

Research Article

Algorithmic Governance and Public Sentiment: Social Media's Dual Role in China's Domestic Legitimacy and External Image Crisis

Ziyang Liu

¹De Master Student, Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China. Email: krtekliu@gmail.com

*Correspondence: krtekliu@gmail.com

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Abstract: This study examines the dual role of social media in China as both a mechanism of algorithmic governance and a platform that reinforces domestic legitimacy while shaping the nation's international image. The research conceptualises citizens' engagement within state-curated digital environments by drawing on Foucault's notion of governmentality and Habermas's theory of the public sphere, exploring how individuals perceive, navigate, and respond to these digitally mediated spaces. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with five Chinese social media users, which facilitated context-rich insights into their digital practices, attitudes, and awareness or understanding of censorship and content manipulation. Thematic analysis revealed six central themes: Awareness of Algorithmic Curation and Information Control; Perceptions of Algorithmic Governance; Evaluating China's Global Messaging Campaigns; Alignment Between National Image and Lived Experience; Negotiating Expression and Avoiding Censorship; and Creativity, Satire, and Indirect Resistance. Participants displayed varying degrees of acceptance, resistance, and adaptation to the state's digitally mediated controls, reflecting a fragmented yet active public sphere. While some individuals aligned with nationalistic narratives, others expressed scepticism regarding the credibility of official communications. The findings highlight the complex interplay between control and communication, emphasising that citizens are not passive recipients of propaganda but rather active, manipulable agents navigating algorithmically constructed realities.

Keywords: Algorithmic Governance, Social Media Surveillance, Digital Authoritarianism, Public Sentiment in China, State Narrative and Propaganda

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In recent years, the Chinese government has increasingly turned to algorithmic governance as a means of regulating societal sentiments, thereby sustaining domestic legitimacy while cultivating a favourable international image. This approach, which leverages big data, artificial intelligence (AI), and the monitoring of social media platforms, represents a substantial shift in governance institutions towards technologically mediated forms of influence and image management [1]. Social media platforms, notably Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin (the Chinese equivalent of TikTok), play a dual role within this transformation: they act both as instruments for consolidating state narratives among domestic audiences and as arenas for contestation in the international representation of China. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) employs algorithmic techniques to shape public opinion, suppress dissent, and disseminate state-sanctioned information [2].

Technology companies supported by the state, together with intelligence units, utilise natural language processing and sentiment analysis to oversee popular discussions, remove content deemed objectionable, and dynamically adjust propaganda initiatives. This data-driven framework allows rapid state responses to emerging crises or social unrest, thereby enhancing political stability and social control. Through such mechanisms, the CCP can project a form of responsive legitimacy, aligning with or amplifying nationalistic sentiments or public satisfaction with government policies [3]. Algorithms thus establish a feedback loop in which citizens both influence and are influenced by state conduct in a highly regulated environment. At the same time, social media poses significant challenges to China's international image, particularly under global scrutiny. Despite the blocking of international platforms such as Twitter (now X), Instagram, and YouTube domestically, official Chinese accounts utilise these channels to propagate state narratives abroad. These efforts, however, are often met with scepticism, resistance, or counter-narratives, especially concerning issues such as human rights violations in Xinjiang, censorship, or the Hong Kong protests [4].

China's attempts to bolster soft power have frequently met with limited success, as observers note inconsistencies between domestic propaganda and its international reception. Furthermore, the transnational nature of digital communication means that content originally intended for domestic audiences can circulate globally, often interpreted through divergent cultural and political frameworks. The external perception of China can be further complicated by nationalist campaigns and state-endorsed or tolerated online trolling [5]. Consequently, while algorithmic governance may consolidate legitimacy within China, it simultaneously risks undermining the country's international standing. This interplay between algorithmic control and social media engagement sits at the core of China's efforts to manage both domestic stability and global perception [3]. The resulting tension reflects a complex balancing act between governance and communication in the digital era, with significant implications for state legitimacy and international relations.

1.2 Problem Statement

The advent of the digital era has prompted extensive use of algorithmic governance and social media surveillance by the Chinese government to manage public sentiment, consolidate domestic authority, and influence its international image. While these strategies enable rapid responses to internal challenges and transnational discourse, they also raise significant concerns regarding personal autonomy and civil liberties [6]. Although the state imposes technical controls, ordinary citizens continue to find ways to communicate, adapt, and express themselves within these digitally constrained environments. Despite this, there remains a lack of research examining the extent to which specific populations comprehend the dual role of social media as both an instrument of state control and a medium for personal communication [1]. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring citizens' perceptions of algorithmic governance and its potential impact on domestic legitimacy and the international representation of China.

1.3 Research Objectives

- To explore public perceptions of how algorithmic tools and social media are used by the Chinese government to influence domestic opinion and political legitimacy.
- To understand citizens' attitudes toward China's online image management on international platforms and its effectiveness in representing national identity or values.
- To examine how ordinary users navigate and respond to the dual function of social media as both a space for state influence and a platform for personal expression.

1.4 Research Questions

- How do members of the public perceive the use of algorithmic tools and social media by the Chinese government to influence domestic opinion and reinforce political legitimacy?
- What are citizens' attitudes toward China's efforts to manage its international image through online platforms, and how effective do they believe these efforts are in representing national identity or values?
- In what ways do ordinary social media users navigate and respond to the dual function of these platforms; as instruments of state influence and as spaces for personal expression?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study provides valuable insights into how Chinese citizens perceive and engage with state-directed digital algorithmic governance. By examining social attitudes towards domestic legitimacy and China's international representation, the research illuminates the interplay between state-imposed control and citizens' autonomy in online spaces. Additionally, it highlights the ways in which algorithmic technologies shape civic expression and offers implications for digital governance, international relations, and the evolving relationships between authoritarian governance, technological mediation, and public opinion in contemporary China.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Aim

This section seeks to examine how Chinese citizens engage with algorithmic governance and state-managed digital discourse, particularly in relation to domestic legitimacy, perceptions of China both internally and internationally, and the extent of citizen subjugation as evidenced by heightened surveillance and curated digital environments.

2.1.1 Public Perceptions of Algorithmic Influence in China

In recent years, the Chinese government has increasingly depended on algorithmic technologies and social media to influence public opinion and reinforce political legitimacy. Citizens' responses to these practices vary according to factors such as digital literacy and political orientation. For some, algorithmic governance and state-managed content moderation are perceived as part of a broader strategy to ensure social stability, order, and national cohesion [7]. This perspective aligns with the view of the state as a protector within the digital sphere, particularly in countering foreign disinformation or culturally destabilising material. However, digitally adept users are progressively aware of the highly curated nature of their online environment [8]. Platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin employ algorithms that amplify content favourable to state narratives while suppressing critical or provocative material.

Although these mechanisms are often subtle, many users recognise the artificial shaping of discourse, especially during politically sensitive periods. This has created a complex relationship between users and digital platforms, wherein trust in content becomes conditional and continuously negotiated according to users' self-reflective assessments [9]. Some interpret algorithmic governance as simultaneously beneficial and problematic: it can sustain civility and order online, yet also suppress opposing views or truths. This dynamic connects to broader questions of political legitimacy. While algorithmic governance can foster an appearance of consensus, it may also undermine trust when users perceive manipulation [10]. Ultimately, the interplay between perceived state objectives and individual autonomy in the digital realm shapes how citizens evaluate their government.

2.2 Attitudes Toward China's Global Image Online

Chinese citizens hold varied opinions regarding the management of the country's online image on international platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, and YouTube—platforms officially blocked within China but accessible via VPNs. State-led initiatives, often referred to as "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy, employ digital campaigns and diplomatic messaging to project a confident and assertive portrayal of China internationally, countering Western narratives and highlighting national achievements [10]. For some domestic audiences, these efforts are a source of pride, perceived as an assertion of sovereignty and a means to rectify what they consider to be misrepresentations in global media [11]. Defending Chinese policies regarding Xinjiang, Hong Kong, or Taiwan is viewed by this group as a necessary, even heroic, defence of the nation's core values.

Conversely, other citizens express scepticism or uncertainty regarding these approaches. Critiques focus on the tone and content of China's digital diplomacy, suggesting that aggressive or overly coordinated messaging may reinforce perceptions of China as authoritarian or confrontational. There is also concern that such externally targeted narratives do not accurately reflect citizens' lived experiences, potentially generating feelings of alienation or embarrassment [12]. Younger generations, particularly those exposed to international cultures, tend to engage critically with both domestic and foreign representations of China. While they may support efforts to enhance China's global image, they often prefer subtler, culturally resonant strategies over polemical content [13]. Overall, although a considerable portion of the population endorses the notion of managing China's international image, significant differences exist regarding the methods of presentation and the effectiveness of current strategies in achieving their intended objectives.

2.2.1 Navigating State Control and Personal Expression

China possesses a highly intensive digital environment in which ordinary users navigate a constant negotiation between social media as an instrument of state control and as a medium for individual expression. Platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, Bilibili, and Douyin serve as central hubs for daily communication, entertainment, and identity formation, yet they are subject to rigorous monitoring and strict content regulation in accordance with state policies [14]. Users are often aware that their online behaviours are observed by automated filtering systems or human moderators Tando Jr ,Lou [15], fostering a culture of self-censorship and coded communication. Within this framework, individuals employ euphemisms, satire, and ambiguity to convey personal opinions while avoiding censorship.

Despite these limitations, users exercise agency in creative ways, transforming state-influenced platforms into spaces for humour, community engagement, and subtle criticism. This nuanced form of expression is particularly evident during politically sensitive events, such as anniversaries of significant incidents or the emergence of national scandals. While the state promotes patriotic narratives and suppresses dissent, citizens frequently respond indirectly or symbolically [16]. Techniques such as literary allusions, memes, and parody videos serve as vehicles for resistance or commentary, reflecting an evolving digital literacy that adapts to the boundaries of state control. Simultaneously, other users accept official narratives, whether out of genuine belief, strategic conformity, or social compliance. Social media thus functions as a space where expressions of nationalism are enacted through participation in state-sponsored campaigns or reinforcement of communal values [17]. In these contexts, distinguishing between authentic personal expression and state-imposed ideology becomes complex, raising questions about the veracity of sentiments expressed online.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Drawing on two complementary theoretical frameworks, this study employs Foucault's concept of governmentality alongside Habermas's theory of the public sphere to examine how algorithmic governance and social media shape public sentiment and contribute to the construction of legitimacy in contemporary China.

2.3.1 Governmentality (Michel Foucault)

Foucault's concept of governmentality emphasises how modern states govern not solely through laws and formal institutions but also by shaping the behaviour of citizens via knowledge systems, surveillance, and subtle forms of discipline. In the Chinese context, algorithmic governance exemplifies this notion, employing data-driven mechanisms

to monitor, categorise, and influence online citizen behaviour. Social media algorithms, sentiment analysis, and content moderation together constitute a form of digital governmentality, in which power operates not through overt repression but through the structuring of visibility and the framing of choices [18]. The Chinese state's ability to regulate public sentiment through algorithmic filtering reflects a form of biopolitical management, cultivating compliance, shaping discourse, and generating an appearance of legitimacy that emerges from the surface of public opinion and performance-oriented governance.

2.3.2 Public Sphere Theory (Jürgen Habermas)

Habermas's concept of the public sphere refers to a domain in which citizens engage in rational-critical debate, a process essential for the formation of democratically legitimate policies. In authoritarian contexts such as China, this sphere is highly constrained. However, social media provides an intermediary space where vestiges of a public sphere persist despite censorship. This study employs a modified interpretation of the public sphere to examine how Chinese citizens navigate these platforms—not necessarily to reach democratic consensus, but to construct individual identities, exchange perspectives, and respond to state narratives [19]. While state algorithms structure and shape discourse, users exhibit creativity in resisting, adapting to, or participating within this contested and fragmented public sphere.

2.4 Literature Gap

Although there is extensive literature on China's use of algorithmic governance and digital surveillance, comparatively little research has investigated how ordinary citizens perceive, comprehend, and navigate these mechanisms in their everyday online lives. Specific areas that remain underexplored include public attitudes towards the dual functions of social media—as an instrument of state control and as a vehicle for personal expression. Furthermore, analyses of China's international image campaigns and the tensions between domestic legitimacy and global perception have received limited scholarly attention.

3. Methodology

3.1 Aim

This study employs a qualitative methodology to examine how Chinese citizens engage with algorithmic governance, interact with state-promoted narratives, and navigate the dual functions of digital platforms for both state-directed and personal communication. Given the focus on lived experiences and individual interpretation within a regulated and mediated digital environment, qualitative methods are particularly suited to produce rich, nuanced insights into these dynamics.

3.2 Research Design

The study will employ semi-structured interviews, which provide both focus and flexibility in data collection. This method allows researchers to pose consistent questions while also enabling participants to share personal narratives and elaborate on their experiences with social media, digital surveillance, and state-driven narratives. Semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable in authoritarian contexts, where direct questioning may not elicit fully candid responses, but guided dialogue can yield deeper understanding. As a qualitative research technique, semi-structured interviews use open-ended questions supported by an interview guide. This approach permits in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews, striking a balance between structure and adaptability to generate rich, contextually grounded data for analysis [20].

3.3 Participant Selection

Five participants will be recruited using purposive sampling, taking into account diversity in demographic characteristics, digital usage patterns, and familiarity with China's online information environment. The selection will span various age groups, genders, and educational backgrounds, and will include individuals who are active users of platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, Weibo, or Bilibili. The objective is not to achieve generalisability, but to generate context-specific insights into digital life under algorithmic governance. Purposive sampling is a non-probability technique commonly employed in qualitative research. Rather than aiming to extend findings to a wider population, this method involves deliberately selecting participants who possess specific characteristics

or knowledge relevant to the study, thereby enabling the collection of valuable, targeted information [21].

3.4 Data Collection

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews of approximately 15 minutes each. These interviews will be conducted in settings designed to ensure participant comfort and anonymity. The discussions will follow a thematic guide encompassing topics such as awareness of algorithmic control, engagement with online content, responses to state narratives, and personal strategies for circumventing censorship. With participants' consent, interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and subsequently subjected to thematic analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be conducted on the interview transcripts following the six-step procedure proposed by [22]. This method facilitates the identification of patterns within the data and situates them within broader social and political contexts. The analysis is guided by the study's theoretical framework, drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality and Habermas's theory of the public sphere, to elucidate the relationship between citizens, state authority, and digital forms of control. Table 1 presents a summary of how Braun and Clarke [22] thematic analysis method has been applied in the context of this study.

Table 1: Braun and Clarke's Method

Phase	Description (As Applied in this Study)
Familiarization	Reading transcripts multiple times to gain a deep understanding of participant narratives and context.
Generating Codes	Identifying key features of the data (e.g., mentions of censorship, self-censorship, trust, or resistance).
Searching for Themes	Grouping codes into potential themes, such as "navigating censorship," "perceived manipulation," or "pride vs. scepticism."
Reviewing Themes	Refining themes to ensure they represent the data meaningfully and align with research objectives.
Defining Themes	Clearly naming and defining each theme to reflect the participant perspectives and the role of algorithmic governance.
Writing Up	Interpreting the themes in relation to Foucault's and Habermas's theories and incorporating participant quotes.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Given the political sensitivity of the topic, strict ethical guidelines govern the research process. Participants are informed of the purpose of the study, their right to confidentiality, and their ability to withdraw at any stage. Measures are taken to ensure anonymity, including the use of pseudonyms in transcripts and secure storage of all data.

4. Data Analysis

This section delineates the findings derived from five semi-structured interviews with Chinese social media users, subjected to thematic analysis in accordance with [22]. Six overarching themes emerged, each corresponding to the focal areas of the interview protocol. These themes encapsulate critical dimensions of algorithmic governance, state-directed influence, individual agency, and the projection of China's international image. Analysis considers both convergences and divergences within participant accounts, thereby capturing the nuanced tensions and contradictions that characterise engagement with a tightly curated digital environment. The findings are interpreted through the conceptual lenses of Foucault's governmentality and Habermas's public sphere, positioning the Chinese social media ecosystem as a contested terrain in which mechanisms of control and spheres of communicative action are continually negotiated.

4.1 Theme 1: Awareness of Algorithmic Curation and Information Control

The first theme pertains to participants' recognition of algorithmic mediation within their digital experiences, especially concerning politically or socially sensitive material. The majority of participants acknowledged that content visibility on platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin is shaped not purely by user preferences, but through

algorithmic curation aligned with state priorities.

Participant 1 remarked, "I noticed during national holidays or political events, certain hashtags trend even if they don't seem very popular among people I follow." This indicates a top-down form of algorithmic governance, in which content visibility is strategically orchestrated rather than emerging organically. Participant 2 echoed this concern but described a more acute incident: "Some posts about Wuhan disappeared overnight. I shared one, and it got removed." In this context, algorithmic governance operates as an immediate disciplinary mechanism, enabling rapid intervention to preserve narrative authority during periods of social or political tension.

By contrast, Participant 3 highlighted the algorithms' role in actively promoting specific content: "Whenever there's a government-related campaign, it suddenly floods my feed... That can't be organic." While not overtly critical, the participant implicitly questions the legitimacy of such "trending" content. Participants 4 and 5 similarly acknowledged the operation of covert controls. Participant 4 recounted an instance of a regional news blackout: "There was a news story about flooding in my hometown that wasn't showing up on Weibo even though locals were posting a lot." Participant 5 reflected on the gradual realization of censorship, stating, "Douyin videos vanish after briefly going viral... it's not always obvious, but if you pay attention, the platform's priorities become clear."

These observations indicate a sophisticated public awareness of algorithmic governance. Although participants did not uniformly characterise these practices as censorship, all five recognised the systemic shaping of information, determining which content is amplified or attenuated. This aligns with Foucault's concept of governmentality, wherein control is exerted not through outright prohibition, but through the strategic management of visibility and discursive space.

4.2 Theme 2: Perceptions of Algorithmic Governance – Order vs. Freedom

The second theme explores participants' negotiation between the perceived benefits of algorithmic control, such as the maintenance of social stability, and its restriction of personal freedom of expression. Participant responses reveal ambivalence: while some view these controls as necessary, others interpret them as coercive constraints.

Participant 1 offered concrete observations: "It helps control chaos... People post rumours or exaggerate a lot, so having a filter isn't always bad." This comment indicates a measure of confidence in the state's capacity to uphold digital order. Conversely, Participant 2 articulated a contrasting perspective: "It definitely limits freedom... That is the real power of algorithmic governance; it does not need to ban everything, it need only make people afraid not to say things." The consequences of self-censorship as a form of subtle surveillance exemplify Foucault's notion of disciplinary power in action.

Occupying an intermediate position, Participant 3 observed: "It is not complete control but I am definitely influencing the boundaries of acceptable dialogue." Participant 4, in contrast, was primarily concerned with the substance of the content rather than with censorship itself: "It is strange that even factual or neutral stuff can be removed... it feels offensive." For this participant, the suppression of critical information, rather than diversity of opinion, represents the fundamental challenge to effective governance. Lastly, Participant 5 offered a noteworthy comparative observation: "The algorithm is a digital leash. You are free, and just in the enclosed field." This depiction suggests the presence of individual agency within a framework of algorithmic governance, highlighting that control is exerted through the delimitation of discursive boundaries rather than through direct enforcement.

Collectively, these responses reveal a spectrum of perspectives: some participants regard algorithmic control as a legitimate component of a broader social contract, while others perceive it as undermining trust, constraining expression, and limiting meaningful civic engagement.

4.3 Theme 3: Evaluating China's Global Messaging Campaigns

This theme examines participants' perceptions of China's image management, particularly in relation to the blocking of platforms such as Twitter and YouTube. Participant responses ranged from national pride to scepticism. Participant 1 expressed support for this strategy: "Using platforms like Twitter is smart... I feel proud when I see diplomats defending our position strongly." This illustrates alignment with nationalist sentiment and endorsement of digital sovereignty. In contrast, Participant 2 offered a critique of the approach: "The Wolf Warrior tone doesn't resonate... it creates more enemies than friends." The deployment of assertive nationalism online risks alienating international audiences, thereby undermining the effectiveness of China's soft-power

initiatives.

Participant 3 emphasised a perceived deficit of authenticity as a central issue: "They seem polished, but I don't know if foreigners believe them... Maybe we need more ordinary citizens sharing their lives." This indicates a preference for more organic, grassroots approaches to digital diplomacy rather than hierarchical, state-directed messaging. Participant 4, meanwhile, highlighted both ethical and strategic considerations: "If we block Twitter and YouTube for our own people, why are we using them to spread messages abroad?" Such contradictions erode the perceived credibility of the messaging, affecting its reception both within China and abroad. Participant 5 emphasised issues arising from cultural miscommunication: "What we think is impressive might not be received the same way internationally... The tone needs to be adapted better." This observation highlights the necessity of tailoring digital messaging to diverse audiences in transnational contexts.

This theme reveals a tension within China's broader international media strategy: while the government projects confidence to external audiences, domestic perspectives expose vulnerabilities in this approach. Habermas's theoretical framework is relevant here, as these semi-public digital spaces function less as arenas of open deliberation and more as instruments for the construction and management of state image.

4.4 Theme 4: Alignment Between National Image and Lived Experience

Participants were queried on whether China's international image aligned with their personal or collective experiences. The majority reported a disjunction between the state-promoted image and their quotidian realities. Participant 1 expressed this perspective succinctly: "The official accounts show a very perfect and controlled version... It's not completely false, but it leaves out a lot." Participant 3 echoed this frustration: "They focus too much on extremes; either very positive or very defensive. Most of us live somewhere in the middle." Participant 2 offered a more differentiated view: "When it's about development or poverty alleviation, those things are real... But when they talk about human rights or freedom, the stories are very one-sided." This observation underscores the conditional credibility attributed to the official narrative. Participant 4 expressed disillusionment: "It's more about how the government wants to be seen, not how the people actually live." For Participant 5, the primary concern centred on the oversimplification of complex realities: "Life in China is nuanced. Sometimes things are good, sometimes frustrating. The campaigns simplify everything too much."

These accounts illustrate a complex interplay between state-curated narratives and lived individual experiences. While certain national accomplishments are acknowledged, the consistently favourable image projected internationally fails to capture the contradictions inherent in the everyday lives of Chinese citizens.

4.5 Theme 5: Negotiating Expression and Avoiding Censorship

This theme explores the ways in which individuals adapt their online behaviour to circumvent censorship. All participants recognised self-censorship as an integral part of daily digital interaction. Participant 1 characterised it as largely instinctive: "You get a sense of what words might trigger filters... It becomes a habit—like second nature." Participant 2 chose avoidance: "I avoid politics entirely... social media should be relaxing, but in China, it feels like a performance." Participant 3 detailed strategic expression: "It's like learning a second language; the language of suggestion and implication." Participant 4 accepted the limitations passively: "I stick to entertainment or lifestyle topics... we avoid, not resist." Participant 5 framed it playfully: "Sometimes I test the waters by posting vague comments... What's okay one day might get you flagged the next."

This illustrates a broad spectrum of coping strategies, ranging from calculated risk-taking to complete abstention from sensitive expression. The commonality among participants lies not in their silence, but in their continuous negotiation: each day, citizens weigh considerations of personal safety, expression, and identity against the constraints imposed by algorithmic boundaries. This observation further reinforces Foucault's concept of surveillance as a form of internalised discipline rather than overt coercion.

4.6 Theme 6: Creativity, Satire, and Indirect Resistance

Nonetheless, through the use of humour, metaphor, and satire, several participants engage in indirect forms of resistance or

commentary within the constraints of digital surveillance. These strategies allow expression while remaining largely impervious to censorship. Participant 1 emphasised the communal dimension of satire: "It's like a secret language among netizens... humour softens the critique but still makes a point." Participant 2 noted how meaning is layered: "I use puns or emojis... if you know the context, you get the message." Participant 3 reflected on the role of ambiguity: "Satirical content blurs the line between critique and endorsement." Participant 5 shared a poetic strategy: "I post literary references or song lyrics... It's a quiet form of rebellion that still feels empowering." Interestingly, Participant 4 distanced themselves from these methods: "I'm not good at using humour or satire... I worry about the consequences." This indicates that not all users possess the confidence or digital literacy required to participate in such subversive exchanges.

In summary, social media in China constitutes a negotiated terrain, neither entirely restricted nor fully permissive. Users deploy creativity, irony, and coded language to cultivate what Habermas would characterise as a fragmented public sphere—partial in openness, yet vibrant with discourse and interaction.

4.7 Concluding Observations

In conclusion, this section has explored the intricate ways in which Chinese citizens perceive and negotiate algorithmic governance alongside the dual role of social media. The findings reveal a spectrum of engagement, ranging from the overt manipulation of content to nuanced emotional and behavioural adaptations, indicating that individual agency endures even within a tightly controlled digital landscape. The Foucauldian concept of governmentality is manifested not merely through coercion or omission, but through the orchestration of the parameters within which thought and expression are deemed permissible. Simultaneously, the Chinese public sphere persists, albeit in a fragmented and non-democratic form, continuously reshaped by the interplay between algorithmic oversight and user-driven creativity, coded expression, satire, and selective projection of authenticity. Participants employ diverse coping strategies, including strategic avoidance, compliance, covert resistance, and subtle critique, illustrating the sophisticated negotiation of personal and collective expression. Collectively, these insights challenge the reductive depiction of Chinese digital citizens as passive recipients of state messaging, instead portraying them as active participants navigating a complex, state-mediated information ecosystem.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that participants exhibited acute awareness of algorithmic curation and content manipulation on platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Weibo, particularly during politically sensitive moments. Many reported engaging in self-censorship or deploying coded language to circumvent moderation mechanisms. These practices resonate with Foucault's concept of governmentality, in which governance operates through the subtle structuring of information and behavioural norms rather than through overt enforcement [23]. Chinese computational propaganda functions through the covert orchestration of discourse, creating the appearance of organic consensus. Moreover, the Chinese state has increasingly woven digital surveillance and real-time content modulation into its strategy for managing public opinion. While some participants rationalised these measures as necessary for social stability, others interpreted them as instruments of digital repression [24]. This duality reflects a notion of "conditional trust," whereby users weigh the practical benefits of platform engagement against the awareness of pervasive state oversight. The resultant negotiated behaviours, spanning avoidance to understated forms of resistance, suggest that algorithmic governance does not entirely suppress dissent but reshapes the modes in which it is articulated [6]. Such a controlled digital landscape simultaneously buttresses state legitimacy while constraining the emergence of a fully autonomous digital public sphere.

Participants' perceptions of China's international image management via platforms such as Twitter and YouTube—despite their domestic inaccessibility—revealed ambivalence. While some expressed pride in the assertiveness of Chinese digital diplomacy, others critiqued the tone, cultural incongruities, and lack of perceived authenticity in state narratives [25]. Although technically sophisticated, these media campaigns often falter when failing to resonate with heterogeneous global audiences. Effective soft power requires cultural sensitivity and emotional engagement. This discrepancy underscores that while China's digital strategies may consolidate domestic narratives, they struggle to bridge international cultural and political divides [26]. The feedback loop between assertive nationalist campaigns and global pushback may therefore compromise the coherence and efficacy of China's

algorithmically-mediated international communication.

Another prominent theme was the creative negotiation of expression under pervasive censorship. Participants regularly employed satire, literary allusions, and euphemistic language to convey dissent or critique, though comfort levels with such indirect strategies varied, with some opting for complete disengagement to avoid perceived risks. These practices illustrate the adaptive agency of Chinese users within a constrained digital environment, where online identities are continually shaped through the calibration of risk, creativity, and communal support [27]. Users in authoritarian contexts often develop strategies such as platform-switching and rhetorical layering to navigate the boundaries of permissible discourse. While algorithmic filters curate the digital space, users respond with sophisticated communicative tactics that sustain a semblance of dialogue. This aligns with Habermas's conceptualisation of a fragmented public sphere, in which rational-critical discourse persists in localized pockets even under authoritarian constraints [28]. Simultaneously, the apprehension of potential repercussions highlights the uneven distribution of expressive freedom [29]; those endowed with higher digital literacy or cultural capital are better positioned to navigate restrictions, whereas others remain silent, indicating that algorithmic governance perpetuates existing inequalities within the virtual civic sphere.

6. Conclusion

This study examined Chinese citizens' perceptions of social media's dual role under algorithmic governance, highlighting how these technologies reinforce domestic legitimacy and shape China's international image. Qualitative interviews revealed the complex and often contradictory experiences of users navigating a curated digital environment. Participants were aware of algorithmic manipulation, particularly during politically sensitive events, noting that feeds are filtered to amplify state narratives and suppress dissent. Some rationalised this as necessary for social order, while others viewed it as a constraint on personal autonomy and freedom of expression. Attitudes toward China's digital diplomacy were similarly ambivalent. While some participants expressed pride in the state's efforts to project a confident international image, others criticised the aggressive tone, lack of authenticity, and limited efficacy of such messaging. The gap between the official portrayal and citizens' lived realities undermines the credibility of these campaigns. Despite pervasive censorship, participants demonstrated inventive self-expression through coded language, satire, and metaphor, reflecting enduring digital agency within a constrained environment. This aligns with Foucault's concept of governmentality and Habermas's fragmented public sphere. Chinese netizens are active participants, shaping, critiquing, and manipulating state discourses, exemplifying the negotiated nature of political engagement under algorithmic oversight. Social media in China thus operates not merely as a tool of surveillance or propaganda, but as a contested space where authority encounters subtle and overt forms of resistance, negotiation, and identity formation. The study deepens understanding of authoritarian digital governance and the coexistence of control and communicative agency in contemporary China.

7. Recommendations

In light of the study's findings, the following recommendations are advanced:

1. **Enhance Transparency of Algorithms:** Chinese platforms should prioritise increasing user awareness of how content is algorithmically curated, cultivating trust through greater openness in filtering and recommendation mechanisms.
2. **Encourage User-Centric Digital Literacy:** Initiatives designed to equip users with skills to critically interpret, question, and navigate curated digital environments could empower engagement, even within heavily moderated online spaces.
3. **Adapt International Messaging Tones:** China's digital diplomacy should employ culturally attuned and nuanced messaging approaches to enhance resonance and effectiveness with international audiences.
4. **Foster Alternative Public Dialogues:** Platforms can facilitate spaces that are less politically charged, enabling citizens to express identity, creativity, and critique through cultural or artistic forms, even under regulatory constraints.
5. **Support Research on Censorship Impact:** Further empirical investigation is required to evaluate the long-term psychological and social implications of digital censorship, particularly for youth and marginalised communities.

These recommendations collectively aim to strengthen state-citizen interactions online, enhance the credibility of China's global narratives,

and ensure the digital public sphere remains inclusive, participatory, and resilient, even under conditions of regulation.

8. Limitations

A key limitation of the study lies in its small sample size of five participants. While this approach allowed for in-depth qualitative insights, it constrains the broader generalisability of the findings. Participants may also have engaged in self-censorship due to the political sensitivity of the subject matter. Furthermore, as all interviewees were active social media users, the perspectives of individuals who have disengaged from digital platforms for political or personal reasons may be underrepresented. Reliance on semi-structured interviews introduces additional variability, as the richness and openness of responses may have been influenced by participants' comfort levels or perceived risks associated with disclosure.

9. Future Research Directions

Future research should aim to expand the sample across different regions, age groups, and occupational backgrounds to provide a more representative understanding of algorithmic governance in China. Comparative studies between urban and rural users could illuminate how digital control is experienced across socio-economic contexts. Longitudinal research would be valuable in assessing how perceptions of state surveillance evolve over time. Additionally, examining the interplay between domestic propaganda cycles and their reception by international audiences could offer insights into the global impact of Chinese digital narratives. Such investigations would contribute significantly to policymaking and academic discourse on authoritarian online governance.

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