

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47344/sdubss.v56i1.002>

IRSTI: 19.31

China through the Screen: Exploring the Influence of Instagram and TikTok on the Perceptions of Kazakhstani Youth

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Abstract

The study of the future elite's views on China, as well as the factors influencing their views, remains a crucial aspect in bilateral relations between countries, as young people have the capacity to influence the future development of their home country. However, given the increasing role of social media in the youth's daily lives, there is little literature on their influence on the youth's perspectives toward China. The main objective of this quantitative study is to investigate how social media narratives, especially on Instagram and TikTok, impact the perceptions of Kazakhstani undergraduate students about China. Data were collected from an online survey-based approach among the undergraduate students at SDU University in Kazakhstan. The main argument is that Instagram and TikTok currently have minimal influence on shaping students' opinions about China due to limited exposure to China-related content and general indifference. The analyses revealed that cultural content fosters curiosity and inspiration among students, while political and economic narratives generate concern and skepticism. However, feelings of indifference and the students' unawareness about Sino-Kazakh bilateral relations prevail. These findings highlight the need for further studies about the youth's political engagement and the long-term effects of social media on the public perception of other nations. This research highlights the importance of social media in shaping public perceptions and media literacy programs to help students critically analyze the digital content they are consuming.

Keywords: social media, public perceptions, Instagram, TikTok, Sino-Kazakh relations

Introduction

Kazakhstan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have always maintained a complex interplay of relations since ancient times. In recent years, China has become a crucial partner for Kazakhstan in areas such as energy, infrastructure, trade, and investments. Sino-Kazakh diplomatic relations began in 1992, with Kazakhstan showing support for the "One China" policy. Both countries have since settled border disputes and collaborated on various projects in economic and political spheres. The "Shanghai Five", the predecessor of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which was established in April 1996, further fostered their cooperative partnership and strengthened political ties. Notably, in 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the land-based component of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), in Astana (Yu, 2024), which highlighted Beijing's commitment to integrating Central Asian countries into its economic system.

However, despite this dynamic growth of economic and diplomatic relations, Kazakhstan and China still face some challenges in the face of cold and indifferent public opinion, which was characterized as "warm politics, cold public", meaning that despite warm relations and strong initiatives between elites, the public perceptions remain cold and skeptical (Kerr, 2010). Many scholars have tried to understand the underlying reasons for this paradox and highlighted several

factors that influence this behavior. Among them is the Soviet propaganda and historical narratives (Peyrouse, 2016), the lack of awareness of the Kazakh community and the lack of transparency in bilateral projects (Arynov, 2022; Syroezhkin, 2009), the alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) (Maizland, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these sentiments, as growing distrust and false information spread rapidly through both traditional and digital media platforms (Neafie, 2022). This article particularly focuses on the role of social media in shaping the views of the Kazakhstani youth.

It aims to analyze whether any posts with China-related aspects on this generation's most-used social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, influence their perceptions of China as they update on their lives, communicate, and gather information. It is crucial to examine the youth's opinions and various factors of influence to determine the reasons for long-lasting mixed and negative sentiments since the Soviet period (Peyrouse, 2016). Youth representatives are considered future policymakers, leaders, and politicians (Chen, 2015). They are also the most digitally active portion of the Kazakhstani population, both platforms taking up a big part of their online activities (Singh, 2025; Kumar, 2025). Therefore, social media has become not only a tool of communication, but a venue where many identities and beliefs are constructed.

There has been some research dedicated to examining the impact of Chinese soft power through Confucius Institutes, educational scholarships, or narratives of traditional media (Nursha, 2018; Hartig, 2016). However, considering the role of social media in today's digital world, less attention has been paid to scholarly articles researching the public perceptions after exposure to social media narratives. Therefore, this research seeks to address this gap in the literature by investigating the SDU undergraduate students' feelings toward China after exposure to social media posts. The main research question of this paper is as follows: how have Instagram and TikTok been influencing the Kazakhstani youth's perceptions of China? The sub-questions include: what factors contribute to the shaping of opinions about China among Kazakhstani youth? and how do Kazakhstani youth emotionally respond to China-related content on these platforms? The research objectives are to assess how frequently SDU undergraduate students engage with posts that include China-related information, to explore how their attitudes are shaped or changed based on the content, and to investigate whether these platforms even play a role in shaping perceptions differently.

The initial hypothesis assumed that the Chinese cultural content, such as food, tourism, and entertainment, would evoke positive reactions, and the political content would cause negative feelings. However, as the empirical findings revealed, indifference outweighed the positive and negative sentiments. As a result, this article argues that Instagram and TikTok currently have minimal influence on shaping students' opinions about China due to limited exposure to China-related content and general indifference, despite being widely used by Kazakhstani youth and having the potential to shape public perceptions.

Drawing on social constructivist theory, this research suggests that the attitudes of Kazakhstani youth toward China are not innate but shaped through regular engagement with China-themed content on various platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Social media posts that undergraduate students engage with help shape their ideas and opinions about China and its people, fostering interest in its culture or vice versa. Although constructivism as a school of thought has roots in earlier works (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Onuf, 1989), this article primarily relies on Alexander Wendt's framework because of its clear focus on identity formation, shared meanings, and the "Self and Other" dynamic (Wendt, 1999).

There are some limitations to this article. Firstly, while this research provides insights into

how digitally active SDU undergraduate students perceive China through social media, the results cannot be generalized to all Kazakhstani youth. The sample population might be biased towards specific faculties and language barriers. Secondly, despite a quantitative methodological framework and empirical evidence, there is no guarantee of the absence of subjective opinions and biases. Comparative studies across multiple universities and focus groups could enhance representativeness in future research. Moreover, limitations of the survey, such as it being entirely in English and not including important variables like ethnicity and pre-existing beliefs, may have influenced the overall analysis of the study.

The following section reviews the existing scholarly literature on the factors influencing the perceptions of Kazakhstani people regarding China and the Chinese population. The author outlines four main issues and Sino-Kazakh projects, which are Beijing's policy in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), economic engagement (especially under the BRI), COVID-19 narratives, and cultural diplomacy, that have garnered significant attention from scholars in this field, examining previous findings from university surveys and interviews. The second section discusses the methodological approach this research employs to collect and analyze data. The following section presents the empirical evidence, demonstrating prevailing patterns and attitudes. Then, in the discussion section, the findings are interpreted in light of constructivist theory and linked to the major concepts of various authors. The final section is dedicated to offering ideas for further research and a general conclusion.

As Kazakhstan navigates its way between major powers like Russia and China, exploring the impact of Instagram and TikTok on the youth's perceptions of China contributes not only to academic literature but also to an understanding of social media diplomacy in the digital world. This research is useful for policymakers in shaping effective foreign policies.

Literature review

Many bilateral initiatives have been launched since the Republic of Kazakhstan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) officially established diplomatic ties. These initiatives include collaborations in infrastructure, education, and the economy. Despite these efforts to strengthen ties, the public perception has not significantly changed. This discrepancy between warm diplomatic relations and the persistent skepticism, often described as "warm politics, cold public" (Kerr, 2010), remains a key topic of discussion among many scholars. Numerous scholarly articles have been published regarding perceptions of Chinese influence in Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan. According to Azizian and Bainazarova (2012), Kazakhstan views China more pragmatically, accepting economic gains while staying wary about geopolitical repercussions. Peyrouse (2016) notes that negative perceptions of China can be traced back to Soviet propaganda, which painted China as a threat to their territorial integrity and cultural identity, reinforcing Central Asian societies' long-standing views about their neighbor. However, he also states that more positive assessments of China have emerged in recent decades, related to its economic strength and regional investments.

This article will discuss the effects of several factors, such as Chinese policy in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), economic engagement through the Belt and Road Initiative, shifts during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and educational and cultural exchanges between the parties as elements of Chinese soft power, on Kazakhstani youth perceptions of China. This research will examine whether numerous projects and actions taken within the frameworks of these factors in Kazakhstan have led to a positive view of China (Sinophilia) or a negative one

(Sinophobia). Furthermore, this research will highlight two social media platforms, Instagram and TikTok, as influential and crucial yet underexplored factors in shaping public opinion. Lastly, the theoretical base of social constructivism is also reviewed to understand the nature of reality and identity.

The present article is grounded in social constructivist theory, which posits that reality and knowledge are not objective or fixed but rather socially constructed through human interaction and shared ideas, as well as understandings that evolve over time. This theory challenges the materialist approaches to international relations, such as neorealism and rationalism, which focus on the balance of power, institutions, or state interest. Instead, constructivism emphasizes that individuals act toward objects and actors based on the meanings that these objects hold for them and the meanings they attach to these objects and relationships (Wendt, 1992).

Many researchers focus on the role of youth perspectives, especially those of students, as representatives of the future elite. The perceptions of students with firsthand experience in China were also examined (Arynov, 2022). According to Chen (2015), analyzing the views of potential elites is important due to their capacity to influence their countries' future development. She (2015) conducted a pilot study among Nazarbayev University students, where 49 out of 73 respondents (67%) indicated that they believe China has the greatest influence in Kazakhstan and will continue to do so in the coming 10 years. Regarding whether China benefits or harms Kazakhstan, 46 people responded with "somewhat more benefit than harm," and 14 people with "considerably more benefit than harm." Moreover, the students' political views, whether conservative or democratic, significantly influence their assessment of China. Conservatives are more likely to be positive about Chinese initiatives, while democrats are more skeptical (Primiano & Kudebayeva, 2023). Several scholarly articles have outlined that the media coverage of China also plays an exceptional role in shaping public opinion. According to Syroezhkin (2009), the media in Kazakhstan often emphasize fears about Chinese expansion, which increases public mistrust of China. However, Slamgazhy et al. (2024) observed that since 2013, media portrayals of Chinese investments have become more positive. This paper fills a gap in the existing literature by exploring how narratives on social media, particularly through Instagram and TikTok, influence the changing perceptions of Kazakhstani youth about China.

The factors of influence on public perceptions

One of the primary reasons for the persistence of anti-Chinese sentiments in Kazakhstan is Beijing's policy towards Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, officially known as Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). It is considered the most politically sensitive region for the PRC, as it constitutes one-sixth of its landmass, borders three Central Asian states, and provides many natural resources for China's economic growth (Dwyer, 2005). The 2009 riots between Uyghurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang's capital of Urumqi were a turning point in China's policy towards XUAR (Handley, 2019). Following this incident, many outbursts of violence, such as the Tiananmen Square attack in 2013 and the Kunming station attack in 2014, were attributed to Uyghur extremists as well. In 2014, during President Xi Jinping's trip to Xinjiang, he launched a new initiative called the 'Strike Hard Against Violent Terrorism' campaign aimed at combating the 'Three Evils' (separatism, terrorism, and extremism) in XUAR, which is also referred to as the 'People's War on Terror' (Theaker, 2023). Since then, white papers, reports by the PRC's State Council Information Office, have started to be published to justify their policies in Xinjiang. Officially called "Vocational training and education centers", the Chinese government highlights their effectiveness as "educating and rehabilitating people influenced by religious extremism and involved in minor

violations of the law” (Bajwa, 2020). However, terms such as “re-education, detention, internment camps” are frequently used by various researchers and international organizations. Maizland (2022) points out that forced labor, surveillance measures, interrogation, sexual abuse, and many other “prison-like conditions” made detainees contemplate or attempt suicide. They were coerced into signing documents in Chinese, a language they did not understand, only to later discover these were forms related to the reactivation of their Chinese citizenship (Standish & Toleukhanova, 2019). On February 8, 2021, relatives of ethnic Kazakhs in Chinese re-education camps started daily protests in front of the Chinese Consulate in Almaty, later supported by the residents of Zhanaozen city on July 9, demanding the release of their family members (Toiken, 2021). The Oxus Society’s Central Asian Protest Tracker reports that out of 136 protests concerning China, 113 called for liberating ethnic Kazakhs in XUAR (Aisarina et al., 2022). Several anti-Chinese demonstrations took place in early 2018-2019 as well, complaining about detention camps in Xinjiang, along with other grievances like Kazakhstan’s increasing debt to China, the purchase of land by Chinese enterprises, and unemployment due to Chinese immigrants (Umarov, 2019). The Central Asia Barometer Wave 10 (Fall 2021) and Wave 14 (Spring 2023) indicate that the Kazakh population was very concerned about the treatment of Muslims in China, more than 65% in both waves. Meanwhile, concerns about human rights in China and the treatment of Uyghurs were relatively balanced, with 52% and 47% respectively. Moreover, the European Union has addressed these human rights violations in its negotiations with China throughout the 2017-2019 summits, making Kazakhstani youth more focused on these issues due to their support for universal (“or Westernized”) values (Buribayev et al., 2025). In summary, the treatment of ethnic and Muslim minorities in XUAR remains a pressing issue, negatively affecting the perceptions of Kazakh society on Chinese presence in the country.

Economic engagement between Kazakhstan and China has significantly influenced public opinion as well. Numerous bilateral projects have emerged, with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) being a crucial element that has attracted both praise and criticism in Kazakhstan. The Belt and Road Initiative was first announced as the land-based “Silk Road Economic Belt” (Yu, 2024) during President Xi Jinping’s visit to Nazarbayev University in Astana in 2013. Its goal is to enhance trade and connectivity globally (Slamgazhy et al., 2024) and to integrate Eurasia in terms of land-based infrastructure and transportation (Chen & Jiménez-Tovar, 2017). Kazakhstan plays a vital role in the BRI as the “springboard” or “buckle” between Asia and Europe, being the most developed economy in the region (Primiano & Kudebayeva, 2023). According to scholarly findings, public opinion on the BRI and overall Chinese investments and bilateral economic exchanges varies. However, results may be limited due to respondents’ lack of awareness regarding projects between Kazakhstan and China. Chen and Günther (2020) highlight that a majority of Kazakhstani (60.3%) and Kyrgyzstani (70.6%) respondents were unaware of the Belt and Road Initiative. Nevertheless, a greater 31.5% of Kazakh respondents have heard of it, compared to those from Kyrgyzstan. Primiano and Kudebayeva (2023) conducted a survey among KIMEP University students. According to their (2023) findings, 41.26% of written responses to an open-ended survey question, “What do you associate with China’s BRI?”, were coded as expressing positive views, 27.18% as expressing negative views, and 31.55% were unclear. However, when asked whether the BRI represents “win-win” cooperation, 62% of respondents felt uncertain, indicating a lack of understanding. Despite this, students firmly believed that the BRI was detrimental to Kazakhstan’s oil and gas industry (Primiano & Kudebayeva, 2023). They (2023) concluded that the majority of respondents do not regard the BRI or China favorably. Similar conclusions were drawn by Bitabarova (2018) and Slamgazhy et al. (2024), who noted that negative assessments are primarily linked with limited socioeconomic benefits and political risks. Furthermore, a recent report by the

Central Asia Barometer (2024) demonstrates that from 2019 until 2022, more than 60% of respondents lacked confidence in Chinese investments regarding improving the energy and infrastructure sectors and job creation. However, public opinion has been improving since the fall of 2022, with the majority of respondents showing support for Chinese investment (Neafie et al., 2024). Moreover, Kazakh graduates of Chinese universities and those acquainted with Chinese culture have more favorable opinions about China's economic presence in Kazakhstan, claiming that China should be "our first partner" in terms of money, technology, and economy (Arynov, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further shifted perceptions of China. It had a heavy impact on the people of Central Asia, as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were the first countries that had to reimpose lockdowns due to a second wave of infections in early July 2020 after the rules were loosened a few weeks before (Caron & Thibault, 2022). The Kazakhstani economy experienced a predictable decline as a result of the significant drop in daily oil prices on the global market during the peak of the pandemic (Sánchez, 2022). Public perceptions were also negatively affected by the media reports originating from China, with claims that Kazakhstani citizens wanted Kazakhstan to become a part of China (Reuters Editorial, 2020), and that US-funded programs studying Coronavirus in bats had labs in Kazakhstan (Sheng, 2020). Students believe that in the coming decade, Chinese influence in the region will decline due to media portrayals that have depicted China as the origin of the virus, and Chinese citizens in Kazakhstan were quickly perceived as potential disease carriers (Neafie, 2022). The Oxus Society (2022) noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified pre-existing pressures on the welfare system, resulting in 54 protests related to inadequate social security benefits and worries regarding subsidized housing and mortgage payments. Decreased demand for oil from China and a decline in Chinese investments due to the pandemic further increased concerns among Kazakh citizens about the country's economic dependence on China (Neafie, 2022). Despite negative public sentiment, many respondents believed that the relationship between China and Kazakhstan remained the same (Neafie, 2022). Not only did the pandemic introduce new areas of tension between China and Kazakhstan, but it also intensified existing conflicts that have influenced and changed the Kazakh perspective towards China (Neafie, 2022).

Chinese cultural and educational soft power is also significantly shaping public perceptions in Kazakhstan. According to Nursha (2018), a notable example of this Chinese educational influence is the Confucius Institutes (CIs), which function as centers for promoting Chinese culture and facilitating language learning. These institutes have been established across Central Asia, with five located in Kazakhstan (Sylam et al., 2024). CIs are regarded as instruments of Chinese public diplomacy, providing opportunities for the world to learn more about China (Hartig, 2016). However, Nursha (2018) points out a troubling trend: while Central Asian youth express interest in learning the Chinese language, they do not necessarily engage with Chinese culture. Approximately 64.9% of Kazakhstani respondents indicated that they do not participate in any additional courses beyond language, and about 40% of CI students give up their studies after one or two months or upon receiving certificates for their Chinese language proficiency. This low level of commitment raises questions about the effectiveness of China's efforts to "win the hearts and minds" of Central Asian learners (Nursha, 2018). Moreover, Chinese soft power also encompasses Luban workshops, named after the father of Chinese carpentry, Luban, which aim to train skilled labor by integrating academic education with practical training for projects under the auspices of the BRI (Leksyutina, 2024; Ustemirova, 2024). Several Central Asian countries have established Luban workshops to promote exchanges in vocational education. There are two Luban workshops in Kazakhstan: one in

Oskemen (Serikbayev East Kazakhstan Technical University) and another in Astana, which is currently under construction (Gumilyov Eurasian National University). The program allows students to study transportation technologies and provides practical training using modern Chinese equipment (Ustemirova, 2024). Additionally, student exchange programs, often called citizen diplomacy, including film festivals and joint exhibitions, aim to foster a more nuanced understanding of China (Slamgazhy et al., 2024). According to the Central Asia Barometer (2024), China ranks as the second most popular destination for Kazakhstani university applicants and schoolchildren, following Russia, with numbers approaching 20,000 post-pandemics. It can be noticed that these initiatives made to enhance the Chinese image in the region are mostly negatively perceived by the Kazakhstani public due to their long-standing skeptical views. The Chinese government has adapted to this situation with the axiom “warm politics, cold public” (zheng re, min leng) (Laruelle & Royce, 2020).

Social media's impact and relevance

Although considerable research has been devoted to studying traditional media's impact (Slamgazhy et al., 2024; Oshanova, 2024), relatively less attention has been paid to social media narratives (Neafie et al., 2024). As of 2025, more than half of the world population (63.9%) uses social media on a daily basis, making it an important part of our lives. Instagram and TikTok are in the top 5 of the most used social media platforms globally, having 2 billion and 1.59 billion active users, respectively (Singh, 2025). A significant portion of their users, from 62.3% on Instagram to 66% on TikTok, are between the ages of 18 and 34 (Singh, 2025; Kumar, 2025). The size of the Kazakh audience using Instagram and TikTok is the primary reason for choosing these particular platforms among all social media networks to analyze their effect on Kazakhstani youth's perceptions of China. Kazakhstan has one of the most digitally active youth populations in Central Asia. As of 2024, the Kazakh audience on TikTok is more than 14 million, while 12.5 million people actively use Instagram. If we compare the figures for 2023, then in 2024, the audience growth on TikTok was 35.4 percent, and on Instagram, almost 16 percent ("Nasha Gazeta", 2025). According to RMAA (2024), TikTok attracts young users aged 16-25, while Instagram is popular among people under the age of 35.

However, social media might also offer risks in shaping public opinion of other states. It can spread stereotypes, misinformation, or create “echo chambers” due to its algorithm, where users are shown content that aligns with their preexisting interests (Chendra & Setiawan, 2024). Posts that stir up feelings of rage, fear, or disgust usually attract more interaction and exposure than information that is neutral or adequate. As a result, more people may see controversial or unfavorable depictions of a nation than complicated or favorable ones. Additionally, Instagram and TikTok use particular algorithms to decide what content users see. They are built to keep users engaged by promoting posts that the users will more likely interact with, in the form of likes, comments, and time spent viewing (Chendra & Setiawan, 2024). These mechanisms may keep people from interacting with unfamiliar or diverse content, unless users actively seek them out. This implies that, in addition to content creators, complicated technical systems that customize each user's experience also influence the quantity and type of posts about other countries, including China. Thus, it could be assumed that the Kazakhstani undergraduate students' perceptions of China may be subject to change largely due to the algorithmic differences and drawbacks of social media platforms. Nevertheless, examining how the content youth consume influences their perception of China is important, as social media has become an integral part of people's daily lives.

Methodology

This research employs a quantitative research method to analyze how Instagram and TikTok content impact the perceptions of SDU University students about China. A survey allows the author to analyze trends and patterns by studying a representative student population sample. It is thought to be more wide-reaching and time-efficient. Therefore, an online survey approach is chosen to systematically collect data on students' engagement with China-related content on social media and their attitudes toward China. The survey does not intend to analyze specific posts on these platforms; rather, it seeks to examine the students' reaction to any post with China-related information, whether it is about Huawei smartphones, Chinese people, or their domestic affairs. The target population for this study includes all undergraduate students currently enrolled at SDU University, aged between 16 and 24 years. Graduate students who fall into the age category were not surveyed. The decision to focus on SDU undergraduate students is based on the assumption that they are part of Kazakhstan's "potential elites". This term describes educated youth who are capable of changing their country's future (Chen, 2015). Moreover, SDU students are representatives of Kazakhstan's youth demographic in terms of age.

The survey design consists of 17 questions, containing demographic information about students, the frequency of social media usage, their engagement with China-related content, and students' feelings towards China after exposure to such content. A mix of closed-ended, open-ended, and Likert scale questions was incorporated in the survey to cover different patterns of the students' perceptions, from measurable to qualitative data. For instance, the quantitative "How often do you see China-related content on Instagram and TikTok?" and "How do China-related posts on Instagram and TikTok typically make you feel?" allowed the author to explore the frequency and sentiment of the respondents. Open-ended questions, like "Can you describe a specific post or video about China that influenced your perception? What was it about, and how did it affect your view?" enabled participants to describe their feelings in their own words. The survey was prepared in English and conducted in March and April 2025. The approximate number of all SDU undergraduate students is nearly 9000. The author referred to the SurveyMonkey guidelines to determine an appropriate sample population, which provides standardized methods for calculating sample size. Based on the industrial standards for social science research, the confidence level of 95% and margin of error of 10% were selected. The minimum required sample size was calculated to be 96 people. The data is collected through the Google Forms platform, distributed via corporate emails of SDU University, and messaging apps that students most commonly use, such as WhatsApp. This method ensures that students outside of personal networks, from different faculties and academic years, have an equal opportunity to participate.

Participation was entirely voluntary, and the respondents were informed in the survey's preface about the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of their responses. The survey description includes a brief informed consent statement, reminding participants that their answers will only be used for research purposes and will remain anonymous. No personal information, such as names and email addresses, was collected. The collected data was analyzed through Microsoft Excel and frequency distributions, and percentages. Charts were created to visually represent responses to key questions, such as how often students encounter posts about China and how they make them feel. Open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic content analysis, where emotional descriptors were grouped into categories, such as positive, negative, and neutral. Also, a word cloud was generated to visualize the most frequent associations with China.

In general, recruiting respondents for this survey was challenging, as many people seemed

uninterested in filling out the survey. The author suspects several reasons for this, which may simultaneously be limitations of this study. One of those reasons could be the survey being entirely in the English language, as this might have hindered many respondents, who are comfortable in Kazakh or Russian, from understanding and participating in it. Moreover, the author surveying SDU students, as an SDU undergraduate student herself, might be included in the limitations. Another reason might be the students' general lack of interest in the topic, as several respondents gave minimal answers or skipped open-ended questions. Finally, the sample population, which is limited to one university, might not fully reflect the broader patterns and attitudes of youth in Kazakhstan's other regions and universities toward China-related content on social media platforms. Despite these limitations, the methodology sheds light on how social media usage affects opinions about China. Furthermore, this article suggests a need for further qualitative research that can employ interviews or content analysis to complement these findings.

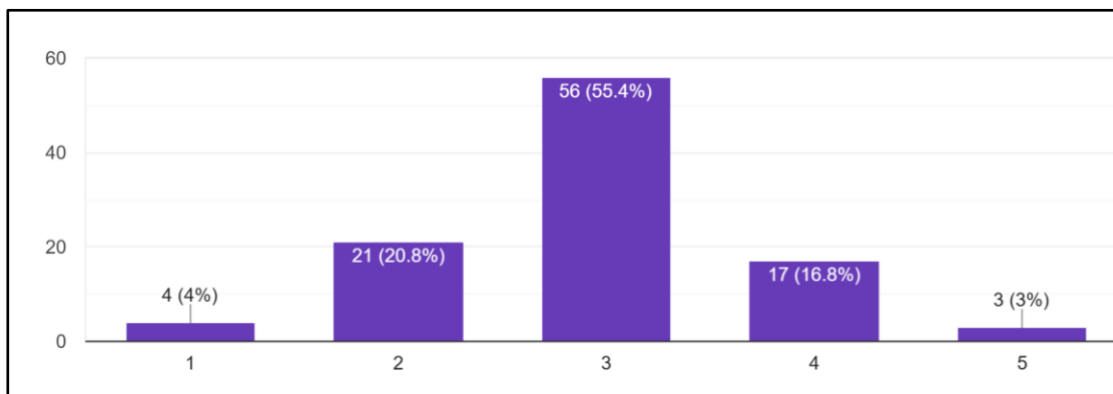
Results

Demographic and general data

The majority of respondents, over half of them (54.5%), were students aged 19-21, followed by 38.4% of those who fell within the 16-18 age range. The smallest group was those aged 22-24, comprising only 7.9% of all participants. In terms of their academic year, fourth-year and first-year students were the overwhelming majority, being 46.5% and 35.6% respectively. There were thirteen second-year and five third-year students participating in the survey. The respondents were from all four faculties: namely, Education and Humanities, Business School, Law and Social Sciences, and Engineering and Natural Sciences. However, the students from the faculty of Law and Social Sciences and the faculty of Education and Humanities were the most highly represented. This variety allowed for a deeper analysis of how perceptions differ across various disciplines, from global politics and economics to technical and educational fields. The data illustrate digitally intelligent students from diverse academic backgrounds, which makes them an ideal sample population for a perception study. The findings revealed that students of the Law and Social Sciences faculty tended to be more skeptical or concerned. Those in the Engineering faculty and Business School were more curious and inspired, likely due to exposure to technology and trade content.

Regarding the respondents' social media usage, the percentage of those who spend at least one hour a day on Instagram and TikTok is 74.3% and 61.4%, respectively. Only one person reported never using Instagram, while 12 people have never used TikTok. Other participants indicated the rare usage of both platforms. This frequent usage of social media displays its crucial role in people's everyday lives, highly contributing to shaping perceptions about diverse topics. The next section of questions was about whether Instagram and TikTok influence the shaping of opinions about China. 65.3% of respondents answered with a "yes," and 24.8% expressed uncertainty to this question: "Compared to traditional media (TV, newspapers), do you think Instagram and TikTok have a stronger influence on shaping opinions about China?". Slightly over half of respondents (52.6%) claimed that Instagram and TikTok alone are not sufficient to form an opinion about China, while 16.5% believed otherwise. In addition, they were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5, how accurate, in their opinion, the social media representation of China was, to which 55.4% of participants chose 3, which is "moderately accurate" - a mix of different information (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 1. *On a scale from 1 to 5, how accurate do you think the social media representation of China is?*



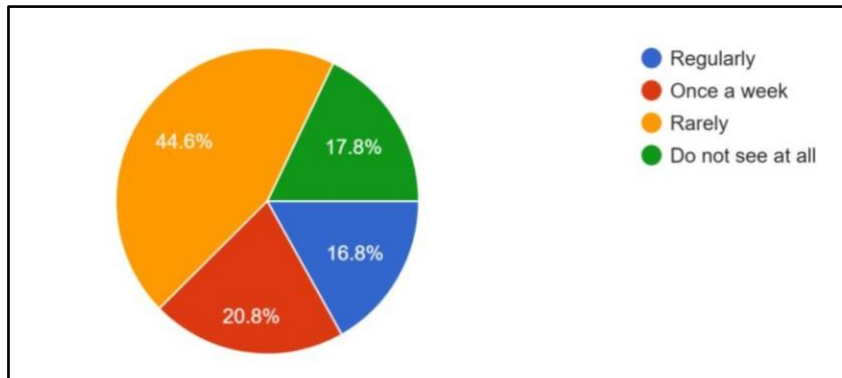
Note. Data from the author's survey conducted in March and April 2025

Meanwhile, 24.8% perceived social media content as inaccurate or highly inaccurate, and only 19.8% found it accurate or very accurate. The collected data reflect that while the students frequently engage with social media content, they remain skeptical of its credibility.

Engagement with China-related content on Instagram and TikTok

The following set of questions explored how informed the students are about bilateral relations and how often they are exposed to posts about China. The findings show that 46% and 33% of students consider themselves moderately and very informed about Kazakhstan's relations with China, while 19.8% of students are not informed about bilateral relations. Those who are slightly or not informed about Sino-Kazakh relations are divided into two groups: those who rarely or never use any of the social media, and those who use both platforms every day. Surprisingly, those who are hyper-engaged in online discourse are rarely exposed to China-related news on social media. As shown in Figure 3.2, just over 40% of the respondents rarely see posts about China, and 20.8% come across China-related content once a week. However, those who indicated their regular exposure to such content are more informed about Sino-Kazakh relations. If we now turn to the type of content they see, the most commonly viewed China-related content on Instagram and TikTok includes food (64.4%), culture & traditions (45.5%), and economy & technologies (42.6%). Posts about Chinese goods & services, travel, and politics are less encountered according to the respondents. The next question was, "Since COVID-19, have you noticed an increase in content related to China on Instagram/TikTok?" Approximately 60% of students stated that there had not been any change, and the amount of content remained the same. When asked about the tone of content they see on Instagram and TikTok, just under half of those surveyed reported that it was neutral, both positive and negative. 30.7% claimed that they see mostly positive news about China, such as its achievements and bilateral initiatives.

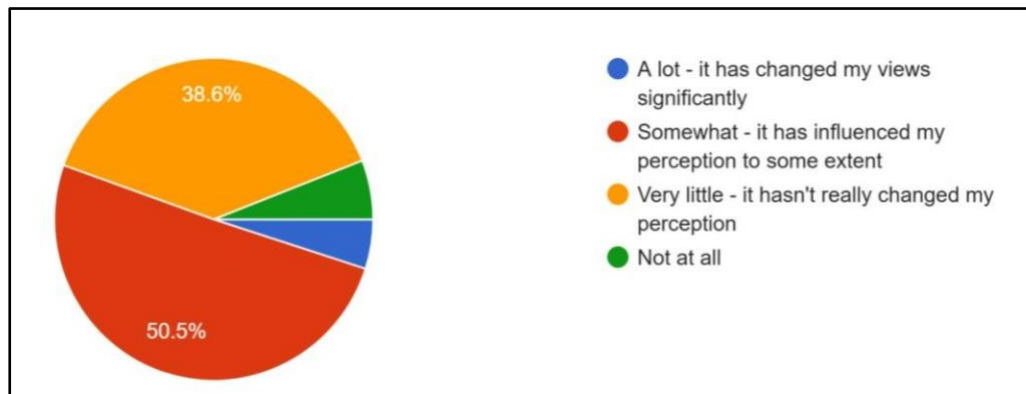
Meanwhile, only 6.9% of students engaged with negative content, like political and economic issues. These findings display a low level of engagement, with posts that are mostly apolitical and algorithmically filtered, that focus on entertainment rather than news or political information.

Figure 2. *How often do you see China-related content on Instagram and TikTok?*

Note. Data from the author's survey conducted in March and April 2025

Mixed feelings toward China

This section of the survey was concerned with the students' feelings toward and perceptions of China after exposure to such content on social media. The first question was about how much, in their opinion, content on Instagram and TikTok affects their perceptions of China. As demonstrated in Figure 3.3, half (50.5%) of the respondents indicated that it has somewhat influenced their perceptions. Not a lot, but to some extent. Meanwhile, 5% stated that their views were affected a lot, and 44.5% responded with "very little" and "not at all". These results highlight that the social media content does not alter their beliefs and feelings toward China. In many cases, respondents claimed to scroll past such content without giving much thought.

Figure 3. *How much do you think content from Instagram/TikTok influences your perceptions of China?*

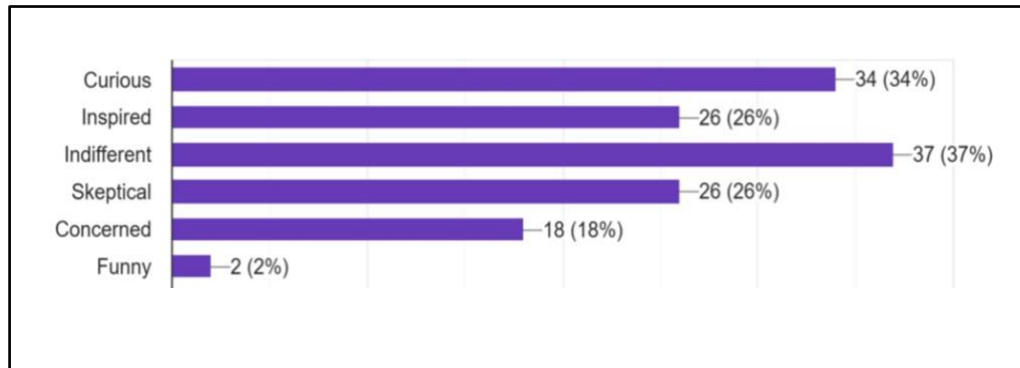
Note. Data from the author's own survey conducted in March and April 2025

The next question was open-ended and aimed at getting to know their association with China after exposure to social media content. The author asked respondents to think of three words that came to mind about China and categorized them into three sentiment categories: positive, negative, and neutral. The results display mainly negative associations with China, with words like "Uyghurs, Xinjiang camps, genocide, virus, Covid-19, labor slavery, authoritarianism, smog, danger, made in China, control, unattractive food," and many more. However, neutral terms were mentioned a lot as well, for instance "rice, red, food, nature, dragon, national clothes, makeup, c-dramas, travel, etc.". The least frequent were the positive sentiments, describing China with words such as "hardworking, developed, intelligent, innovative, modern, etc.".

For further analysis, participants were asked to indicate how China-related posts on both

platforms typically make them feel, with response variables including curious, inspired, indifferent, skeptical, concerned, and others. Thirty-nine people responded with “indifferent”, 35 with “curious”, 27 with “inspired”, 27 with “skeptical”, and 18 with “concerned” (see Figure 3.4).

Figure 4. *How do China-related posts on Instagram and TikTok typically make you feel? Please specify.*



Note. Data from the author’s own survey conducted in March and April 2025

The next question was open-ended and voluntary, with 40 people choosing not to respond. The question was as follows: “Can you describe a specific post or video about China that influenced your perception? What was it about, and how did it affect your view?”. The responses varied from detailed descriptions to short answers. Out of all 61 responses, 16 participants commented that they do not remember seeing such content and that they do not pay attention to China-related posts. Fourteen people’s responses were interpreted as having negative views, as concentration camps and the abuse of the human rights of Uyghurs were mentioned numerous times. Someone wrote about “strange” Chinese online streams and local food, which “causes quite unpleasant emotions”. The respondents highlighted a more nuanced and critical view of China’s development model and labor condition: “there are a lot of signs of the workers being abused and underpaid, and of child labor which is highly prohibited worldwide”, and “I mostly associated China with rapid development and population density, but “ghost cities” made me realize that development does not always equal success — sometimes it reveals deeper systemic issues like overbuilding, inequality, or government mismanagement”. Additionally, China’s influence over Kazakhstan and BRI partner countries was a concern for several participants: “the post that got my attention was about its influence on Kazakhstan in a negative way, which made me concerned”, and “excessive debts received by partner states lead to debt trap and dependency on China much more”. One respondent reflected on content by Chinese government accounts: “The Instagram account of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs sometimes posts negative comments about the United States of America... I do not like when states try to humiliate each other”, claiming that the states need to behave with mutual respect and honor. Another participant noted: “I saw a short video on Instagram where a grown man and a school student were saying, ‘We will beat the USA’. It was funny. I think China (Chinese people certainly) live under some ignorance of world politics”. The respondents also mentioned neutral things, such as posts about street food, beauty, memes, online shopping, and the difficulty of studying the Chinese language. Positive attitudes were also demonstrated: “For me, China is one of the lovely countries” and “China has a big role in the international economy”, as some respondents articulated. China’s new development ideas and innovative technologies, like “Deepseek”, were mentioned too: “Open AI created ChatGPT for more than 100 million dollars, meanwhile Deepseek was made for approximately 10 million”. One respondent appreciated the Chinese advertising

strategies in promoting their culture, which they perceived as seemingly different from their own culture. Another participant emphasized the perseverance of traditional Chinese clothing in expressing their culture, despite globalization. Interestingly, two participants referred to Chinese nature and technologies as “another universe or planet”, and “future, not reality”. In summary, SDU students have mixed attitudes toward China. However, indifference and neutral feelings prevail, as many respondents indicated that they mostly see entertaining posts about China. The observed disinterest suggests a need for further research to explore underlying causes, which may include limited exposure, political alienation, or other reasons.

Discussion

The findings suggest ambivalent and mixed perceptions of China, characterized by limited engagement, emotional indifference, and political alienation. This discussion highlights key insights, categorized into four subsections: 1) Instagram and TikTok as weak factors of influence, 2) indifference as a dominant response, 3) the contradiction between the type of content and the respondents’ attitudes, and 4) China as the “Other”.

Instagram and TikTok as weak factors of influence

According to the survey conducted for this research, 74.3% of students spend more than one hour per day on Instagram, and 61.4% spend the same amount of time on TikTok. These numbers align with broader national trends that point to the dominance of these platforms in Kazakhstan’s digital space, particularly among the 16-24 year-old age group (RMAA, 2024). One of the most significant results of this research is the minimal influence Instagram and TikTok have in shaping SDU students’ perceptions of China. Although both platforms have daily presence in the respondents’ lives and are commonly viewed as powerful instruments in shaping public opinion, key results indicate that students rarely encountered China-related content or felt influenced by it. Even if the students were exposed to posts about China, it was mostly memes, news reports, or bloggers doing Chinese trends, not official Chinese governmental accounts or creators. One of the reasons for the limited engagement might be Instagram and TikTok’s algorithms, which play a huge role in exposing China-related content to their users. They prioritize posts by giving preference to content that receives instant user interactions, likes, shares, and comments (Chendra & Setiawan, 2024). Also, sometimes users tend to engage more with content that resonates with their national and social identities, which may limit their interaction with foreign narratives (Chendra & Setiawan, 2024). Moreover, Kazakhstan’s efforts in monitoring social media, with \$4.3 million spent on automated surveillance systems to detect unrest (Kiliñ et al., 2023), might have hindered higher engagements and open discussions about foreign powers. These findings outline that social media alone is not enough to influence perceptions about other nations.

From the constructivist theory, perceptions are constructed not only by exposure, but by shared understandings and collective beliefs (Wendt, 1999). When students see Chinese culture through a filtered lens, perceptions are not accurately formed. The results also highlight the failed efforts of the Chinese government to use social media as a tool of soft power. Despite investments in Confucius Institutes, language programs, and educational scholarships, Chinese narratives do not frequently appear in the Kazakhstani youth’s social media feeds.

The type of content and the students’ attitudes

The author hypothesized that SDU students who frequently consume cultural content about

China, such as food, tourism, or entertainment, on Instagram and TikTok would have a more positive perception of China; meanwhile, those who engage with political content, like economic situations and bilateral relations, would evoke negative reactions. However, contrary to the initial hypothesis, this pattern was not consistent. The students' attitudes toward China do not depend on what type of content they are exposed to. The respondents felt indifferent or skeptical about China, in spite of the fact that the tone of Chinese content they were exposed to was neutral or positive. Moreover, most of the respondents indicated feeling "concerned" and "skeptical" about China-related posts, while choosing "culture & traditions, food, travel" as the type of content they most frequently encounter. They backed up their responses by giving associations to this question: "What 3 words come to mind when you think about China based on what you've seen on social media?". For instance, one respondent engages with cultural content (culture & traditions, economy & technologies), but feels concerned, associating China with genocide of Uyghurs, pinduoduo, and smog. Another student felt curious and concerned and chose words such as "made in China, communism, closed, danger" to describe his/her feelings. Someone wrote "territory cockroaches", while being exposed to "culture & traditions" type of content. 15 respondents chose "culture & traditions, food, travel" and provided neutral or positive terms, such as "meme, food, innovation, hardworking", but still felt skeptical towards China. Meanwhile, 5 students felt inspired and 13 students were curious, engaging with political and economic content. This contradiction highlights that social media users' perceptions are primarily shaped by their preconceived views, influenced by family, traditional media, and society.

Indifference as a dominant sentiment

The surprising finding was that most students seemed emotionally neutral and indifferent regardless of the type of post they encountered. Indifference is not only the lack of interest, but also the inability to form emotional or ideological attachment, which can potentially cause more harm to China's soft power ambitions than just negative views. Whereas negative or critical opinions can create debates and engagements, indifference makes China irrelevant in the youth representatives' minds. From the constructivist viewpoint, indifference might mean a lack of constructed identity or relation with the "Other" (Wendt, 1999). Some respondents articulated their views as "I do not care much about China, actually" and "I do not pay attention".

On the contrary, the prevailing indifference fits into the paradigm of "warm politics, cold public" proposed by David Kerr (2010), demonstrating that warm bilateral relations do not necessarily mean positive public opinion. Furthermore, McGlinchey (2019) claims that the majority of Central Asians are Sino-agnostic, not Sinophobic, as one-third of the region expresses uncertainty toward Chinese leadership. There might be several underlying causes of this, such as a lack of interest, and the society's limited awareness of Sino-Kazakh relations, which Syroezhkin (2010) describes through surveys conducted in different regions of Kazakhstan. The East region, which directly borders China, surprisingly has lower awareness of Chinese history, culture, and modern realities than the average in the whole republic. The South region has average and higher awareness, while the North region's respondents demonstrate the highest level of knowledge in most of the questions. The survey respondents who were moderately informed of Sino-Kazakh relations, with knowledge acquired outside of social media, expressed more detailed opinions, either positive or negative. Students who lacked knowledge of such relations articulated ambivalent viewpoints, often leaving open-ended questions with answers, such as "I do not know" and "I do not remember", or with nothing at all. Firstly, to explain the reasons for this occurrence, he claims that there is a complete lack of developments on the culture, traditions, and everyday lives of the

Chinese. Secondly, for reasons completely unknown, there is no transparency in official Sino-Kazakh initiatives. Information about Chinese labor migrants, the activities of enterprises with Chinese capital in Kazakhstan and vice versa remains closed. Lastly, he (2010) states that the opinions of most Kazakhstanis are based on rumors and stories from acquaintances or “out of thin air”. Those might be the reasons why people articulated mixed attitudes about China.

China as the “Other”

The social constructivism’s concept of “Self and Other” describes how the state and individual identities are constructed in relation to external actors, which are considered as the “Other”. This concept is highly relevant to explain that to Kazakhstani students, China may serve as the “Other”, distant and unfamiliar. Several respondents of the survey referred to China as “another universe or planet”, and “future, not reality”. Arynov’s (2022) interviewees have similarly pointed out the substantial difference between their country and China, calling the latter “a different world” and “a separate planet”. He (2022) refers to these responses as “civilization abyss”. These metaphors emphasize the distance students feel towards China. Even though they are impressed by Chinese innovations and progress, they consider them to be beyond their reach and disconnected from their reality. In fact, positive sentiments seem to arise from familiarity and the sense of belonging, whereas China, with the status of geopolitical “other”, might produce only indifference or negative feelings. Since shared understandings and collective beliefs are essential in constructing identities (Fearon & Wendt, 2002), the reason for prevailing indifference might be a contrasting difference in values, religions, and historical narratives of both cultures (Arynov, 2022). Since every society defines itself in relation to others, this “Othering” process is not always negative. Students use the “Othering” of China as a mechanism to ensure their own identities, whether they are Kazakh, Central Asian, or just “not Chinese”. However, this relationship becomes a barrier to bilateral cooperation and mutual engagement when it is influenced by emotional distance, a lack of shared values, or mutual misunderstanding.

Furthermore, in spite of the general indifference, there are cases of negative associations with China as well. The most common terms include “Uyghurs”, “Xinjiang camps”, “genocide”, “virus”, “slavery”, and “authoritarianism”. These results reinforce the findings of earlier works by Syroezhkin (2009) and Slamgazhy et al. (2024) that both historical and modern grievances regarding China remain present in the public conscience. Even students who claim to be uninformed about Sino-Kazakh relations know a lot about Xinjiang camps and human right abuses in China. Additionally, several students who mentioned positive or neutral terms (such as development, innovation, or Chinese food and fashion) were reluctant to describe China in entirely positive terms. The mixed responses - ranging from concerns about Chinese political motives and labor conditions to fascination with their technologies and nature—reflect the complicated nature of public perceptions. Both can be found in one person, depending on the angle or the question being asked (Peyrouse, 2016).

An important limitation of this study is that the survey participants’ ethnic background and the pre-existing beliefs about China were not taken into account during the data collection process. The majority of students approach China-related content with attitudes that have previously been shaped by family, education, traditional mass media, and general public discourse. Only a few of the frequent social media users reported that social media posts altered their overall perception of China in a fundamental way. This aligns with Primiano and Kudebayeva’s (2023) findings that student political orientation (conservative vs. democratic) powerfully shapes how they perceive China. Conservative students might believe what the general public is saying, forming opinions

about China based on stereotypes and historical facts. Meanwhile, those with democratic views might support Chinese initiatives or remain neutral.

There is still a need for further research about the overall political engagement of Kazakhstani citizens, on why there is limited awareness of bilateral relations, and a disinterest in domestic political life. Moreover, this study provides the opportunity to conduct qualitative research, such as interviews and focus groups, to examine indifference and selective engagement more deeply. Whether the social media content fails to reach or does not resonate with them. In addition, exploring how ethnicity, socioeconomic background, or field of study influences perceptions could offer a more complete picture.

Conclusion

This article aims to investigate how the perceptions of Kazakhstani youth, specifically the undergraduate students at SDU University, about China, its policies, culture, and presence in Kazakhstan, are affected by the narratives on Instagram and TikTok. Given the growing relevance of digital diplomacy, the author believes that exploring this topic is both timely and needed. This article addressed the research gap by examining the impact of Instagram and TikTok, focusing primarily on the level of engagement, the types of content, and the students' attitudes toward China. The key findings display that while students use Instagram and TikTok every day, the posts related to China are limited, and the impact they make on their perceptions is weak. Currently, they do not seem to serve as effective platforms for shaping opinions about China. This is not because students are hostile to Chinese content, but rather because they are mostly indifferent.

At first, it was hypothesized that students who often encountered cultural content, like Chinese food, entertainment, or tourism, would have more positive views. Meanwhile, those exposed to political content, such as human rights concerns or bilateral projects, might respond negatively. The findings, however, did not support these hypotheses. Although the majority of students engage with cultural content more than political, it does not always result in positive attitudes. In fact, regardless of what type of posts they see, many of them remain neutral or indifferent. Indifference is a key takeaway of this research, as many simply do not give much thought to posts with China-related information. This discrepancy is important because it draws attention to the disparity between China's huge role in Kazakhstan's foreign relations and how little it appears to matter to regular students. This tendency is often characterized as "warm politics, cold public" by scholars to explain the good diplomatic relations and weak public opinion. Despite many developments, like growing trade, educational opportunities, and infrastructure initiatives, many students seem to be unaware and uninterested. This might be the reason as to why the students' perceptions are not altered by social media content.

The social constructivist framework explains this pattern through the "Self and Other" dichotomy. It holds that identities and ideas are not fixed and shaped by material forces, but formed through experiences, interactions, and shared understandings. It can be challenging for Kazakhstani youth to develop a sense of personal or social identity when they do not regularly or meaningfully interact with Chinese people, culture, or institutions. In their minds, China is still a distant "Other" that is sometimes regarded as strong and developed but is also bizarre or even unrelatable. This clarifies why even content that is engaging or positive, such as posts about food or travel, doesn't always result in more favorable opinions.

These findings have significant implications. They imply that China's present soft power ambitions in Kazakhstan might not be successfully reaching their target audience, at least not on

social media sites like Instagram and TikTok. The Chinese policymakers should not only focus on domestic platforms like WeChat and Weibo, but also effectively utilize other platforms, especially in the digital age. It's not enough to just post content, young people must relate to it, find it relevant, and trust it. Moreover, the findings indicate a broader problem for Kazakhstan: a large number of young people appear ignorant of or disinterested in the foreign policy of the country, particularly regarding its giant neighbors like China. This could be a result of a lack of access to credible information and limited involvement in politics. Increasing media literacy and raising awareness about global affairs could help bridge this gap.

In conclusion, this article contributes to our understanding of what role social media plays in shaping youth's perceptions of international relations. While Instagram and TikTok have the potential to shift and construct opinions, they are not doing so as of now. For Chinese efforts to win hearts and minds to succeed, social media content and people's exposure to it is not enough. There needs to be a sense of relevance, familiarity, and shared values. Without these elements, even the most carefully constructed public diplomacy strategies risk being overlooked.

Funding details: None.

Disclosure statement: Author has nothing to disclose.

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FTAMP: 19.31

Қытай экран арқылы: Инстаграм және Тикток платформаларының Қазақстан жастарының Қытай туралы пікірлеріне әсерін зерттеу

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Аңдатпа

Болашақ элитаның Қытайға деген көзқарасын, сондай-ақ олардың көзқарастарына әсер ететін факторларды зерттеу елдер арасындағы екіжақты қарым-қатынастардың маңызды аспектісі. Дегенмен, жастардың күнделікті өміріндегі әлеуметтік медианың рөлі артып келе жатқанын ескере отырып, олардың жастардың Қытайға деген көзқарасына әсері туралы әдебиеттер аз. Бұл сандық зерттеудің негізгі мақсаты – әлеуметтік желілердегі нарративтердің, әсіресе Instagram және TikTok-тағы қазақстандық бакалавриат студенттерінің Қытай туралы көзқарастарына қалай әсер ететінін зерттеу. Деректер Қазақстандағы СДУ университетінің бакалавриат студенттері арасында онлайн сауалнамаға негізделген тәсілден жиналды. Зерттеу нәтижесінде Instagram және TikTok қазіргі уақытта Қытайға қатысты нарративке шектеулі болуының әсерінен және жалпы қызығушылықтың болмауы салдарынан студенттердің Қытай туралы пікірін қалыптастыруға аз әсер ететіндігі анықталды. Талдау көрсеткендей, мәдени нарративтер студенттердің қызығушылығы мен шабытын оятады, ал саяси және экономикалық баяндаулар алаңдаушылық пен күдікпен қарау тенденциясын тудырады. Алайда студенттердің жауаптарында қытай-қазақ екіжақты қарым-қатынастарына қатысты немқұрайлылық пен бейхабарлық басым. Бұл тұжырымдар жастардың саяси белсенділігі және әлеуметтік медианың басқа ұлттардың қоғамдық қабылдауына ұзақ мерзімді әсері туралы қосымша зерттеулер қажет екенін және студенттерге олар тұтынатын цифрлық ақпаратты сыни тұрғыдан талдауға көмектесу үшін медиа сауаттылық бағдарламаларын қалыптастырудың маңыздылығын көрсетеді.

Кілт сөздер: әлеуметтік медиа, қоғамдық көзқарас, Инстаграм, TikTok, Қытай-Қазақстан қарым-қатынасы

МНРТИ: 19.31

Китай через экран: Исследование влияния Instagram и TikTok на восприятие Китая казахстанской молодежью

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Аннотация

Изучение взглядов будущей элиты на Китай, а также факторов, влияющих на их взгляды, остается важнейшим аспектом двусторонних отношений между странами, поскольку молодые люди имеют возможность влиять на будущее развитие своей страны. Однако, учитывая растущую роль социальных сетей в повседневной жизни молодежи, исследований, посвященных их влиянию на взгляды молодежи на Китай, крайне мало. Основная цель данного количественного исследования – изучить, как нарративы в социальных сетях, особенно в Instagram и TikTok, влияют на восприятие Китая казахстанскими студентами программ бакалавриата. Данные были собраны в ходе онлайн-опроса студентов бакалавриата Университета СДУ в Казахстане. Основным аргументом заключается в том, что Instagram и TikTok в настоящее время оказывают минимальное влияние на формирование мнения студентов о Китае из-за ограниченного доступа к контенту, связанному с Китаем, и общего безразличия. Анализ показал, что культурный контент стимулирует любопытство и вдохновение у студентов, в то время как политические и экономические нарративы вызывают беспокойство и скептицизм. Однако преобладают чувства безразличия и неосведомленности студентов о китайско-казахстанских двусторонних отношениях. Эти результаты подчеркивают необходимость дальнейших исследований политической активности молодежи и долгосрочного влияния социальных сетей на общественное восприятие других стран, а также важность социальных сетей в формировании общественного восприятия и программ медиаграмотности, помогающих учащимся критически анализировать потребляемый ими цифровой контент.

Ключевые слова: социальные медиа, общественное мнение, Instagram, TikTok, китайско-казахстанские отношения