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ABSTRACT

With the growing popularity of Chinese social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin, more young Taiwanese users are engaging with content that subtly reflects Chinese cultural values. These platforms, known for their intuitive design and constant updates, have become part of everyday life for Taiwanese youth. Beyond entertainment, they shape users' aesthetics, consumption habits, and cultural imagination through lifestyle-oriented posts that appear apolitical yet carry implicit cultural messages. This study investigates whether China is exporting a depoliticized form of culture through these seemingly neutral contents. It examines how Xiaohongshu and Douyin construct cultural narratives and how their algorithms recommend and reinforce certain aesthetic and value systems. The research explores not only the platforms' mechanisms but also users' perceptions: do young Taiwanese recognize the cultural influence behind these contents, or do they internalize and replicate them unconsciously? The findings suggest that such cultural transmission can be seen as a digital form of China's soft power, operating through everyday online practices. By embedding cultural values in appealing and entertaining formats, these platforms blur the boundary between culture and politics, making ideological influence both accessible and invisible. This study highlights the need for Taiwanese youth to develop cultural awareness and critical literacy in navigating transnational media flows, which is crucial for shaping Taiwan's future cultural subjectivity.

Keyword: Soft Power, Algorithm, Culture, Aesthetics, Youth

從小紅書到抖音：當台灣年輕世代遇上中國軟實力

摘要

　　隨著社群媒體的普及與使用習慣的改變，越來越多台灣年輕人開始使用中國開發的平台，如小紅書與抖音。這些平台以直覺的介面設計、多元的內容與快速的更新節奏，迅速在台灣年輕族群中流行開來。它們不僅用於娛樂與資訊獲取，更逐漸成為生活風格的指南，提供穿搭、美妝、旅遊與流行趨勢等資訊，深刻影響使用者的審美觀、消費偏好與語言表達。表面上看似日常且無害的內容，實則潛移默化地傳遞中國的流行文化與價值觀，成為影響台灣年輕世代文化想像的重要途徑。

　　本研究聚焦於小紅書與抖音，分析其內容風格、視覺語言及演算法推播邏輯，探討這些平台是否透過「去意識形態化」的方式進行文化輸出。平台可能依據自身策略主動推送特定類型的文化內容，使使用者長期處於特定文化語境中而不自覺。同時，本研究亦關注台灣年輕使用者的回應與認知：他們是否完全吸收與模仿，或仍保有批判性思考與距離感？是否察覺這些輕鬆有趣的內容背後隱含的文化輸入？

　　研究認為，這一現象可視為中國「軟實力」的數位化展現。當文化輸出以娛樂化、生活化的形式出現時，影響更易被接受而難以察覺，政治與文化的界線也隨之模糊。最終，本研究旨在提出對「中國文化如何無形影響台灣年輕世代」的新觀點，並思考在全球媒介流動的環境中，台灣年輕人如何培養文化辨識力與批判能力，以維護與建構自身的文化主體性。

關鍵詞：軟實力、演算法、文化、美學、青年

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INTRODUCTION

Background

From the national chapter of "Cultural Identity of Contemporary Chinese People", it can be understood that the composition of cultural identity includes the three levels of cultural form, cultural category and cultural value, which is the result of the comprehensive interconnection of factors such as social environment, psychological development and group identity. When cultural mainstream ideologies and cultural elements drive digital outflow to other cultures through the platform, the affected young people will gradually be influenced by specific cultural elements in virtual and real cross-cultural exchanges and reinvent themselves through the atmosphere of group communication.

Social media not only provides instant information and social convenience, but also redefines the expression and interpersonal interaction of young people. Therefore, on these platforms, young people in Taiwan may see their imitation or recognition of Chinese popular culture, lifestyle and mainstream values, demonstrating the phenomenon of integration of dual-cultural identity. However, this cultural integration will also experience potential cultural conflicts, such as tensions with local values, neglect of real interpersonal relationships or difficulty in choosing values.

When the younger generation faces information overload and algorithm manipulation, their media literacy and mental health will also be greatly challenged. Managers and interest intensification can build a virtual world, providing young people with a creative and strong sense of belonging, but this will also bring social anxiety, comparison and cultural chaos to it. Therefore, examining how Chinese social media affects young people's Taiwan's cultural identity, values and media consumption culture, and linking it with the cultural power relationship behind it and young people's thoughts will help to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of changes in young people's use of social media patterns.

Motivation

As members of Taiwan's Gen Z, we have noticed how platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin are becoming increasingly popular among our peers—serving not just as spaces for entertainment, but as arenas where cultural identity and expression are constantly being negotiated. Despite their appearance as fun, aesthetic-driven apps, these platforms are deeply embedded with China's soft power strategies and political frameworks. This observation drives a study motivated by both personal and academic curiosity: How do Taiwanese young people engage with platforms that subtly or sometimes explicitly promote different ideological values? Do they adapt, resist, or simply ignore these dynamics? More importantly, what does this mean for our sense of identity, belonging, and voice in the digital age? By exploring these questions, we hope to better understand the invisible pressures and creative strategies Taiwanese users employ when navigating these apps, ultimately shedding light on how cultural identity is not just expressed, but actively shaped, within these algorithmic spaces.

Research purpose

The purpose of this research is to investigate the usage patterns of Xiaohongshu and Douyin among Taiwanese youth aged 18 to 25. It aims to analyze how the content from these platforms influences participants' perceptions of their cultural identity and how they negotiate their cultural identity and self-expression when engaging with Chinese social media. By examining the interactions between Taiwanese youth and these platforms, the study seeks to understand the role of Chinese social media in shaping cultural narratives and the ways in which users navigate the complexities of maintaining cultural identity in a globalized digital landscape.

Research questions

RQ1: What are the impacts of Chinese social media platforms on Taiwanese public perception of Chinese soft power?

RQ2: How do Taiwanese social media users adapt their content to comply with platform regulations while maintaining their cultural identity on platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin?

RQ3: What strategies do Taiwanese social media users employ to bypass or challenge censorship while expressing their views on cross-strait relations on Xiaohongshu and Douyin?

RQ4: How do Taiwanese social media users navigate censorship and self-censorship on platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin while expressing their cultural identity?

Contributions

This study contributes to the existing literature by exploring the intersection of media consumption, cultural identity, and soft power through the lens of Chinese social media influence in Taiwan. It provides empirical insights into how platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu function as instruments of cultural dissemination and perception shaping among young Taiwanese users. Furthermore, it highlights the subtle yet impactful ways in which digital platforms may influence national and cultural self-perception beyond overt political messaging. The research also serves as a foundation for future studies to further investigate media influence across regions and cultural boundaries in a rapidly evolving digital environment.

Limits

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, due to time and resource constraints, the sample size, while reasonably substantial, was limited to 150 questionnaire responses and 25 in-depth interviews, all collected from participants aged 18 to 25 in Taiwan. The age restriction excluded other generations who may engage differently with these platforms, and the geographic scope being limited to Taiwan prevented cross-national comparisons with other regions where these platforms are used. Second, while the data collection methods were rigorous, the responses in both the survey and interviews tended to be neutral or ambiguous. Few participants expressed strong opinions, which posed challenges in drawing clear conclusions or identifying distinct attitudinal trends. This may be attributed to the sensitive nature of the topic or to respondents' limited familiarity with the broader cultural and political implications of their media usage. Third, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be affected by social desirability bias or selective memory. Fourth, the research focused only on Xiaohongshu and Douyin, excluding other influential Chinese platforms

such as Bilibili or Weibo. Fifth, the reliance on questionnaires and interviews, without longitudinal data or big-data analysis, limited the ability to track evolving patterns over time. Finally, given the ever-evolving nature of platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu, the findings may become less representative over time.

Delimits

This study focuses on the influence of Chinese social media platforms—specifically Xiaohongshu and Douyin—on Taiwanese young adults' cultural identity and self-expression. These two platforms are chosen because of their popularity and relevance in the Taiwan context, and because they represent the most direct and visible channels of cultural soft power among Taiwanese youth. While existing scholarship often emphasizes political propaganda or news media, relatively few studies examine how lifestyle-oriented, non-political content functions as a vehicle for cultural influence. By centering on Xiaohongshu and Douyin, this study seeks to fill that gap, showing how entertainment and everyday aesthetics can subtly serve as instruments of soft power. The target demographic is restricted to individuals aged 18 to 25, as this group is highly active on social media and more susceptible to cultural trends. Moreover, the study focuses on the perceived cultural influence rather than political implications, in order to maintain a clear and focused scope within the field of media and cultural studies. This delimitation therefore provides both scholarly value and originality, as it addresses a key issue neglected in prior research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, Chinese social media platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu have extended beyond their original roles as sources of entertainment and lifestyle content, increasingly serving as vehicles for cultural and political messaging. Even when the content appears neutral or recreational, it often conveys subtle ideas that reflect specific cultural and political perspectives. For young people in Taiwan, particularly the Gen Z cohort, engagement with these platforms is not merely about leisure or self-expression; it also involves navigating content and norms shaped by a different political system. Studies in China indicate that platforms such as Douyin can subtly shape adolescents' value systems through algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, influencing aesthetics, social behaviors, moral judgment, and media literacy (Wang & Liu, 2021).

The rise of these platforms raises questions about how Taiwanese youth maintain their sense of identity while interacting with content influenced by mainland China. Recent reports suggest that exposure to such content can shape perceptions of China, influence cultural preferences, and even affect attitudes toward national identity and political engagement (Hille, 2025). This literature review examines existing research on the cultural, social, and political implications of Chinese social media use among Taiwanese youth, highlighting both the potential for subtle influence and the strategies young users employ to assert their own identity.

Chinese Social Media and Taiwanese Youth — Cultural and Cognitive Influence

High Usage and Cultural Participation

Chinese social media platforms, such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and the international version of TikTok, have evolved from tools for entertainment into central channels for cultural engagement among Taiwanese youth. Studies highlight the ubiquity of these platforms: approximately 44% of primary school students and nearly 60% of junior high students regularly use TikTok to engage with dance and lifestyle content (Hille, 2025). Beyond browsing and imitating popular trends, these youth interact with peers and engage in cross-border cultural exchanges (Li, 2024; Que, 2024). Research on Chinese users by 薛可兒 (2019) further indicates that these apps fulfill multiple needs—"social expression," "information seeking," and "leisure and entertainment"—which drive behaviors such as liking and sharing, while creating a sense of satisfaction that reinforces habitual participation. However, Grey Zone literature notes that even content with political undertones, when amplified through networked accounts, can unintentionally influence users' perceptions and values (Beskow & Carley, 2018; Ng, Robertson & Carley, 2022). This suggests that algorithms and message structures may affect cultural engagement and cognitive recognition beyond explicit political messaging.

Cultural Exposure and Language Influence

The exposure of Taiwanese youth to Chinese television dramas, music, dance, and influencer-led tutorials has significantly reshaped both their aesthetic preferences and linguistic habits (Hille, 2025; Wu & Jiang, 2024). Popular terms such as *niu* ("awesome"), *po fang* ("emotionally broken"), *chao ding* ("superb"), and *I-ren / E-ren* ("introvert/extrovert") have been widely adopted as essential communication tools, facilitating humor and emotional

resonance across the Taiwan Strait (Wang, 2024). This phenomenon aligns with research in China suggesting that engagement with platforms like Douyin can reinforce adolescents' social norms, moral perspectives, and aesthetic standards (Wang & Liu, 2021). Within the framework of Grey Zone studies, these cultural elements are further solidified through amplification and retweet mechanisms, which increase the visibility of specific vocabulary and make it more likely to be internalized by users (Jacobs & Carley, 2023). However, this cultural integration has sparked significant concern; as reported by *The Guardian* (2023), many Taiwanese students fear that such subtle linguistic and cultural messages may represent an attempt to deny or erase the distinct Taiwanese national and cultural identity, underscoring a profound impact that extends far beyond mere entertainment.

Cross-Border Cultural Negotiation and Psychological Effects

Although Taiwanese youth primarily engage with these platforms for entertainment and lifestyle purposes, their selective browsing, imitation, and feedback mechanisms reflect a degree of active cultural negotiation and agency (Miao, 2024; Doublethink Lab, 2024). However, this agency operates within a sophisticated technological and strategic environment. Chinese research indicates that algorithmic curation on Douyin can subtly influence adolescents' moral perspectives, social behaviors, and critical thinking, potentially fostering conformity or vanity even in the absence of explicit political messaging (Wang & Liu, 2021). This subtle influence aligns with broader strategic objectives; as noted by *The Guardian* (2023), Beijing's propaganda strategy toward Taiwan is explicitly described as moving "into the island, into the household, into the brain, into the heart," leveraging popular culture as a vehicle for perception management. Corroborating this, Grey Zone literature suggests that official or semi-official accounts can disseminate curated content that, through networked amplification and strategic topic focus, reshapes users' cultural cognition and perceptions—even when such messages are not consciously accepted by the users (Jacobs & Carley, 2023).

Media Literacy and Educational Implications

Guided engagement with Douyin can serve as a channel for media literacy education, helping adolescents develop critical thinking, positive value orientations, and cultural agency (Wang & Liu, 2021).

The Guardian survey found that nearly nine out of ten Taiwanese students believe they have seen false information online, yet two-thirds rarely or never perform fact-checking (The Guardian, 2023). This underscores the urgent need for educational strategies that enhance critical media literacy.

Social Media as a Cultural Bridge

Social media platforms are not only spaces for cultural consumption but also venues for cross-border exchange, emotional resonance, and value negotiation (Li, 2024; Que, 2024; Wu & Jiang, 2024). Youth learn, imitate, and receive feedback on content from mainland peers, fostering cross-cultural understanding. Grey Zone literature indicates that amplification mechanisms naturally increase the visibility of specific cultural symbols, making platforms both tools for entertainment and subtle influencers of cultural cognition.

Societal Impact and Policy Discussions

Long-term engagement with Chinese social media platforms significantly influences the cultural perceptions, linguistic habits, lifestyle practices, and core values of youth, even when entertainment remains their primary motivation (Hille, 2025; Wu & Jiang, 2024). Experts in Taiwan have warned that TikTok may pose a "significant national security risk during the gray zone period," citing the platform's demonstrated capacity to mobilize users for political ends, such as the instance where TikTok prompted U.S. users to contact their political representatives (Focus Taiwan, 2025). This mobilization potential is coupled with a subtle

attitudinal shift; some Taiwanese interviewees have noted that because lifestyles across the Strait appear increasingly similar, unification might be perceived as having minimal impact on the daily lives of ordinary citizens (Focus Taiwan, 2025). Analysts argue that this perception is a deliberate component of China's strategy to "pave the way for unification by creating the perception that it would be a painless process" (Focus Taiwan, 2025). In response, the Taiwanese government has implemented restrictive measures, such as banning Douyin use among civil servants and establishing the Cognitive Warfare Research Center to monitor external influence (Miao, 2024). These actions underscore the complex challenge of balancing the promotion of cultural engagement with the necessity of protecting national interests, all while acknowledging the digital agency of the youth.

Cross-Strait Cultural Resonance and Soft Power

Social media facilitates high levels of interaction between Taiwanese youth and mainland Chinese cultural content, resulting in pronounced cross-Strait cultural resonance (Wu & Jiang, 2024; Wang, 2024; Li, 2024). Popular slang, lifestyle aesthetics, and social behaviors create informal channels for cross-cultural engagement. Youth actively learn, imitate, and receive feedback, reinforcing mutual understanding. Media reports emphasize that such engagement is often driven by cultural curiosity and aesthetic appreciation rather than political intent (Global Times, 2023).

However, studies on short-video platforms show that algorithmic recommendation combined with entertainment-driven participation can create long-term cultural alignment, even if users join primarily for leisure (薛可兒, 2019).

Concluding Observations

Cross-border social media platforms serve as spaces for entertainment, cultural learning, and identity formation. Research highlights that amplification, retweeting, and algorithmic recommendation mechanisms may subtly influence users' cultural cognition, enhancing psychological alignment or cultural preference. Taiwanese youth engage in "cultural negotiation," absorbing cross-border culture while maintaining cultural agency. At the same time, studies warn that platforms can be leveraged during "gray zone" periods for soft power and cognitive influence (Focus Taiwan, 2025; The Guardian, 2023).

Chinese studies further indicate that algorithmic content and media literacy education play critical roles in shaping adolescents' value orientations and cultural awareness (Wang & Liu, 2021).

METHODOLOGIES

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine how Chinese social media platforms—Xiaohongshu and Douyin—influence cultural identity and self-expression among Taiwanese young adults. The mixed-methods approach was selected to capture both general usage patterns and attitudes through survey data, as well as in-depth personal experiences and reflections through interviews. By integrating these two methods, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural meanings are negotiated in digital spaces.

Sources of Data

1. Locale of the Study

The research was conducted in Taiwan, focusing on young adults aged 18 to 25. Taiwan was selected as the research setting due to its distinctive sociocultural and political context, in which Chinese social media platforms have gained widespread popularity despite complex cross-strait relations. This context allows for an exploration of how Taiwanese youth engage with Chinese digital platforms while maintaining, adapting, or negotiating their own cultural identities. The geographic focus is therefore particularly relevant to discussions of soft power influence and cultural negotiation.

2. Population Sampling

The target population consisted of Taiwanese young adults aged 18 to 25 who actively use Xiaohongshu and Douyin. A total of 150 valid questionnaire responses were collected through an online survey. Based on the survey results, 25 participants were selected for semi-structured interviews. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling and snowball sampling, primarily through social media platforms and university-related online groups. For the interview stage, participants were selected to reflect diversity in usage patterns and cultural attitudes, ensuring a range of perspectives.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach utilizing two primary research instruments: an online questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The online questionnaire, developed via Google Forms, was distributed to Taiwanese youth aged 18–25 to measure their social media usage patterns, cultural perceptions, and perspectives on identity and self-expression. To ensure quantitative precision, the survey incorporated a combination of multiple-choice questions and Likert-scale items. Complementing the quantitative data, a semi-structured interview guide featuring open-ended questions was employed to delve into participants' personal experiences, emotional responses, and reflections on cultural identity. These interviews were conducted through either phone calls or text-based chats, accommodating participant preferences for comfortable self-expression. To ensure the instrument's validity, the questionnaire was grounded in relevant academic literature and underwent peer review by media and cultural studies experts. Furthermore, a pilot test ($n = 10$) was conducted prior to formal data collection to refine question clarity and optimize wording.

1. **Online Survey Distribution**

A Google Forms link was distributed through social media platforms and university group chats. The target sample consisted of Taiwanese youth aged 18–25. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, anonymity, and consent procedures before completing the survey. A total of 150 valid responses were collected.

2. **In-depth Interviews**

After analyzing the survey results, 25 participants were selected for follow-up semi-structured interviews. Participants were chosen based on diversity in their responses to ensure a range of perspectives. Interviews were conducted via phone and text (written chat), depending on participants' preferences. All responses were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

Tools for Data Analysis

This study employed a mixed-methods research design utilizing two primary instruments for data collection: an online questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The online questionnaire, developed via Google Forms, was distributed to Taiwanese youth aged 18–25 and focused on measuring the frequency and patterns of social media usage on platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin, alongside participants' cultural perceptions and self-expressive behaviors. To complement this, a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was used to delve into deeper, personal reflections regarding cultural identity and digital media engagement. The Google Forms link was distributed through social media platforms and university circles, resulting in a total of 150 valid responses. Based on the diversity of these survey results, 25 participants were selected for further in-depth interviews conducted via phone calls or written text-based chats,

depending on their individual preferences. All interview data were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis.

The analysis of the collected data involved both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data from the 150 survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentages, and mean scores, to identify general trends and attitudes toward cultural identity. For the qualitative portion, data from the 25 interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis. Transcripts from these sessions were coded to identify recurring themes, patterns, and emotional insights that reflect how youth negotiate their cultural identity in relation to Chinese digital platforms. To ensure the study's rigor, the instruments were designed based on relevant academic literature and refined through expert review and a pilot test involving 10 participants. Content validity was established through this review process, while reliability was maintained by using a standardized question format and interview structure. Furthermore, inter-rater reliability was enhanced by having multiple researchers participate in the coding process of the qualitative data to ensure consistency and objectivity in the findings.

DATA ANALYSIS

The questionnaire conducted with 141 Taiwanese young respondents reveals diverse patterns of engagement with Chinese social media platforms (e.g., Xiaohongshu, Douyin). Among the participants, 39.7% reported never using these platforms, 27.7% occasionally use them, 10.6% use them with moderate frequency, 13.5% frequently use them, and 8.5% use them daily. Content preferences are primarily oriented toward lifestyle and entertainment, emphasizing visual and leisure-oriented materials. In terms of cultural expression, only 12.8% of respondents had ever shared Taiwanese cultural content on these platforms, while 87.2% had not. The perceived impact on personal values was limited: 2.1% reported a strong influence, 28.4% some influence, 44.7% minor influence, and 26.2% reported no influence. Regarding impressions of China after using the platforms, 10.6% became more positive, 7.8% more negative, 36.9% observed no significant change, and 44.7% remained neutral.

When asked about perceptions during cross-strait crises—such as China's stance toward Taiwan's military and civilians—12.1% held a positive impression, 13.5% negative, and 74.5% neutral. Additionally, 17.7% reported that algorithmic recommendations had exposed them to viewpoints they were previously uninterested in, while 52.5% indicated no such impact. A majority of 72.3% agreed that expressions on the platforms could affect cross-strait relations, while 27.7% disagreed. Moreover, 43.3% of respondents considered political factors when sharing content, whereas 56.7% did not.

Notably, 17.7% acknowledged that algorithmic recommendations had altered their perspectives or values, 52.5% denied such changes, and 29.8% were uncertain. Over half of the respondents indicated that political considerations factored into their decisions about content sharing.

Figure 1 **Usage frequency of social media platforms in China. (N=141)**
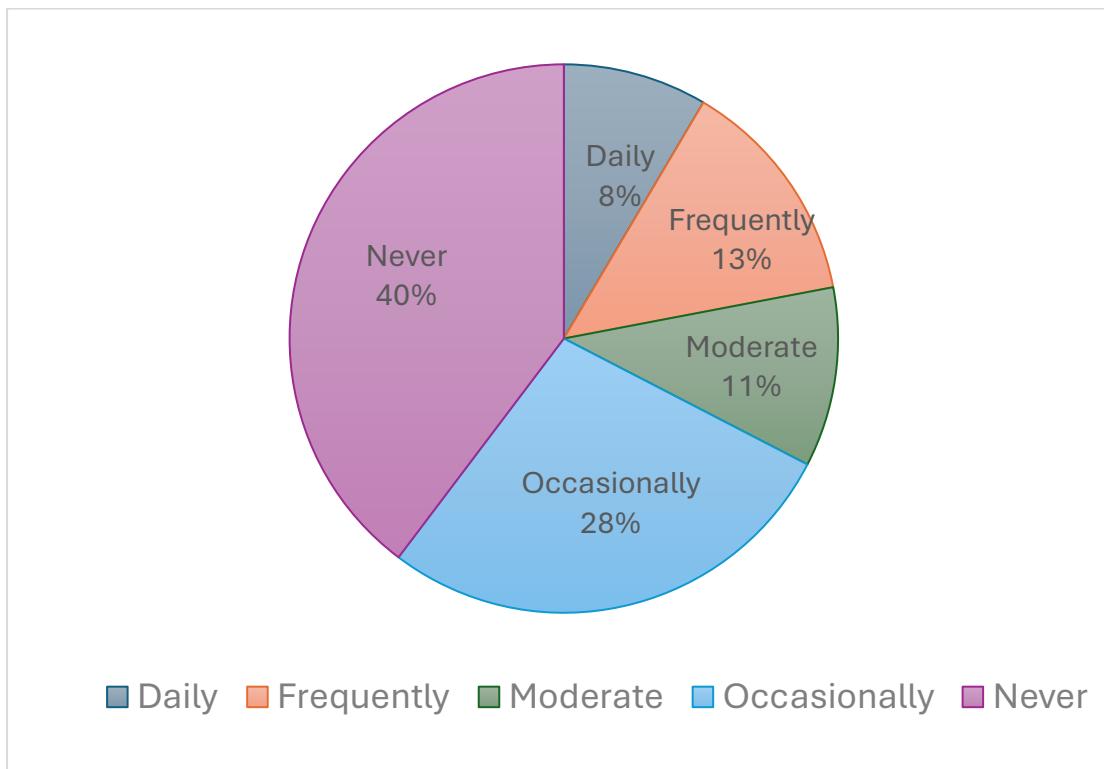
Table 1 Cultural Expression and Influence on Personal Values (N = 141)

Subject	Answer	Percentage (%)
Cultural Expression	Shared Taiwanese content	12.80%
	Not shared	87.20%
Impact on Personal Values	Strong	2.1%
	Some	28.4%
	Minor	44.7%
	None	26.2%

Table 2 Perceptions of China, Cross-Strait Issues, and Algorithmic Influence (N = 141)

Subject	Answer	Percentage (%)
Impression of China	More positive	10.60%
	More negative	7.80%
	No change	36.90%
	Neutral	44.70%
Perceptions During Cross-Strait Crises	Positive	12.10%
	Negative	13.50%
	Neutral	74.50%
Algorithmic Exposure	Changed perspectives	17.70%
	No change	52.50%
	Uncertain	29.80%
Political Consideration in Sharing	Considered	43.30%
	Not considered	56.70%

Qualitative Interview Insights

This study conducted in-depth interviews with three female university students. A student from Tamkang University stated that Xiaohongshu had not significantly influenced her political stance but emphasized the importance of media literacy. She highlighted the need for users to critically evaluate content authenticity to avoid uncritical acceptance of information.

A student from Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages shared that she had previously posted politically related content and encountered platform censorship, which limited her freedom of expression. To avoid sensitive topics, she adjusted her communication strategies but noted that this experience did not reduce her willingness to continue using the platform.

A student from Providence University expressed a neutral perspective, emphasizing that the platform's influence depends largely on how individuals choose to use it. She reported little interest in cross-strait issues and affirmed that her political stance remained unchanged.

Overall, the qualitative findings reveal that participants generally maintain neutral positions. They perceive Xiaohongshu's influence as limited, shaped more by personal choices and media literacy than by the platform itself.

Usage Frequency and Content Preferences

Out of 141 valid responses, about 40% of participants said they used Chinese social media platforms frequently, and 8.5% reported using them every day. This indicates that these platforms have become a noticeable part of daily life for some Taiwanese youth, serving not only as a source of entertainment but also as a way to keep up with trends and personal interests. When it comes to content, most participants preferred entertainment, lifestyle tips, beauty advice, and travel-related posts. This shows that users mainly treat these platforms as a space for leisure and personal enjoyment rather than a place for serious discussions or news. It also suggests that the way young people engage with these platforms is centered on personal hobbies and interests, with less focus on broader social or political issues. In general, these platforms are seen as a tool for relaxation, inspiration, and self-expression in everyday life.

Cultural Expression and Political Participation

Even though some respondents reported frequent use, engagement in cultural or political discussions was still limited. Most participants viewed these platforms primarily as spaces to share daily routines, hobbies, and personal interests rather than arenas for debating social or political topics. Additionally, some users consciously avoided sensitive or controversial content in order to maintain a more comfortable and safe online experience. This indicates that Taiwanese youth are aware of potential risks in online discussions and practice self-regulation when navigating content. Overall, the findings suggest that young people tend to focus on personal lifestyle expression and social connection rather than participating in political or cultural debates on Chinese social media platforms.

Perceived Influence on Personal Values and Cross-Strait Attitudes

Most respondents reported that using these platforms did not significantly affect their political views or opinions about cross-strait relations. This suggests that users possess a degree of media literacy and independent judgment, allowing them to navigate platform content without being strongly influenced. However, a minority mentioned that the "atmosphere" of the platforms or the way content is presented could subtly influence their perception of cultural differences. While these effects are not direct or immediately noticeable, they demonstrate that media environments can still shape attitudes and perspectives in more subtle ways over time. This highlights the nuanced impact that social media can have on personal viewpoints, even among users who are generally cautious and independent in their thinking.

Algorithmic Exposure, Censorship, and Expression Strategies

Participants generally noted that Xiaohongshu's algorithm recommends content based on users' past interests, which can create echo chamber effects by limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints. Many users were also aware of the platform's censorship and content restrictions, prompting them to adjust their sharing strategies. For instance, they might avoid certain keywords or limit posts to non-political, lifestyle-related topics. These practices demonstrate that users are actively navigating the platform's algorithms and rules, finding ways to protect themselves while continuing to enjoy the content they like. The findings suggest that Taiwanese youth are both conscious and strategic about how they engage online, balancing self-expression with safety and comfort.

Qualitative Insights from Interviews

The three interviewees provided more detailed perspectives on their experiences. Students from Tamkang University and Providence University emphasized that Xiaohongshu's influence largely depends on individual usage habits, and they did not feel their personal values or political views had changed significantly. The student from Wenzao Ursuline University shared that she had experienced censorship after posting political content, which led her to be more careful about what she shared. Despite this, she continued to use the platform to post lifestyle-related content.

Overall, the participants expressed mostly positive attitudes toward the platform, viewing it as a space for fun, inspiration, and lifestyle sharing rather than political influence. Their experiences suggest that while Chinese social media platforms are integrated into their daily lives, their impact on beliefs and values is limited and shaped more by personal usage choices than by the platform itself.

Analysis

The data suggest that Chinese social media platforms have achieved notable penetration among Taiwanese youth. The survey revealed diverse usage patterns: 40% of respondents reported frequent use, while only 8.5% engaged daily, indicating that engagement remains selective and functional rather than habitual. Content consumption was concentrated on lifestyle, entertainment, beauty, and travel-related posts, reflecting that these platforms are primarily perceived as spaces for leisure and aesthetic inspiration rather than political arenas.

Qualitative interviews further highlight how Taiwanese youth engage with these platforms cautiously and strategically. While participants enjoyed aesthetic and lifestyle content, they consciously avoided posting sensitive topics, instead favoring neutral

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expressions. Some employed subtle strategies such as emojis, or indirect language to preserve their cultural identity while adapting to platform constraints. This reflects a process of identity negotiation, balancing cultural assimilation with resistance in a cross-cultural environment.

The role of algorithms was also significant, as participants noted how recommendation systems reinforced pre-existing interests and created echo chambers. Although respondents generally maintained that their political views were unaffected, they acknowledged that platform design shaped communication styles and limited expressive range. Moreover, awareness of censorship led users to adjust how they presented themselves, without fundamentally altering their political stances.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the influence of Chinese social media on Taiwanese youth is indirect and contextual. Rather than producing overt political transformation, these platforms subtly normalize Chinese cultural aesthetics and discourse practices through everyday interactions, shaping modes of expression, content preferences, and cultural negotiations.

Summary of data analysis

This study demonstrates that Chinese social media platforms have gained a degree of prominence among Taiwanese youth, with approximately 40% identified as frequent users and 8.5% as daily users. Content consumption remains concentrated on leisure-oriented and lifestyle themes, while cultural expression and political participation remain relatively limited.

Although censorship mechanisms and algorithmic filtering exist, their impact primarily manifests in shaping modes of information presentation and expression strategies rather than directly reshaping values or cross-strait political positions. Respondents generally exhibited media literacy, distinguishing between entertainment functions and political content while maintaining a degree of autonomy.

Overall, the influence of Chinese social media on Taiwanese youth is limited yet gradually expanding. Its effects are most visible in daily habits and patterns of expression rather than in political transformation. This suggests that China's soft power, as exercised through digital platforms, demonstrates a penetrative but constrained influence—one moderated by Taiwanese youth's cultural autonomy and media literacy.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how Chinese social media platforms, particularly Xiaohongshu and Douyin, influence Taiwanese young adults' cultural identity, expression strategies, and perceptions of China. The findings suggest that while these platforms have achieved notable penetration among Taiwanese youth—with 40% reporting frequent use—engagement remains largely oriented toward lifestyle, entertainment, and aesthetic inspiration. Although censorship mechanisms and algorithmic filtering were acknowledged by participants, their impact was primarily felt in shaping communication styles and self-expression strategies rather than causing direct shifts in political identity. Most users demonstrated media literacy and autonomy, maintaining a critical distance even while adopting aspects of Chinese digital culture.

Nevertheless, the study highlights that the boundary between entertainment and cultural strategy is increasingly blurred. Algorithms and platform design subtly immerse users in Chinese cultural contexts, shaping values and preferences over time. While overt political transformation is limited, the gradual normalization of Chinese aesthetics, language, and lifestyle choices represents a form of soft power that may have long-term implications. Importantly, despite this pervasive influence, Taiwanese youth retain a sense of cultural subjectivity. They enjoy the creative, trendy, and entertaining aspects of Chinese platforms, but they also employ strategies of subtle resistance—such as selective engagement, self-censorship, and critical reflection—to preserve their own identity.

Building upon these observations, our motivation for conducting this research stemmed from our shared identity as members of Taiwan's Generation Z. As young digital natives ourselves, we have witnessed how social media—especially Chinese platforms—has become deeply embedded in the daily lives of Taiwanese youth. This prompted our curiosity about

how political and cultural contexts might shape users' engagement with such media. Given Taiwan's complex political landscape, where differing ideological influences are often reflected even in academic environments, we sought to understand whether young people with stronger national or cultural attachments would still be drawn to or influenced by Chinese digital trends.

To explore this issue, we adopted a mixed-method approach that combined qualitative and quantitative analysis. We reviewed previous literature on soft power, media influence, and cultural identity formation, yet found limited studies directly focusing on cross-strait social media interactions. This gap motivated us to design our own survey and analytical framework, aiming to examine how these platforms might subtly contribute to cultural convergence. Although our findings were not as radical as initially expected, the consistency of participants' responses revealed meaningful patterns indicating both attraction to and awareness of China's digital soft power strategies.

Ultimately, this study responds to our research question by revealing that Chinese platforms do shape Taiwanese youths' cultural tastes and self-expression, but not necessarily their political stance. The findings suggest that soft power functions less through persuasion and more through the normalization of shared digital cultures. In this way, our research contributes to a deeper understanding of how everyday media practices can gradually influence identity construction in politically sensitive contexts. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of media literacy education in Taiwan, empowering young people to critically interpret digital content and maintain their cultural autonomy in an increasingly interconnected world.

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<center>**Appendix**</center>

<center>**Semi-Structured Interview Guide**</center>

Below are our qualitative interview questions (English version).

1. Basic Information

   - Name

   - Age

   - University

   - Consent to recording

   Topic Explanation:

   Our project is called "Culture Clash on Screen." It focuses on how Chinese social media platforms, such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu, influence young people in Taiwan after entering the local market. We are not only concerned about usage behavior, but also how these platforms affect cultural identity, values, and even modes of expression—for example, whether people self-censor or change the way they speak in order to fit the Chinese market.

   Part I. Usage Habits and Exposure

   1. Do you usually use Xiaohongshu or Douyin? Since when?

   2. What kind of content do you mainly watch on these platforms? Any favorite accounts or categories?

   3. Do you post content yourself on these platforms? Why or why not?

   Part II. Content Preferences and Platform Impressions

   4. What differences do you notice between the content on Xiaohongshu/Douyin and other Taiwanese platforms (like Instagram, Dcard)?

5. When using these platforms, are you aware that they are Chinese platforms? Does that affect your experience?

Part III. Cultural Identity and Value Influence

6. Do you think the content on these platforms has influenced your perception of China or Chinese culture?

7. Do you feel you can freely express yourself on these platforms? Or are there things you avoid saying?

8. Have you ever realized that the values or cultural perspectives on these platforms are different from your own?

Part IV. Identity and Expression Strategies

9. Do you pay special attention to the wording, style, or content of your posts on these platforms?

10. Do you think the accounts and content you follow on Xiaohongshu/Douyin reflect the same version of yourself as in real life, or are they somewhat different?

11. Do you notice the use of "mainland Chinese slang" (支語)?

12. Do you think cultural trends from these platforms may gradually replace Taiwanese local culture?

13. If you have younger siblings, are you worried that these trends might affect their speech, behavior, or way of thinking?

Part V. Concluding Questions

14. Overall, do you feel that using Xiaohongshu/Douyin has had a positive or negative impact on you?

15. If another Taiwanese person asked your opinion of these platforms, how would you describe them? Would you recommend using them?