

RESEARCH REPORT

Fandom Culture as a Catalyst for Propaganda

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Abstract

Through computational-assisted analysis of the Weibo corpus of the Chinese Communist Youth League (CYL) spanning from 2013 to 2020, this paper unveils the strategic utilization of fandom culture by the CYL, the youth wing of the ruling party, in its nationalistic propaganda on the internet. Specifically, the CYL deliberately associates with the pop idols of the younger generation on Weibo, harnessing their influence to promote nationalistic content that encompasses both “pride-oriented” and “hostility-oriented” themes. Subsequent analysis reveals a greater propensity for nationalistic content to generate audience response compared to other types of content, particularly when endorsed by these pop idols. This research enriches our understanding of the CYL’s propaganda efforts and contributes to the burgeoning scholarship on “soft propaganda” in China.

摘要

通过对 2013 年至 2020 年间共青团微博语料库的计算辅助分析，本文揭示了这一中国执政党的青年附属组织如何策略性地利用中国新兴的粉丝文化在互联网空间中开展宣传活动。具体而言共青团在微博上与拥有大量年青拥趸的流行偶像建立紧密联系，并借助后者的影响力宣传以“骄傲导向”和“敌意导向”为主题的民族主义内容。随后的统计分析显示，较之其他主题内容，共青团发布的上述内容更易引发受众反馈，特别是在获得流行偶像的背书之后。这项研究丰富了我们对于共青团宣传工作的理解，同时也对正在发展中的中国“软宣传”研究作了贡献。

Keywords: Communist Youth League; China; propaganda; nationalism; Weibo

关键词: 共青团; 中国; 宣传; 民族主义; 微博

In recent years, there has been a series of online collective actions in the name of patriotism in China. Interestingly, the Chinese Communist Youth League (CYL), the youth wing of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), appears to have played a crucial role in many of these activities.¹ However, few studies have thoroughly examined its propaganda practices, particularly the tactics it uses to channel the nationalistic sentiments of young people. This research report aims to fill this gap by conducting an analysis of over 15,000 original posts published by the CYL Weibo account between 2003 and 2020. First, the report finds that the category of accounts that the CYL most frequently mentions (i.e. “@”) on Weibo is pop idols. Considering the official nature of the CYL Weibo account, this peculiar association network indicates that the influence of pop idols is utilized to support the CYL’s propaganda efforts. Second, employing the Structural Topic Model, the CYL’s Weibo corpus can be categorized into 13 topics, in which “pride-oriented” nationalism, such as Chinese athletes’ victories, the development of science and technology, and multiple patriotic activities, and “hostility-oriented” nationalism, such as disputes with the US and Japan and the issues of Taiwan and Hong Kong, account for nearly half of the total sample, and the proportion of these posts show an upward trend over time. Finally, in comparison to non-nationalistic posts, both

¹ The CYL refers to the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League in this research report.

types of nationalistic posts are more likely to elicit audience feedback, particularly when pop idols are mentioned in the posts.

The contribution of this research is twofold. First, while a series of studies have examined the role of the CYL in the Chinese socio-political context from different perspectives,² there is, to the best of our knowledge, a dearth of literature that systematically investigates the CYL's propaganda work. This paper fills that void by demonstrating that the propaganda guidelines of this youth organization are to promote both "pride-oriented" and "hostility-oriented" nationalism by harnessing the influence of pop celebrities. Second, this study aligns with the growing body of literature on soft propaganda in China that indicates that the Chinese authorities use entertainment, directly and/or indirectly, to carry out propaganda work in order to achieve better persuasion.³ By using the CYL as a case study, this research demonstrates how soft propaganda is exploited to promote nationalist sentiments.

The Evolution of Propaganda Strategies in China

Propaganda has long been a crucial means used by the Chinese authorities to shape ordinary people's perceptions of the regime and maintain resilience.⁴ Traditionally, the authorities take a heavy-handed approach that is often stodgy, didactic and wooden, known as "hard propaganda," with the primary purpose of deterring potential dissent by demonstrating the government's strength in maintaining social control.⁵ However, with the development of network technologies in recent years, authoritarian regimes worldwide have updated their propaganda tactics on the internet to manipulate public opinion at home and abroad more effectively.⁶ China is no exception to this trend. In response to the evolving media and communication landscape, the authorities not only resort to "hard propaganda" to signal the strength of the regime but also exploit more subtle and sophisticated "soft propaganda" tactics to persuade ordinary citizens to accept official narratives and instil specific ideologies.⁷

The existing scholarship has identified two types of soft propaganda employed by the Chinese authorities to spread pro-regime information. The first type is direct, where the authorities support, promote and invest in entertainment products with propaganda purposes, such as "main melody" dramas, movies and short video clips, to implicitly publicize the contribution of the CCP to the country.⁸ Additionally, official propaganda units pay attention to the adoption of innovative communication techniques to maximize the dissemination of those entertainment-driven propaganda products.⁹ The second type is indirect, where the Chinese authorities utilize entertainment as a *gateway* to expose politically unsophisticated individuals to propaganda materials.¹⁰ To be specific, the propaganda authorities use entertainment elements, like soft news, pure entertainment shows and pop celebrities, as a "lure" to attract the attention of a subset of people who are receptive to fandom culture, and then use official propaganda to construct the recipients' perceptions of the regime.

A prominent theme of the propaganda work in China is nationalism. Theoretically speaking, Chinese nationalism can be differentiated into two categories: "pride-oriented" nationalism, which is pride in China's culture and history as well as its rapid development; and "hostility-oriented" nationalism, which is hostility towards foreign countries that have historical

2 Doyon 2020; Tsai and Liao 2021; Tsimonis 2018.

3 Cai 2016; Xia 2022; Zhu and Fu 2023; Zou 2023.

4 For example, Brady 2009; Shambaugh 2007.

5 Carter and Carter 2022; Huang, Haifeng 2015.

6 For example, Woolley and Howard 2018.

7 Mattingly and Yao 2022; Zou 2023.

8 Cai 2016; Su 2019.

9 Creemers 2017; Repnikova and Fang 2018; Zou 2019.

10 Xia 2022; Zhu and Fu 2023.

feuds or current disputes with China.¹¹ Over the last few years, the Chinese government has intensified both strands of nationalist ideology through the soft propaganda approach with the aim of shaping public opinion. Various branches of propaganda and education institutions within the party-state share the responsibility of fulfilling this mission. As the youth wing of the CCP, the CYL is entrusted with cultivating the younger generation's national identity and loyalty to the regime. Given the indispensability of the internet to young people, it is inevitable that the CYL has endeavoured to develop effective propaganda strategies to promote nationalistic sentiments in cyberspace. Specifically, the CYL predominantly employs the indirect form of soft propaganda to instil nationalism among the youth.

The CYL and Its Innovative Propaganda Work Online

The CYL, which recruits young people aged from 14 to 28, had more than 80 million members as of the end of 2017.¹² The most salient mission of this organization is to spread propaganda among young workers, peasants and students in order to mobilize them to unite closely behind the flag of the CCP.¹³ To better achieve this objective, the CYL has recently employed soft propaganda strategies to guide the public opinion of young people online. At the heart of these strategies is the utilization of fandom culture as a subtle tool to support the CYL's propaganda intents. The rapid growth of the Chinese entertainment industry has spawned a large number of pop idols who are popular with ordinary people, particularly the younger generation. The pursuit of stars by young people has gradually transformed into a fervent fandom culture known as the "fan circle" (*fanquan wenhua* 饭圈文化), where devoted fans not only passionately support their idols but also become defensive when their idols face criticism or attacks.¹⁴ The CYL uses this irrational feature to its advantage in influencing young people's ideological inclinations. As Wu Dezu 吴德祖, the ex-director of new media affairs for the CYL Central Committee, once stated, "Only pop idols' devoted fans can defeat those devoted fans of public intellectuals."¹⁵

Specifically, the CYL establishes social media ties with popular celebrities, by mentioning them in its Weibo postings, to draw the attention of the younger generation, and particularly the idols' followers, to its social media accounts. Given that an association with the CYL confers formal accreditation to these pop idols to some extent, the idols are willing to maintain a close relationship with the CYL.¹⁶ For example, in 2014, the CYL called for people to take photos showing the national flag to commemorate National Day. This initiative received little attention from netizens at first until a famous pop singer, Han Geng 韩庚, joined in. Han posted a photo on Weibo of himself with the Great Hall of the People, with the text, "I love you China." This prompted a number of his fans to follow suit.¹⁷ Eventually, this online activity gained popularity among ordinary netizens. With the cooperation of pop idols, the CYL can boost its influence in cyberspace and lay the groundwork for infusing the young with nationalistic ideology.

In terms of propaganda content, the CYL seems to promote both "pride-oriented" and "hostility-oriented" nationalism in cyberspace. To boost people's national self-confidence, the

11 Woods and Dickson 2017.

12 Data source at <https://bit.ly/3ctYx08>.

13 Pringsheim 1962.

14 See, e.g., "Star Wars: China's devoted, combative celebrity fan clubs." *The Economist*, 2 June 2020, <https://econ.st/3rt3Wdf>. Our research defines "pop idols" as entertainers, including singers and actors, promoted by the entertainment industry for their image, attractiveness and personality. This category also encompasses popular athletes like Sun Yang 孙杨 and Fu Yuanhui 傅园慧, who have a substantial young fan base and actively participate in entertainment programmes.

15 "Fanquan zhengzhi xue: guojia chengwei aidou zhihou, chongxin xushu de minzu zhuyi" (Fandom politics: after the state became an idol, re-narrating nationalism). *Initium Media*, 26 August 2019, <https://bit.ly/3hMvVmy>.

16 See Chen and Gao 2023.

17 See Table A1 of the supplementary material for the original text.

CYL celebrates China's technological achievements since the 18th Party Congress, such as high-speed rail and Chang'e Spacecraft. At the same time, historical humiliation, anti-separatism and foreign forces are used as powerful instruments to escalate hostile nationalism. On the basis of the discussion above, this research report proposes the following three hypotheses regarding the CYL's propaganda work online:

H1: *The CYL maintains a close relationship with pop idols online.*

H2: *In its propaganda work, the CYL pays more attention to "pride-oriented" and "hostility-oriented" nationalism than to other content, and it promotes nationalistic content using the influence of pop idols.*

H3: *Nationalistic content disseminated by the CYL is more likely to elicit engagement from audiences, particularly when harnessing the influence of pop idols.*

Empirical Strategies

To examine the CYL's propaganda online, we analysed all of the original posts on the CYL Weibo account from its inception (on 27 December 2013) to the end of 2020.¹⁸ In total, 15,373 posts were collected.¹⁹ Weibo was launched in 2009 and is one of the biggest social media platforms in China, with around 550 million monthly active users as of the end of March 2020.²⁰ Early scholarship was optimistic about Weibo and the free flow of information and open political debates.²¹ However, the authorities have tightly regulated Weibo and other platforms via sophisticated censorship, and has even adopted them for propaganda purposes.²² For instance, by the end of 2020, government offices and individual officials operated more than 0.14 million Weibo accounts, with the aim of directing online public opinion.²³ Similarly, the main purpose of the CYL in launching a Weibo account in late 2013 was to shape the perspectives of young individuals.²⁴

We used the text-as-data approach to analyse the Weibo corpus. Specifically, we first explored which groups of Weibo accounts are mentioned the most by the CYL in its posts by calculating the connection network based on the CYL Weibo corpus. The Structural Topic Model (STM) was then used to infer the topical structure of the Weibo corpus.²⁵ The topic model is an unsupervised machine learning approach to uncover the underlying semantic structure of a collection of documents based on a hierarchical Bayesian analysis, specifically, defining topic as a distribution over a fixed vocabulary of terms and assuming K topics are associated with a collection of documents.²⁶ From the STM analysis, we were able to deduce what type of content the CYL mainly propagandizes on the internet.

Results

Keep a close relationship with pop idols on Weibo

On Weibo, mentioning (i.e. "@") other accounts within the body of a post is a major connection approach. To learn the CYL's connection network, we searched for all Weibo accounts mentioned

18 We scraped CYL's posts in March 2021. To reduce noise, we excluded non-original posts.

19 For details, see Figure A1 of the supplementary material.

20 Data source available at <https://bit.ly/3le4kLo>.

21 See, e.g., Huang, Ronggui, and Sun 2014.

22 See, e.g., Creemers 2017.

23 China Internet Network Information Center 2021.

24 "Gongqingtuan zhongyang kaitong weixin weibo" (The Central Committee of the CYL launched WeChat and Weibo). *China Youth Daily*, 30 December 2013, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/1230/c363174-23977289.html>.

25 Roberts, Stewart and Airoidi 2016.

26 Blei and Lafferty 2009.

Table 1. The CYL Connection Network Statistics

Group	Number of Accounts	Number of Times	Three Most Mentioned Accounts
Pop Idols	112	2,688	TFBOYS-Karry Wang TFBOYS-Roy Wang Lay Zhang
Media	93	4,278	<i>People's Daily</i> CCTV News Global Times
Opinion leaders	70	612	Niguang Fei-Xing CD Rev Lei Xiying
Military and police forces	36	432	Capital Cybersecurity Police Ministry of Public Security Department of Defence
Government agencies	31	651	Memorial Hall Ziguang Pavilion CRCC
Local CYLs	28	868	CYL Shandong Committee CYL Fujian Committee CYL Tibetan Committee
Others	25	149	United Nations SCO Tsinghua University

Source: The author.

Notes: Memorial Hall refers to the Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders; CRCC is the China Railway Construction Corporation; SCO is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Refer to Table A2 for the account names in Chinese.

in its post corpus using “@” as the key character, and then categorized them based on their nature. Table 1 shows that the accounts mentioned by the CYL can be roughly divided into seven categories, namely pop idols, the media, left-wing opinion leaders, military and police forces, government agencies, local CYLs, and others. Interestingly, while the CYL most frequently mentions mainstream media in posts, the largest group mentioned by the CYL is pop idols. As an official account, the CYL’s subtle operational practice appears to show that pop idols are treated as a pivotal resource for propaganda work in cyberspace. In essence, the CYL attempts to exploit the influence of pop idols to capture the attention of young people and subsequently foster nationalist sentiments.²⁷

Close observation of the pop idol accounts mentioned by the CYL reveals that most of these pop idols meet the following criteria: they are highly popular among young people and they are willing to spread “positive energy” on the internet. In addition to Han Geng, mentioned above, many other celebrities who are highly popular among the younger generation have been lauded by the CYL and have frequently appeared in its Weibo posts. The TFBoys 加油男孩, a pop teen band with over 80 million followers on Weibo, is a salient representative. Three members of the band actively participated in online patriotic activities launched by the CYL and propagandized pro-regime messages. For instance, on 24 June 2018, the CYL posted an interview with Karry Wang 王俊凯, the lead singer of the TFBoys, in which he said that the craziest thing he did after becoming famous was to go to Tiananmen Square to watch the flag-raising ceremony early in the morning.²⁸ Another

27 To further illustrate the CYL’s use of fandom culture in propaganda, we compared it to two representative official accounts: “Chinese police online” (*Zhongguo jingfang zai xian*) and “Women’s voice” (*Nüxing zhisheng*). While media mentions accounted for around 25% across all three accounts, the CYL stood out with a significantly higher proportion of pop idol mentions, close to 20%, compared to less than 6% in the other accounts. For details, see Table A3 of the supplementary material.

28 See Table A1 of the supplementary material for the original text.

prominent representative is pop singer Lay Zhang 张艺兴, who was one of the first celebrities to repost the post, “China cannot lose even a little,” which was published on the CYL Weibo account after the South China Sea Arbitration denied China’s “nine-dash line” claim in the South China Sea in 2016.²⁹ Since then, Zhang has regularly appeared in CYL posts to spread “positive energy.” For example, in a post on 5 July 2017, the CYL quoted Zhang as saying, “The year 2035 may seem far away, but it is not far away. The Chinese nation ... [is] to build a socialist modern power, and the young people, let us work harder and harder.”³⁰ Moreover, this pop singer, who has more than 50 million followers on Weibo, has been appointed as a “propaganda ambassador” by the CYL of Hunan province.³¹

The above findings reveal that the CYL frequently associates with pop celebrities on Weibo, utilizing their influence to spread pro-regime information, particularly regarding “pride-oriented” nationalism. This supports H1.

Nationalistic topics as the core of propaganda

We used STM analysis to explore the CYL Weibo corpus. After comparison, we found that this corpus can be reasonably categorized into 13 topics.³² Figure 1 presents the proposed labels, proportions and top five words for each topic. Posts published by the CYL cover multiple fields. For example, there are posts with hard propaganda themes,³³ such as news about the top leadership of the CCP (Topic 4), applauding the advancement of China’s overseas cooperation (Topic 6) and the memorial sacrifice of soldiers (Topic 9).³⁴ A subset of posts cover the COVID-19 pandemic (Topic 2).³⁵ Meanwhile, some sets of posts are about youth work directly, including guidance on values for young people (Topic 3), inspiring young people to pursue their goals (Topic 10) and promoting positive role models among teens (Topic 12).

In addition to the above content, nationalism is a pivotal theme of the CYL’s online propaganda. Among the “pride-oriented” nationalism themes, there are posts celebrating events such as the victory of Chinese athletes in various sports competitions (Topic 8), a series of technological breakthroughs in China (Topic 11) and CYL-led online patriotic activities aimed at promoting national pride (Topic 13). The “hostility-oriented” nationalism posts focus on events such as the deterioration of Sino-US and cross-Strait relations (Topic 1), Sino-Japanese disputes in terms of historical and contemporary issues (Topic 5) and social movements in Hong Kong (Topic 7). Furthermore, as can be noted in Figure 2, which plots the prevalence of each topic from late 2013 to 2020, the proportion of nationalistic topics has increased in more recent years.³⁶

Furthermore, Figure A3 in the supplementary material illustrates the frequency of pop idols being mentioned across the 13 topics. The data reveal that pop idols are frequently referenced in “pride-oriented” nationalist posts, such as cheering athletes’ victory and promoting online patriotic activities. Examples including the TFBoys and Lay Zhang vividly exemplify this trend. Simultaneously, a recent study demonstrates that pop idols frequently repost messages from official

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 “Zhang yixing daiyan Hunan gongqingtuan xuanchuan gongzuo” (Lay Zhang speaks for Hunan Communist Youth League propaganda work). *China Youth Daily*, 13 July 2016, <http://qnzs.youth.cn/2016/0713/4616607.shtml?mobile=0>.

32 See Figure A2 of the supplementary material for the discussion on the choice of the number of topics.

33 For review, see, Huang, Haifeng 2018.

34 Topic 9 exhibits dry and routine language, resembling hard propaganda rather than “hostility-oriented” nationalism with its explicit targets and fierce language.

35 Posts on Topic 2 merely involve general and scientific information regarding the pandemic, such as daily confirmed cases.

36 Owing to space constraints, the features and representative posts of nationalistic topics are discussed in the supplementary material.

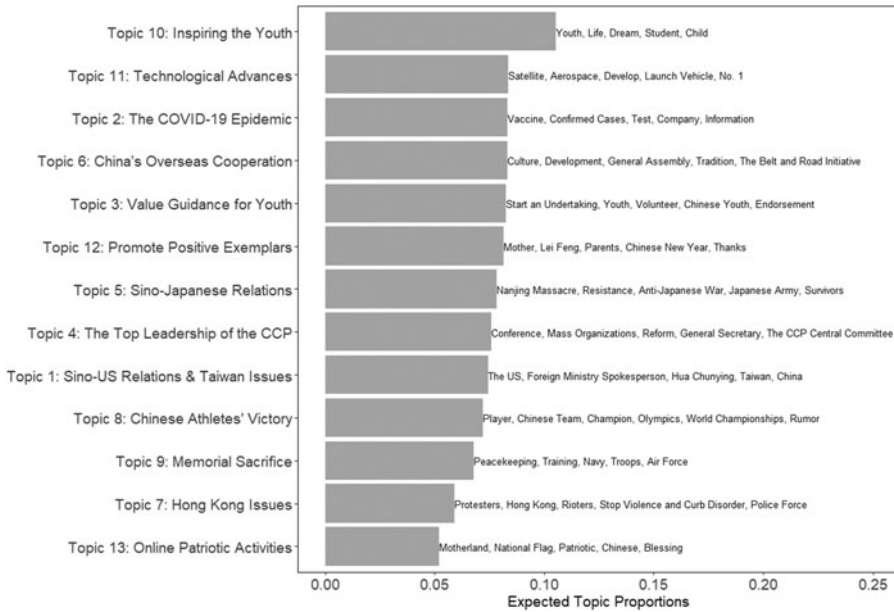


Figure 1. Estimated Topics and Top Words, by STM

Source: The author.

Notes: This graph shows the proposed label, proportion and top 5 words for each topic. The original top words for each topic can be found in Table A4.

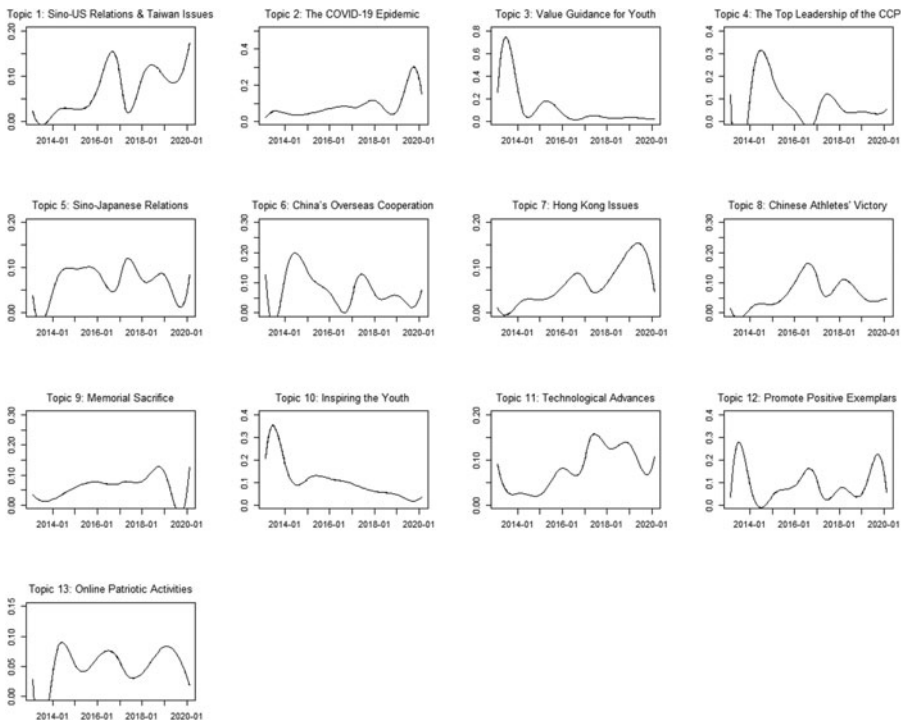


Figure 2. Topic Prevalence over Time

Source: The author.

Notes: The figure depicts the prevalence of each topic from late 2013 to 2020. To make it clear, we do not add confidence intervals. Some line segments coincide with the abscissa axis, meaning that no documents are classified to the topics at these time slots.

accounts on Weibo, showcasing their support and loyalty to the state.³⁷ Consequently, nationalistic posts, especially those involving pop celebrities, are highly likely to receive wider promotion by these idols, leading to increased online visibility. Therefore, H2 is supported.

Nationalist content attracts more audience feedback

Using retweets, comments and “likes” as metrics to gauge audience engagement, we investigated the disparities between nationalist and non-nationalist topics as well as the impact of association with pop idols. The dependent variable is audience feedback,³⁸ while the independent variable is the topic of each post.³⁹ We designated the non-nationalist topics as the reference and included the mention of pop idols and post length as covariates in the regression model.⁴⁰ Owing to the characteristics of the outcome variable, we employed negative binomial regressions to examine the relationship between nationalist topics and audience feedback.

Figure 3 visualizes the regression results.⁴¹ Overall, compared to non-nationalistic topics, topics instilling either “pride-oriented” or “hostility-oriented” nationalism are more likely to obtain retweets, comments and “likes” from Weibo users. Examining the coefficients, posts on online patriotic activities (Topic 13) and Sino-Japanese disputes (Topic 5) are the most effective at eliciting audience feedback. Surprisingly, posts highlighting China’s technological breakthroughs receive fewer retweets and comments compared to posts mainly featuring hard propaganda, suggesting that the propaganda effect of the former is not as potent as initially anticipated. Table A6 also reveals that posts featuring idol mentions exhibit a greater propensity for gaining audience engagement in comparison to posts without such mentions. To further examine the heterogeneity of celebrity mentions across the six nationalistic-centric topics, we ran regressions within each topic to see whether an association with pop idols improves the likelihood of audience feedback. Keeping other variables constant, Table A7 shows that posts incorporating celebrity associations generally engage more audience feedback. Consequently, H3 is supported.

Concluding Remarks

This study investigates the CYL’s propaganda tactics using the Weibo corpus from 2013 to 2020. The findings reveal that the CYL establishes a close relationship with pop idols, attracting the attention of young people. Simultaneously, the CYL has consistently released posts encompassing both “pride-oriented” nationalism, such as lauding Chinese technological breakthroughs and athletes’ victories, and “hostility-oriented” nationalism, such as framing threats from external hostile forces and internal separatist forces. Using retweets, comments and “likes” as indicators, statistical analysis shows that in contrast to non-nationalistic posts, nationalistic posts published by the CYL are indeed more likely to gain audience feedback, especially when the posts mention pop idols. Altogether, this research unveils for the first time how the CYL exploits soft propaganda tactics online to instil nationalist sentiments.

This study has some limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, it solely explores the CYL’s propaganda strategies through its Weibo corpus and textual analysis, potentially limiting the understanding of its overall propaganda work. Future research should adopt a mixed approach, incorporating additional materials for a comprehensive perspective. Second, while it has shown evidence of the CYL utilizing the influence of pop idols for propaganda on Weibo, it

37 Chen and Gao 2023.

38 To avoid the influence of extreme observations (see the density plot in Figure A4 in the supplementary material), we winsorize the top and bottom 2.5% of the data points.

39 It is estimated by the STM; see the supplementary material for details.

40 See Table A5 of the supplementary material for descriptive statistics of variables.

41 See Table A6 of the supplementary material for details.

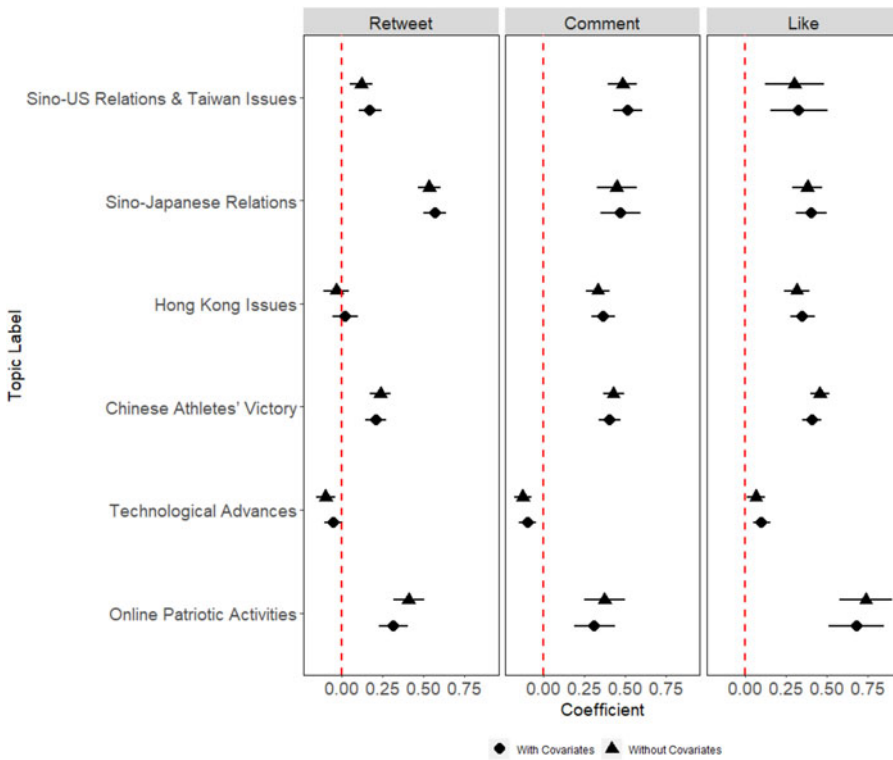


Figure 3. Relationship between Nationalist Topics and Audience Feedback

Source: The author.

Notes: Triangles and points represent the regression results without and with control variables, respectively, and the line segments are the 95% confidence intervals.

has not empirically demonstrated the actual impact of this strategy in attracting fans and expanding the CYL’s online influence. Third, the measurement of audience feedback used here relies on indicators such as retweets, which may not fully capture the genuine persuasion capability of the CYL’s propaganda tactics. A recent study suggests that political messages on social media may have limited influence on individuals.⁴² Hence, future research should employ experiments or other suitable approaches to assess the actual effectiveness of the CYL’s soft propaganda.

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42 Amsalem and Zoizner 2023.

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