclough & Wodak, 2011).

By amplifying such user voices, Chinese media construct a narrative of organic integration, where TikTok migrants are not merely tolerated but embraced and valued. Unlike the metaphor of "refugees," which connotes passivity, this identity foregrounds agency and mutual exchange. This framing aligns with China's broader attempts to position its digital platforms not only as technologically advanced but also culturally open.

Representation of TikTok migrants in Western media

TikTok migrants as naive digital consumers. Western media frequently portray TikTok migrants as digitally indifferent individuals, unconcerned about data privacy and dismissive of government surveillance. This representation suggests users trivialize national security concerns and reinforces a paternalistic discourse that legitimizes state regulation of digital spaces.

Excerpt 8

"I'm just a simple person living a simple life," Ms. Fotheringham told the BBC

in a RedNote message. “I don't have anything that China doesn't, and if they want my data that bad they can have it.” (*BBC*, Jan 20, 2025)

Excerpt 9

“I surrender all my data to China. Here you go, China, in exchange for keeping my TikTok, you can have all my information,” a TikTok user who goes by @Thiqydusty said in a video. (*AP News*, Jan 22, 2025)

Excerpt 8 begins with “I’m just a simple person living a simple life.” Here, a macro-political issue (data security and state surveillance) is reframed as a trivial personal concern. The follow-up clause, “if they want my data that bad, they can have it,” adopts sarcasm to downplay coercion, recasting state surveillance as inconsequential. *Excerpt 9* amplifies the same strategy through hyperbolic surrender: “I surrender all my data to China. Here you go.” The direct address “you” is deliberately vague; it collapses the complex apparatus of state agencies and corporate actors into a single, faceless interlocutor. By blurring the responsibility holder, the speaker removes the locus of accountability — another hallmark of de-ideologization (Van Dijk, 2008). The exaggerated offer of “all my information” functions as satire: it mocks the very logic of surveillance by pretending full compliance, thus stripping the threat of its rhetorical force.

When Western outlets re-contextualize these quotes as representative public sentiment, they simultaneously passivate the users (Van Leeuwen, 2008). The sarcastic voices are interpreted not as strategic ridicule but as evidence of naive or insufficient digital literacy. This discursive move foregrounds user vulnerability while backgrounding user agency, opening a narrative space in which policy intervention appears protective rather than coercive. In short, the de-ideologizing tactics within the excerpts are re-ideologized by the media frame, converting personal satire into a rationale for governance. A notable contradiction emerges when such “naive” users are simultaneously framed as ideological threats. Consider the following:

Excerpt 10

“Propagandists from the United States can easily achieve their goals by

following a simple routine - first praise you a few words to make you ‘relax your vigilance’, and then bring their own goods to subtly influence you,” he said in an article first published on Wednesday morning that was later deleted. (*Reuters*, Jan 16, 2025)

At first glance, ***Excerpt 10*** conveys Chinese nationalist suspicion. The phrase “relax your vigilance” positions RedNote not as a neutral social space but as an ideological battleground. However, in Western media’s recontextualization, this warning is repurposed to underscore US concerns about foreign influence. By citing Ren Yi’s statement, Western outlets redirect the focus from Chinese anxiety about Western propaganda toward the perceived threat posed by Chinese platforms themselves. In this context, the platform becomes an ideological apparatus, and TikTok migrants are cast as unconscious ideological agents.

At the sociocultural level, the dual construction reflects deeper anxieties over digital sovereignty. It enables Western media to shift the narrative from platform regulation to ideological defense, reframing surveillance discourse as information warfare. As a result, the representation of TikTok migrants helps normalize heightened US control over digital platforms under the guise of national interest.

TikTok migrants as censored subjects. Western media frequently construct TikTok migrants as subjects who, upon leaving an allegedly free digital ecosystem, enter a system of ideological surveillance. Specifically, their transition to RedNote is an entry into a digital sphere marked by censorship and normative constraints, seen as the antithesis of Western digital freedoms. In doing so, censorship becomes both a thematic focus and a symbolic boundary marker in articulating Sino-Western technological difference.

Excerpt 11

“Americans are used to very clear and transparent rules, and they cannot accept the censorship system within the Great Firewall,” wrote former WeChat politics blogger Lao Zhou Heng Mei on X, adding that this was a “honeymoon period” for American users. (*Reuters*, Jan 17, 2025)

Excerpt 11 contrasts “transparent rules” with “the censorship system”, positioning Western platforms as open and predictable while framing China’s as repressive and unpredictable. The metaphor “honeymoon period” suggests an inevitable decline from initial curiosity to eventual disenchantment, constructing Chinese digital space as fundamentally incompatible with Western users’ values. This reflects Fairclough’s (1995) notion of ideological naturalization, wherein Western ideals (e.g., transparency and openness) are positioned as normative, while alternatives are rendered illegitimate. However, the binary overlooks how Western platforms also employ algorithmic control and content moderation, thereby masking shared structural features under the guise of cultural difference.

Excerpt 12

Another said they had asked “What [sic] Chinese think about gay people?” and received a similar notification, that they had violated “public moral order” guidelines. And Chinese users keep reminding Americans on the app “not to mention sensitive topics, such as politics, religion and drugs”. (*BBC*, Jan 17, 2025)

Here, censorship becomes not only a regulatory apparatus but a socialized norm. The phrase “public moral order” functions as an ideologically loaded construct that legitimizes the suppression of certain topics. More significantly, the agency shifts from the state to users themselves—Chinese users are reported as reminding Americans of taboo topics. This dynamic resonates with disciplinary power, where social subjects internalize and reproduce normative boundaries, rendering overt control unnecessary (Foucault, 2013). Yet, the text fails to acknowledge how similar peer-regulation practices, such as community reporting and shadow banning, are equally prevalent in Western platforms.

Excerpt 13

Some security experts have already raised concerns that RedNote could also pass along US user data to the Chinese government and that many Americans won’t understand what they’re allowing when they agree to the app’s terms of service, which are only available in Mandarin. (*CNN*, Jan 16, 2025)

Excerpt 13 extends the discourse from censorship to surveillance and asymmetrical

access. The reference to “security experts” exemplifies what Van Leeuwen (1996) calls functionalization (the attribution of authority through occupational labeling). By citing unnamed experts, the narrative constructs epistemic legitimacy, allowing speculative claims to appear factual. Simultaneously, the inaccessibility of terms of service constructs American users as vulnerable, linguistically disempowered, and subject to opaque control mechanisms. However, this discourse obscures a broader irony: Western platforms also use opaque legalese and routinely collect data under similarly inaccessible terms. Thus, the ideological asymmetry constructed here is less about factual governance structures than about symbolic power—where transparency is assumed to be culturally Western, and opacity Eastern.

TikTok migrants as rebellious libertarians. Western media also frame TikTok migrants as digital resisters—individuals who assert their political autonomy by actively defying US digital governance measures. This representation departs from portrayals of passive adaptation, instead emphasizing intentional acts of subversion, trolling, and irony as expressions of cultural resistance. Within this discourse, digital migration becomes more than a response to platform bans; it becomes a performative gesture of protest against perceived state overreach.

Excerpt 14

“The reason that our government is telling us that they are banning TikTok is because they’re insisting that it’s owned by you guys, the Chinese people, government, whatever,” said one new RedNote user, Definitelynotchippy. She goes on to explain why she is on RedNote: “A lot of us are smarter than that though so we decided to piss off our government and download an actual Chinese app. We call that trolling, so in short we’re here to spite our government and to learn about China and hang out with you guys.” (*BBC*, Jan 18, 2025)

Excerpt 14 exemplifies carnivalesque resistance. Users employ vulgar humor and irreverent speech to temporarily invert dominant power hierarchies (Bakhtin, 1984). The phrase “we’re here to spite our government” dramatizes dissent, converting personal expression into a performative declaration of digital rebellion. By labeling their actions as “trolling,” the user reframes digital migration as a playful yet politically

charged gesture, and recasts platform switching as an act of ideological protest. In amplifying this voice, Western media reposition the TikTok migrant from a victim of state regulation to an empowered agent reclaiming digital autonomy.

Excerpt 15

Language learning app Duolingo said Wednesday it has seen a 216% spike in new Mandarin users compared to this time last year, potentially owing to the Americans joining RedNote, which features lots of content in Mandarin. “Learning Mandarin out of spite? You’re not alone,” Duolingo said in a post on X. (CNN, Jan 16, 2025)

Institutional voice represents a different layer of discourse: the platformization of resistance. In *Excerpt 15*, Duolingo’s post humorously commodifies political disobedience, transforming user protest into brand engagement and marketing narratives. The ironic question “Learning Mandarin out of spite?” suggests that geopolitical defiance has become a user trend, blending ideological resistance with lifestyle branding. This reflects a broader logic in platform capitalism where dissent is absorbed, aestheticized, and recirculated as a mode of engagement.

Overall, the representation reinforces a familiar binary in Western political discourse: the freedom-seeking individual versus the overreaching state. By highlighting TikTok migrants as rebellious libertarians, Western media not only legitimize user agency but also subtly critique US digital sovereignty efforts. Also, this framing may obscure the structural constraints of platform governance, simplifying complex geopolitical tensions to digestible narratives of youthful rebellion. Ultimately, such portrayals serve a dual ideological function: challenging the moral legitimacy of TikTok bans while reaffirming individualism as the cultural cornerstone of digital freedom.

Discussion and conclusion

Drawing on Fairclough’s model of CDA and intertextuality theory, this study highlights the representations of TikTok migrants in Chinese and Western media, revealing how discourse is strategically employed to frame digital migration in alignment with

ideological contestation.

In Western media, TikTok migrants are discursively constructed as either naive digital consumers, censored subjects, or rebellious libertarians. These representations align with a broader securitization discourse (Buzan et al., 1998), where digital behavior becomes a matter of national security. By repeatedly emphasizing surveillance threats, opaque governance, and ideological manipulation, Western media contribute to a securitized public imagination. Audiences are encouraged to view cross-platform mobility as dangerous and misguided, fostering concern over the reach of foreign digital powers. This securitized framing, in turn, facilitates the legitimization of state intervention. By portraying TikTok migrants as individuals who unknowingly expose themselves to Chinese surveillance or as actors who unwittingly engage in digital colonization, Western media discursively legitimize regulatory interventions while maintaining the illusion of user agency. This mirrors previous securitization efforts against Chinese digital infrastructure, such as Huawei (Campion, 2020) and chip restrictions (Yang, 2024), where state and media narratives co-construct China's digital expansion as a geopolitical threat.

In contrast, Chinese media adopt a counter-hegemonic approach by constructing TikTok migrants as victimized refugees, welcomed guests, or cultural participants, with narratives that strategically position China as a more inclusive digital space. These representations shape domestic public perception by reinforcing a sense of national pride and digital confidence. The image of grateful foreign users embracing Chinese platforms serves to validate the quality and attractiveness of China's digital infrastructure. By depicting the migration as an act of admiration rather than necessity, media narratives generate emotional resonance and public endorsement of China's digital leadership. As a result, these narratives subtly legitimize the existing digital governance framework while projecting Chinese platforms as symbols of soft power and global leadership (Nye, 2004). This aligns with China's "community of shared future in cyberspace" framework (Creemers, 2017), which promotes an alternative non-Western model of internet governance.

Finally, these competing discursive strategies also shape the operational realities of journalism. In both media systems, reporting on cross-border platform dynamics is filtered through institutional mandates and geopolitical alignments (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Journalists must navigate ideological expectations while balancing professional norms and national interests. This calls for heightened reflexivity and awareness of how news production itself contributes to framing digital migration not merely as a technical issue, but as a site of ideological struggle.

Limitations and future directions

This study, while offering a critical analysis of media portrayals of TikTok migrants, has certain limitations. First, this study primarily focuses on media representations rather than audience reception. Investigating how TikTok migrants themselves perceive and respond to these portrayals through ethnographic research or sentiment analysis would provide valuable insights. Second, while the study contrasts Chinese and Western media, it does not account for intra-regional variation, such as differences between state-affiliated and independent media. Further research could explore how diverse media actors within each region construct competing narratives on digital migration. Third, the long-term impact of these representations on policy decisions, platform governance, and public perception remains an open question. Future studies could examine how media framing influences digital policymaking and user behavior over time, particularly in the context of evolving US-China technological tensions.

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