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**Borrowing Credibility to Shape Public Opinion:  
Western Influencers as Chinese Government Foreign Defenders**

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**Abstract**

Recent advances in digital communication enable authoritarian regimes to shape the perceptions of democratic audiences and soften their demands for punitive foreign policies in response to human rights violations. While state mouthpieces like Russia Today and CGTN actively push state narratives online, their rigid propaganda style and explicit foreign attribution limit both their persuasive appeal and their likelihood of being selected by skeptical audiences. I argue that seemingly independent foreign social media influencers—acting as credible ingroup storytellers—allow autocrats to bypass these institutional barriers. I evaluate this argument through a preregistered survey experiment that exposes U.S. respondents (N = 1,044) to pro-Chinese government YouTube videos addressing human rights in Xinjiang, manipulating both **the primary source of origin** (state media vs. influencer-created) and **the intermediary endorser** (state media vs. influencer-shared). Results show that while pro-Chinese government narrative content from both sources reduces respondents' objections to Chinese state actions in Xinjiang, state media endorsement degrades perceived source credibility, reducing overall persuasiveness and discouraging information selection. By identifying influencers as gateways for foreign propaganda across both persuasion and selection stages, this study uncovers a key mechanism of cross-border opinion manipulation.

**Keywords:** foreign propaganda, influencers, authoritarianism, social media

## Introduction<sup>123</sup>

While the advancement of the internet and communication technology has challenged authoritarian regimes by increasing information flows and boosting collective action potential (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020), recent studies suggest authoritarian regimes with strong digital capacity are well equipped to handle these challenges (Keremoğlu & Weidmann, 2020; Tucker et al., 2017) or even deploy these technologies to manipulate public opinion both domestically (Zhu & Fu, 2023) and abroad (Brady, 2015). Nonetheless, extant research on digital repression explores how authoritarian regimes manipulate domestic public opinion using propaganda (D. C. Mattingly & Yao, 2022), censorship (Y. Chen & Yang, 2019; King et al., 2013), and distraction and diversion (Roberts, 2018). But this research pays little attention to authoritarian information operations abroad.

Like domestic propaganda, foreign propaganda targeting audiences abroad shapes autocratic survival (Dukalskis, 2021). On the one hand, foreign propaganda helps authoritarian regimes promote their foreign policies and helps foster an international environment conducive to authoritarianism. For instance, Chinese state media and diplomats engage more frequently and positively on social media with countries that have stronger economic ties to China (Liang, 2021; Villegas-Cruz, 2024b). Similarly, the Russian government disseminates misinformation in the West through coordinated efforts by state media and bots (Bennett & Livingston, 2018) to disrupt democratic politics (Eady et al., 2023; Elswah & Howard, 2020) and exacerbate polarization (Bradshaw et al., 2023). Further, foreign propaganda neutralizes negative narratives from foreign and exiled critics who may incite domestic opposition (Escribà-Folch & Wright, 2015; Nugent & Siegel, 2024) and pressures democratic states to intervene (Tomz et al., 2020; Tomz & Weeks, 2020). Notable examples include the Chinese government's information strategies to counter international opprobrium from the outbreak of Covid-19 by, for example, highlighting shared victimhood (Loh & Loke, 2024) and medical aid from China (Villegas-Cruz, 2024a). One of the CCP's largest foreign information operations aims to defend itself against

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alleged human rights violations in Xinjiang by featuring religious extremism and its benevolent rule in Xinjiang (Alpermann & Malzer, 2024; Villegas-Cruz, 2025).

Two gaps in the literature persist, however. First, extant research mostly focuses on state actors – such as state media, diplomats, and governmental agencies – who are typically unfamiliar to foreign audiences. As a result, we know little about the predominant way foreign audiences consume propaganda, namely through non-state actors, such as social media influencers (Brockling et al., 2023). Social media influencers are broadly defined as third-party actors who gain influence over niche groups through social media activities (Hudders et al., 2021). Though these influencers are non-state actors, they are increasingly coordinating information strategies with governments in both democracies and autocracies (Wang & Zhang, 2025; Woolley, 2022). Therefore, I examine how Western social media influencers, as non-state actors, deploy foreign propaganda and how their information shapes attitudes among foreign audiences. Second, while some research finds that foreign propaganda prompts foreign citizens to adopt narratives and policy positions aligned with the interests of authoritarian regimes (Carter & Carter, 2021; Kobayashi et al., 2025; Mattingly et al., 2024), others show that foreign information campaigns are often not credible and suffer from low engagement with foreign audiences (Crilley et al., 2022; Henriksen et al., 2024; Liang et al., 2023; Min & Luqiu, 2021). These studies lack consensus, in part, because we do not yet understand the key mechanisms that make foreign propaganda effective.

I argue that the persuasiveness of foreign propaganda depends on the perceived credibility of the information source. In the modern online information environment, credibility is multi-layered. Unlike in the age of printed and broadcasting media, online information is processed through various stages before reaching the audience. As such, the credibility of online information depends on factors beyond the primary source's origin, such as intermediary endorsers, i.e., who is sharing the information with you (Mena et al., 2020; Metzger et al., 2010; Shen et al., 2019). In this context, propaganda messages produced or shared by social media influencers, who are not only better storytellers than state sources but also convey a higher level of credibility, could better persuade foreign citizens. This is because influencers appear neutral and convey a sense of authenticity, which makes the content seem less propagandistic. More

importantly, influencers share critical ingroup identities with target audiences, such as nationality, race, and cultural background. Social identity theory proposes that people treat those they perceive as ingroup members more favorably than outgroup members, which, in turn, influences individuals' attitudes and behavior (Huddy, 2001). This high perceived credibility, whether it originates from the source or the endorser, not only mediates the persuasive effect of the message but also could extend the reach of propaganda (Brockling et al., 2023) by guiding selective information consumption (Messing & Westwood, 2014; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2022).

I test this theory using a preregistered survey experiment exposing U.S. respondents to pro-Chinese government videos publicly available on YouTube. The experimental design manipulates the video's primary source origin (a Western influencer vs. China Global Television Network [CGTN], a Chinese state media outlet) alongside additional intermediary endorsers (a Western influencer's endorsement of CGTN's video and CGTN's endorsement of a Western influencer's video) to isolate how distinct credibility signals from the two sources affect audience attitudes toward Chinese state actions in Xinjiang and support for U.S. punitive actions targeting the Chinese government. Results show that while pro-Chinese government video content generally reduces opposition to Chinese state actions in Xinjiang, explicit state media endorsement triggers a significant credibility penalty that diminishes persuasive impact and depresses the audience's information selection. This influencer advantage was especially pronounced among respondents skeptical of the mainstream media and with prior negative views of China. However, exposure and endorsement of either source did not shift respondents' support for U.S. punitive actions targeting the Chinese government.

This paper advances the literature on foreign information strategies by theorizing how information sources influence information credibility, with implications for understanding the persuasiveness of foreign information in high-choice media contexts. In these information environments, overt state branding undermines message persuasiveness, whereas seemingly organic influencer cues enhance it. This research demonstrates that influencers could be effective information brokers not only because they could persuade foreign audiences but also because they could better reach targeted audiences. These dynamics highlight authoritarian resilience, in which information strategies soften perceptions among ordinary democratic citizens rather than

elites, which may reduce their support for domestic and diasporic anti-regime activism, as well as punitive foreign policy, in the long run. Further, because audiences cannot easily distinguish influencer-mediated propaganda from organic discourse, governments face acute regulatory challenges, forcing democratic platforms to balance labeling requirements with free expression, as autocracies exploit fragmented attention economies to broaden their external support networks.

### **Effects of Foreign Propaganda Messages: Mixed Evidence**

Few studies explore how autocratic propaganda targets foreign citizens. Some find that foreign propaganda is most persuasive on salient issues about which audiences have little prior knowledge and pre-existing opinions. For instance, Carter & Carter (2021) demonstrate that exposure to Russian-sponsored propaganda shifts U.S. citizens' opinions on less salient issues, such as the U.S. role in global affairs, rather than on more salient domestic issues. Similarly, Mattingly et al. (2024) find that exposure to propaganda from the external media arms of the Chinese and U.S. governments moves citizens' preferences toward their respective governance models, which is also an abstract issue. Other studies perceive foreign propaganda as a form of misinformation. Mader et al. (2022) find that German voters who mistrust the government, believe in conspiracy theories, and are less politically informed are vulnerable to Russian narratives. Yet Kobayashi et al. (2025) suggest the opposite: that Japanese respondents are generally susceptible to Chinese official narratives.

In addition to issue salience and audience attributes, the perceived credibility of information messages shapes their persuasiveness. Credibility, which entails reasonable grounds for being believed (Meyer, 1988), has long been established as central to making messages persuasive (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Propaganda content that blatantly adopts a pro-regime position and is inconsistent with mainstream narratives (Mader et al., 2022) is unlikely to be perceived as credible or persuasive in a society with a free media environment. For instance, Min & Luqiu (2021) find that standard propaganda justifying one-party rule in China was perceived as less credible to foreign audiences than a propaganda video praising Chinese meritocracy. While state-sponsored media outlets can learn to produce content that better fits foreign contexts (Brady, 2015), using official government sources remains a problem for enhancing messages' perceived

credibility (Druckman, 2001; Ladd, 2010; Miller & Krosnick, 2000). Compared with information from domestic mainstream media, propaganda content from unfamiliar external sources is perceived as less credible. Dai and Luqiu (2020), for example, find that the same Chinese propaganda content was more persuasive to U.S. citizens when it appeared in well-known Western media outlets than in Chinese outlets. Similarly, Mader et al. (2022) find that Russian propaganda is only effective among German citizens who distrust the mainstream media.

Credibility further limits the potential effects of foreign propaganda by guiding media consumption. The classic information reception model (e.g., Zaller, 1992 and Geddes & Zaller, 1989) reminds us that the effect of a propaganda message is contingent on exposure. In communication research, credibility, in both online and offline settings, plays a dual role: conditioning the persuasive effects of information and guiding the selection of information sources (Messing & Westwood, 2014; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2022). Yet citizens living in democracies, unlike their counterparts in authoritarian regimes, enjoy a wide range of media choices and are not compelled to be exposed to authoritarian propaganda. Although advances in internet and communication technologies increase the global reach of foreign propaganda, it remains unclear whether foreign citizens select information from pro-authoritarian sources rather than from competing or opposing narratives. For instance, Henriksen et al. (2024) find that content from RT and Sputnik, two Russian state-backed media outlets, has minimal reach even within European domestic alternative news ecosystems. Crilley et al. (2022) discovered that Twitter followers of RT rarely engaged with RT's content and also followed other mainstream news channels. The impact of perceived credibility on the circulation of foreign propaganda is more clearly demonstrated by Liang et al. (2023), who found that sharing tweets from China's state media accounts, particularly political tweets, dropped immediately and continued to decline after these accounts were labeled as state-affiliated.

### **Borrowing Credibility from Influencers for Political Propaganda**

I argue that authoritarian regimes leverage the credibility of social media influencers to amplify their foreign propaganda. Social media influencers can be broadly defined as third-party actors who gain opinion-shaping power over a niche group of people through social media activities

(Hudders et al., 2021). By showcasing their expertise (Wasike, 2023), narrating with attractive and fashionable linguistic styles (Huffaker, 2010; Schmuck et al., 2022), and developing virtual social relationships with followers (Cheng et al., 2024; Harff, 2022), they become credible information sources for their audiences. Further, objective and visual indicators, such as verification badges and the number of likes, shares, mentions, and subscriptions (Treem et al., 2020), increase the perception of their influence. Recent survey evidence illustrates the scope of their online influence: the most active 25% of U.S. adults account for more than 95% of posts on Twitter (McClain et al., 2021) and TikTok (Bestvater, 2024). Given their influence and increasing popularity on social media, they now resemble traditional opinion leaders who serve as information brokers and gatekeepers, mediating mass communication (Lazarsfeld & Katz, 1955; Zaller, 1992). In that sense, they provide credibility to information not only as primary sources but also as intermediary endorsers. This endorsing role is even more critical in online settings, as internet users seldom directly access information from primary production sources. Instead, online users' exposure to information heavily depends on other factors, such as platform algorithms and social reaccommodation from intermediaries (Messing & Westwood, 2014). For instance, Metzger et al. (2010) found that endorsements from peers can outweigh initial skepticism about an unfamiliar information source.

Influencers address everyday life issues, such as fashion, sports, or gaming, and leverage their sway for commercial purposes, while also becoming increasingly politicized in both democracies and authoritarian regimes (Riedl et al., 2023). In democracies, some social media influencers engage in daily online political discussions (Wang & Zhang, 2025) and electoral campaigns (Shmargad, 2022), posting content that resembles partisan narratives. While some influencers may genuinely hold their expressed partisan positions, many are driven by material and non-material incentives under the auspices of marketing firms and political parties (Goodwin et al., 2023; Woolley, 2022). Compared with traditional party-led political advertisements, influencers convey authenticity by producing personalized, ostensibly nonpartisan content that is perceived as more credible and appealing than official state media and direct communication from politicians' social media feeds. Other influencers remain independent of governments, shaping followers' political attitudes and behaviors, including political interests (Harff, 2022), online and offline political participation (Cheng et al., 2024), and political efficacy (Wasike,

2023). In authoritarian regimes, despite censorship, credible public opinion leaders — such as critical journalists, intellectuals, and activists — can challenge official propaganda (Nip & Fu, 2016) and facilitate protest mobilization (Poell et al., 2016), much like their counterparts in democracies. Yet authoritarian regimes with strong digital capacity, such as the CCP, both recognize this threat and exert a firmer grip on the behavior of online opinion leaders (Creemers, 2017). For instance, Chinese celebrities are compelled to repost content from Chinese government agencies' social media accounts to survive in the entertainment industry, which is tightly controlled by the government (D. Chen & Gao, 2023).

The advantages of incorporating social media influencers into domestic political advertising and propaganda campaigns apply to foreign authoritarian governments as well. Recent studies show that both the Russian and Chinese governments hire social media influencers to influence public opinion in democracies (Brockling et al., 2023; Woolley, 2022), which helps build a positive image of these authoritarian regimes in the minds of foreign audiences. Moreover, I posit that this effect translates into policy influence, shaping how democratic societies perceive and respond to authoritarian regimes. Citizens' moral evaluation of authoritarian regimes, alongside other factors such as threat perception, shapes not only citizens' support for punitive policies against such regimes (Arı & Sonmez, 2025; M. R. Tomz & Weeks, 2020) but also the positions of policymakers who observe their constituents' preferences (M. Tomz et al., 2020). Therefore, propaganda messages produced or endorsed by foreign influencers, compared to those from official state media institutions, will be more effective in persuading foreign citizens to adopt favorable attitudes toward an authoritarian regime and lower their support for punitive foreign policies (**H1**).

**H1 (Persuasive Effect of Influencer Propaganda):** Foreign citizens are more effectively persuaded by propaganda produced or endorsed by foreign influencers than that by official institutions of authoritarian regimes to:

- a) adopt a more favorable attitude toward the authoritarian regime.
- b) lower support for punitive actions against the authoritarian regime

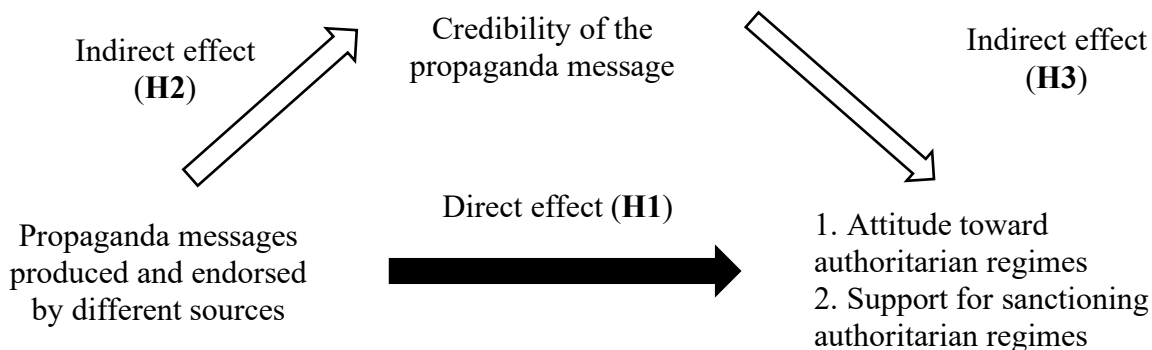
Content produced by social media influencers, compared to that produced by the official institutions of authoritarian regimes, better aligns with foreign contexts and internet culture, as influencers are natives of those online spaces and may adopt a more personal communication style and a softer presentation. These qualities make their messages more authentic. Thus, influencer-produced content is more convincing than both traditional didactic party-state content and the authoritarian propagandists' broadcasting style, which persists in their foreign propaganda (Fan et al., 2024; Min & Luqiu, 2021). This is especially true when foreign influencers reside in and frequently travel throughout authoritarian regimes, enabling them to produce content that appears apolitical and close to the lives of ordinary people.

More importantly, foreign citizens are likely to perceive foreign influencers as more credible than official government communication. Influencers not only sell the autocrats' story by sharing authentic and personal experiences but do so while concealing their affiliation with these institutions. Further, a common ingroup identity, shared by both the influencer and the audience, strengthens the apparently neutral image. Audio and visual cues indicating shared ingroup identity include race and ethnicity as well as accent and tone. A consistent finding in social identity theory suggests that people treat those they perceive as ingroup members more favorably, which, in turn, influences political attitudes and behavior (Huddy, 2001). Similarly, in public diplomacy, ingroup messages are perceived as more credible and persuasive by foreign audiences because insider communication is likely to be perceived as more agreeable and constructive than messages from outgroup members (Abramson et al., 2025; Dragojlovic, 2015). Building on this logic, I expect that foreign citizens will perceive a message produced or endorsed by a foreign influencer as more credible than one from official institutions of authoritarian regimes (**H2**), and that this perception will, in turn, positively mediate the persuasive effect of propaganda (**H3**).

**H2 (Credibility of Influencer Propaganda):** Foreign citizens perceive propaganda messages produced or endorsed by foreign influencers as more credible than those from official institutions of authoritarian regimes.

**H3 (Mediation Effect of Propaganda Credibility):** The perceived credibility of the propaganda message positively mediates the persuasive effect of the propaganda message in **H1**.

**Fig. 1 Causal diagram**



Finally, foreign influencers enjoy a higher level of perceived credibility, an antecedent variable guiding information selection in both offline (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2022) and online settings (Messing & Westwood, 2014). Thus, I posit that a foreign influencer is more likely than an official institution of authoritarian governments to be selected by foreign citizens when they seek additional information about China (H4).

**H4 (Selection Effect of Influencer Endorsement):** Foreign citizens are more likely to select a foreign influencer than an official institution of authoritarian governments as an information source.

### Research Design

I recruited a nationally representative sample of U.S. citizens in April 2025 for a preregistered survey experiment that randomly assigned respondents to view edited, real pro-Chinese government videos available on YouTube from the Chinese state media outlet China Global Television Network (CGTN) or Western pro-Chinese government influencers. These videos adopt narratives that defend the Chinese government on the controversial issue of human rights in Xinjiang. Among the treatment groups, some respondents received an additional social media profile of the two sources as endorsers of the videos. By manipulating these cues of credibility of the primary production source and intermediary endorser, I tested whether perceived credibility mediates the persuasive effect of pro-Chinese government videos on respondents' attitudes towards the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang and their support for dovish and hawkish

punitive actions toward the Chinese government. In a pretreatment question, I also asked whether the respondents prefer a social media profile showing a Western influencer living in China or CGTN as their information source about China.

### *Case selection*

I study the case of Xinjiang for several reasons. First, preliminary evidence indicates that the Chinese government works with Western influencers on social media to promote the Chinese version of the Xinjiang story – “borrowing mouths from foreign friends,” as Chinese officials responsible for foreign propaganda have described it (Ryan et al., 2021, 2022). Second, human rights issues strongly motivate democratic citizens to support their governments in adopting more proactive policies against authoritarian regimes (M. R. Tomz & Weeks, 2020), thereby giving authoritarian states clear incentives to sway foreign public opinion on this issue. Thus, this case is a prototypical example of authoritarian foreign propaganda. Third, human rights in Xinjiang receive extensive coverage in Western democracies, including the U.S.<sup>4</sup> As discussed above, propaganda is less likely to persuade citizens on issues when they are more informed. If influencer-assisted Chinese propaganda proves effective in this case, it could demonstrate its capacity to influence these democratic publics. Finally, the U.S. government is increasingly hostile toward China and has become a leading force behind international sanctions aimed at China. Understanding how Chinese propaganda influences U.S. public attitudes and policy positions has important implications for U.S. foreign policy and China’s long-term development.

### *Treatments selection*

In treatment groups, respondents either watched a YouTube video anchored by a Chinese journalist from CGTN or by a Western white influencer. I selected real videos to increase the experiment’s external validity. Randomly assigning respondents to receive a video from the pool reduces bias by minimizing the possibility that the treatment videos are unrepresentative or that respondents are pre-treated (Carter & Carter, 2021). I selected videos from CGTN because it is the largest foreign-facing propaganda apparatus of the Chinese government, providing content in

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, a poll by YouGov in September 2022 says that 57% of the adult U.S citizens have heard about the treatment of the Uyghur people by the Chinese government, and 53% of them believe the treatment qualifies as a human rights violation – see <https://today.yougov.com/international/articles/43714-americans-think-china-guilty-human-rights-abuses>

all six UN official languages. Following Mattingly et al. (2024), I selected videos by analyzing the text description of CGTN's YouTube videos about Xinjiang.<sup>5</sup> For influencers' videos, I curated a list of pro-Chinese government influencers based on the earlier studies of Brockling et al. (2023) and other policy research briefs (Ryan et al., 2021, 2022; Seitz et al., 2022) on this issue, following a list of criteria that ensure their White identity, pro-Chinese government positions, and online influence, and selected videos that match the narratives of CGTN's video.<sup>6</sup> There are three pairs of treatment videos from both sources on three common narratives used by the Chinese government on the Xinjiang issue (Alpermann & Malzer, 2024) – (1) praising the government's efforts in developing Xinjiang, (2) the prevalence of terrorism in Xinjiang under external influences, and (3) cultural and religious freedom enjoyed by the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. This helps control differences in content between CGTN's and influencers' videos. Additionally, all videos were edited to around 1.2 to 1.5 minutes and included subtitles to minimize potential biases from differences in exposure duration and the speaker's English accent.<sup>7</sup> With these measures in place, I minimized differences in the main message of the video and highlighted differences in the identities of the video anchors and the sources.

Some respondents also received the actual profile of either CGTN or one of the three influencers on X after watching the video and being told that this profile shared the video to create an impression of endorsement. There are three common heuristics from non-content attributes that social media users use to evaluate the credibility of a message's source (Lin et al., 2016), including authority, bandwagon cues, and identity. I standardized these profiles according to the first two heuristics. Regarding authority, all profiles indicated that the account holders are informed about China, either as foreigners living in China or a Chinese media outlet. For bandwagon cues, I removed all subscription counts to prevent respondents from evaluating the profiles based on their perceived influence. The major difference among these profiles was their identity. While the CGTN profile revealed its connection to China through its full name, the influencers' profiles featured a white person's face and bios typical of influencers.

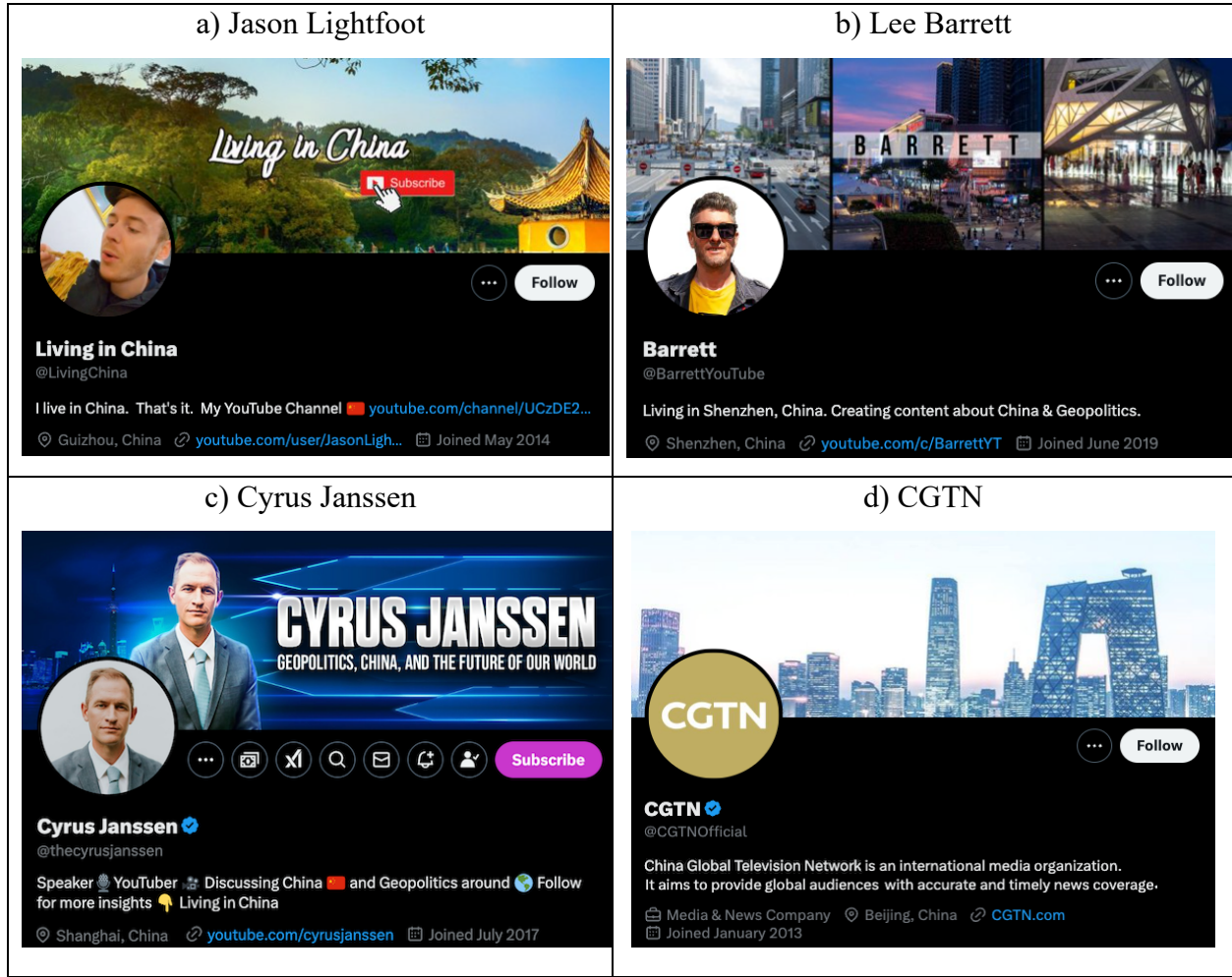
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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix A1 for the analysis

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix A2 for the criteria

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix D for the treatment videos' transcripts and snapshots.

**Fig. 2. Profile of White Influencers and CGTN on X**

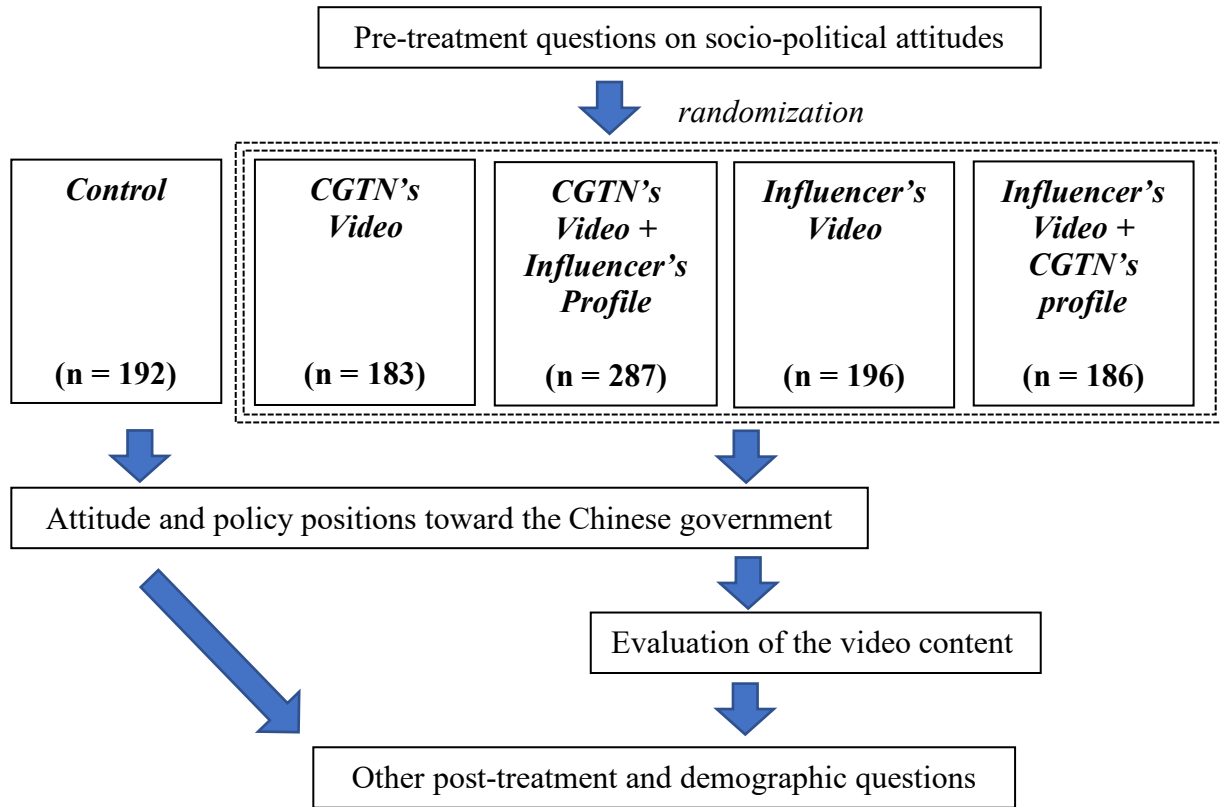


### *Experimental Design*

1,098 U.S. citizens were recruited as respondents via Cint Theorem, and the results of 1,044 who passed an instructional manipulation check were included in the study. Missing data are assumed to be missing at random and imputed using multiple imputation with the *MICE* package in *R*. All respondents first answered a set of pre-treatment questions on socio-political attitudes and behavior, including being asked to choose either CGTN's social media profiles or one of the influencers as their preferred source of information about China.<sup>8</sup> As these profiles were also used in some treatment groups, this question was administered well before the treatment to avoid contamination of its results and those of the outcome questions.

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix E for the survey questions.

**Fig. 3. Flow of survey**



Then, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the five experimental conditions: (1) a placebo video showing natural scenery (*Control*), (2) one video from CGTN (*CGTN's Video*), (3) one CGTN's videos with one influencers' profiles (*CGTN's Video + Influencers' Profile*), (4) one videos from influencers (*Influencers' Video*), and (5) one influencers' video with CGTN's profile (*Influencers' Video + CGTN's profile*).<sup>9</sup> While *CGTN's Video* and *Influencers' Video* serve to test the persuasive effects of these videos, the additional *CGTN's Profile* and *Influencers' Profile* examine whether their endorsements moderate the effects of the treatment videos from the other source.

I did not treat respondents with the video and profile from the same source for two reasons. First, having pure video treatments helped to isolate the effect of the videos. Second, there were enough cues in the videos to suggest their sources, including the ethnicity of the

<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, this study could be perceived as having 6 video treatment groups or having 18 sub-treatment groups if we consider the status of the profile treatment. Thus, the treatment condition *CGTN's Video + Influencers' Profile* had a higher sample size to allow each of the 9 sub-treatment groups to have a comparable size with the others.

narrators in the videos, style of the narration, and a short sentence on each survey page of the treatment videos – *Please watch this video produced by [a China-based media organization the China Global Television Network (CGTN)], or [a social media influencer living in China, the name of the influencer]*. Thus, profiles from the same source provide little additional information to respondents, and the treatment effect associated with an endorser is already partially captured by the videos. Furthermore, the profile was displayed after the video with a pause. This design isolated the profile's endorser effect from the video content by allowing respondents, as in other treatment groups, to first watch the videos and then evaluate them after the pause more independently of the content based on the new information provided.

After the treatment, all respondents were asked to answer three sets of primary outcome questions that are increasingly aggressive towards China, including (1) objections to the Chinese government's action in Xinjiang, (2) support of the U.S government taking dovish actions against the Chinese government, and (3) support of the U.S government taking hawkish actions against the Chinese government. I used (1) as a proxy for respondents' perceptions of the Chinese government, as democratic citizens tend to associate authoritarian regimes with human rights violations (Barceló & Sheen, 2024). Moreover, these treatment videos are explicitly created to defend the Chinese government on the Xinjiang issue. Thus, directly asking respondents for their views on the Xinjiang issue better captures the video's effects. For (2) and (3), I followed the literature and selected four actions as proxies for the dovish (public condemnation and economic sanctions) and hawkish actions threatening and using military force) (Mattingly & Sundquist, 2023; Xu, 2025). I averaged the two actions for each policy type. Only respondents from the treatment groups were asked to assess the videos' credibility in presenting the situation in Xinjiang and the Uyghurs. These three outcome questions were measured using a 5-point Likert scale. After answering these outcome questions, all respondents completed additional post-treatment and demographic questions.

### *Identification*

The primary estimand is the average treatment effect (ATE) of watching a video endorsed and produced by Western white Influencers or CGTN on the primary outcomes (1) – (3) for **H1a** and **H1b**. For the primary outcomes, the pre-registered regression model is as follows:

$$Y_i^j = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{video} + \beta_2 \text{profile} + \varphi X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

In the formula, (*i*) indexes the respondents, (*j*) indexes the three sets of primary outcome questions, (*is* the result from the primary outcome questions, *video* and *profile* are factored variables indicating (*i*'s) treatment status of receiving which video or profile, ( $\beta_1$ ) is the effect of the video, ( $\beta_2$ ) is the effect of the social media profile additive to the video,  $\varphi X_i$  and is a vector of binarized covariates. They include demographic characteristics such as *age*, *gender*, *race*, *education*, and political attitudes, including *partisanship*, *ideology*, and *political interest*. Additionally, I include two measures of respondents' orientation toward China, which are likely to affect the two primary outcomes and mediate the effect of the treatment: their *impressions of the Chinese government* and their *knowledge about Chinese politics and history*. I did not directly ask respondents about their knowledge of Xinjiang issues to avoid priming or post-treatment bias; instead, I asked two indirect but related pretreatment questions (Blackwell et al., 2025). Finally,  $\varepsilon_i$  is the error term.

I employed four ordinary least squares (OLS) models for three primary outcomes to test **H1**, using the full sample and the sample that passed a treatment-related factual manipulation check, with or without covariate adjustment<sup>10</sup>. I tested **H2** by rerunning the same four models with the secondary outcome, but I changed the baseline comparison group to respondents from CGTN's video, since respondents from the control group were not asked to evaluate the video's content. To test **H3**, I used the model from Imai et al. (2011) to separate the indirect effect of credibility from the direct effect on respondents' objection to the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang. In the appendix, I proved that my results are robust to alternative specifications by treating individual videos and profiles as the independent variables.<sup>11</sup> Finally, to test H4, I used a simple binomial test to see whether respondents pick CGTN's or a Western influencer's social media profile as their preferred source for additional information about China.

## Persuasive Effects of Pro-Chinese Government Content

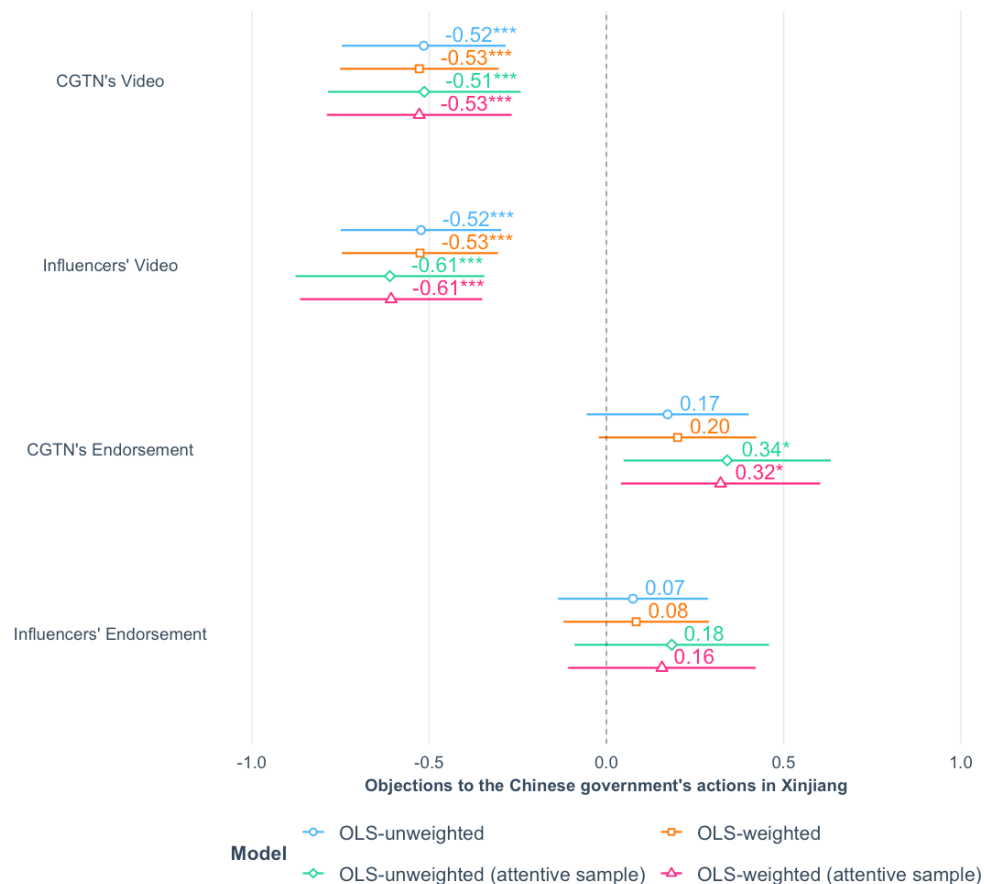
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<sup>10</sup> Factual manipulation checks (FMCs) ask respondents objective questions about the experiment and better confirm attentiveness to the experiment than the instruction manipulation check. See Kane and Barabas (2019)

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix C

Fig. 4 presents the average treatment effects (ATE) on objections to the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang.<sup>12</sup> The x-axis shows different treatment conditions, including the two primary sources of pro-Chinese-government videos, the additional intermediary endorsement of CGTN on the influencers' videos, and influencers' endorsements of CGTN's video. A larger value on the y-axis indicates a more critical attitude toward the Chinese government.

**Fig.4 ATE on objections to the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang**



Notes: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

In Fig. 4, both CGTN's and influencers' videos produced a strong and statistically significant negative effects (-0.5 to -0.6) on respondents' objections to China's actions in Xinjiang across models. In the two covariate-adjusted models, this magnitude is close to that of the positive effect of having a positive prior-impression of the Chinese government in the

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix B3 for the tabulated results for Fig. 4 to Fig. 6.

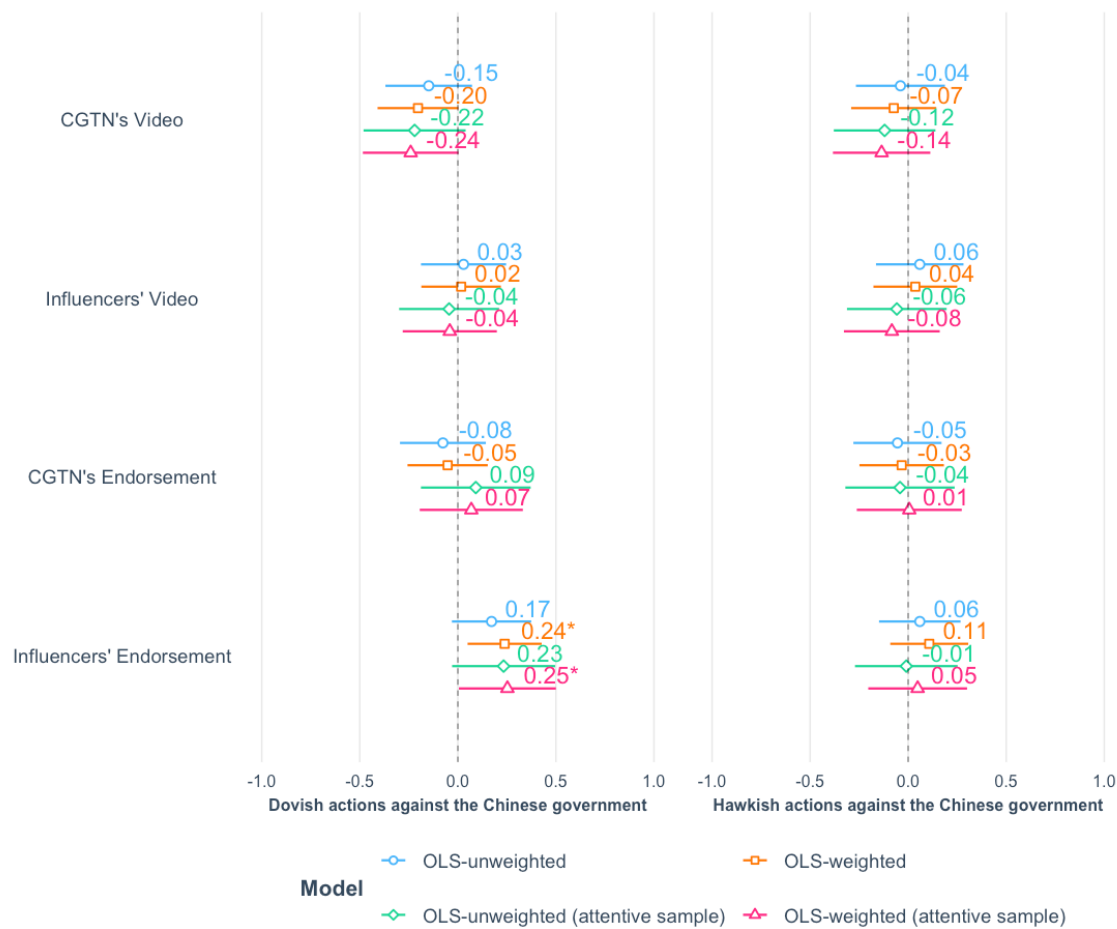
full regression model (0.5). In other words, the results suggest that even brief exposure to pro-China content could offset the negative impression of China typically held by an average U.S. citizen. This finding challenges earlier claims that China's foreign propaganda is ineffective at shifting public opinion (Brady, 2015), given the Chinese government's persistent efforts to modernize its foreign propaganda, especially by cloaking it in a neutral tone (Moore & Colley, 2024). Among the attentive respondents, influencers' videos enjoyed a slightly larger persuasive effect (-0.6) than CGTN's video (-0.5), though the difference is not statistically significant.

Nonetheless, the figure also highlights the effect of endorsement cues via social media profiles. Endorsement of CGTN alongside an influencer's video produced a modest positive effect (0.3) among attentive samples, offsetting about 53% to 56% of the videos' persuasive effects. These results suggest that when U.S. respondents detect a clear Chinese affiliation in pro-China content on social media, the message's persuasiveness drops sharply. In contrast, exposure to an influencer's profile alongside a CGTN video had no effect, likely because respondents perceived these influencers as ordinary users when they were neither followers of these influencers nor able to assess the perceived influence of these users after the relevant cues were removed from the profiles. In this regard, influencers, even when perceived as ordinary social media users, enjoy a comparative advantage in disseminating pro-Chinese government content by avoiding the discredit of being associated with the Chinese government, thereby explaining their success in extending the reach of propaganda produced by Chinese state media (Brockling et al., 2023). Together, these findings provide partial evidence supporting **H1a**.

Fig. 5 shows the ATE on support for the U.S. government taking dovish and hawkish punitive actions against the Chinese government. The results show that videos and additional endorsement cues from both sources have almost no effect, except for small positive effects on support for dovish policies caused by influencer endorsements in the covariate-adjusted model. This suggests a backfiring effect, as respondents may believe that dovish actions, as the only viable foreign policy options currently on the table, should not be shaped by information from random social media users. Taken together, these results reveal

that respondents' prior beliefs about appropriate diplomatic responses to the Chinese government remain stable, especially on costly military measures against a seemingly strong authoritarian regime, such that a once-off exposure, though changed their attitude to the issue *per se*, would not directly their policy position. This is consistent with the literature, which argues that factors beyond moral evaluations—such as perceived threat—also critically shape foreign policy preferences (M. Tomz et al., 2020; M. R. Tomz & Weeks, 2020). Overall, the results reject **H1b**.

**Fig.5 ATE on support for punitive actions against the Chinese government**

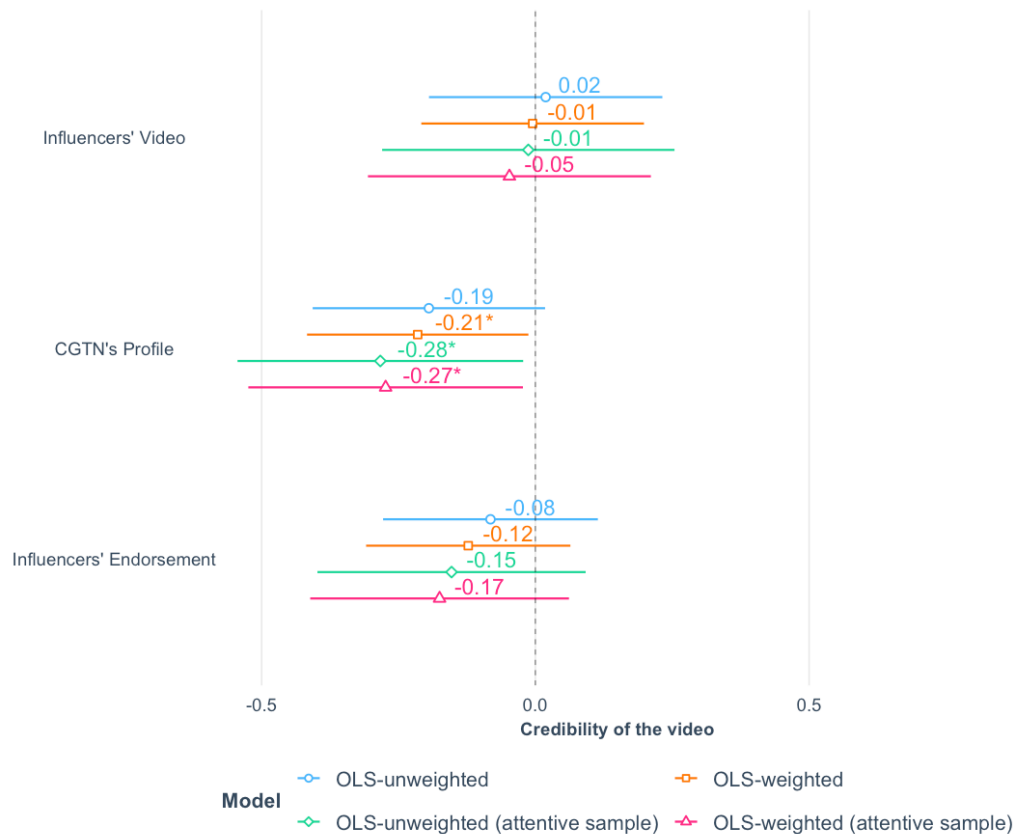


Notes: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

# **How Perceived Credibility Mediates the Persuasiveness of Pro-Chinese Government Content**

Next, I examine respondents' perceptions of the treatments' credibility. In Fig. 6, respondents who received CGTN's video treatment served as the reference group because those in the control group were not asked to evaluate the video.

**Fig. 6. Credibility of pro-Chinese government videos from different sources and with different endorsement cues**



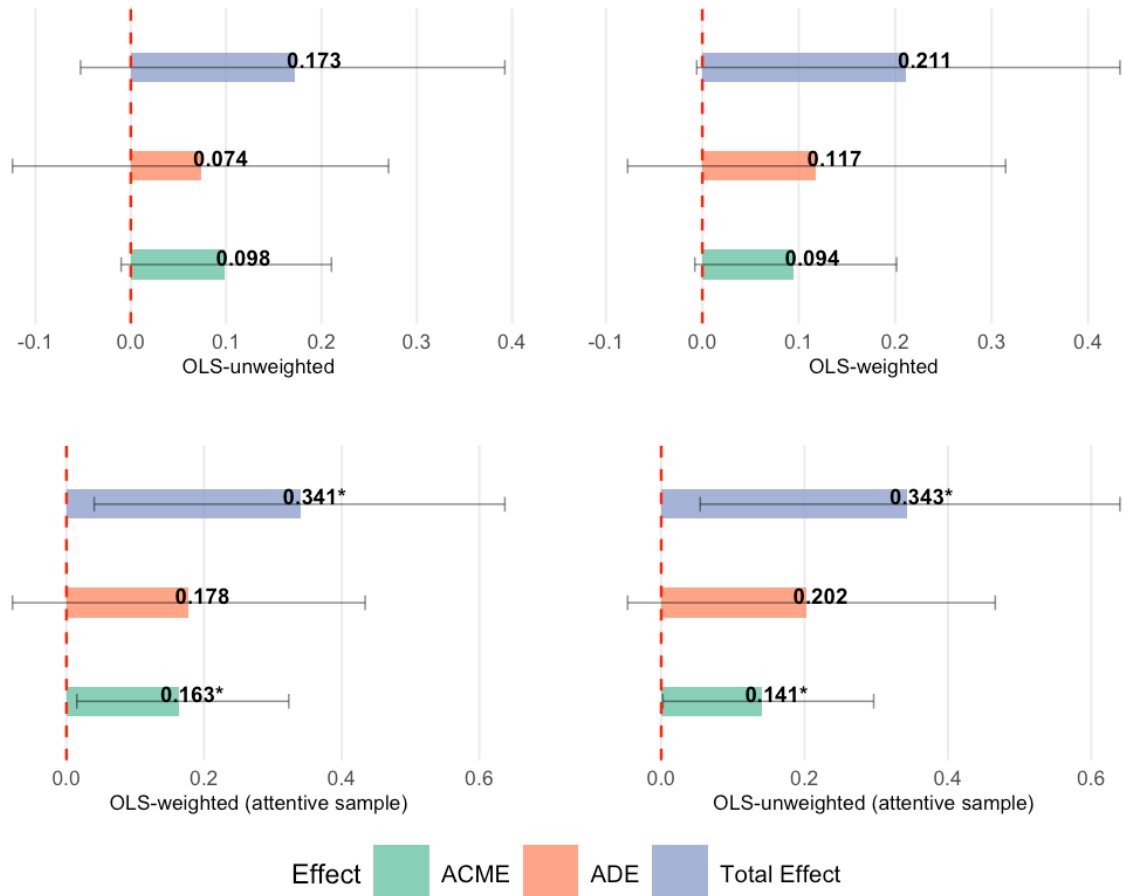
Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Across models, influencers' videos showed no significant credibility advantage over CGTN videos, consistent with their persuasive effects on objections to the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang as presented in Fig. 4. It is also unsurprising that the endorsement of influencers had no statistically significant effect on the credibility of the pro-Chinese government videos, again, given that respondents were neither followers of these influencers nor able to assess the online influence of these influencers. In contrast, CGTN's endorsement, which clearly signaled that it is a China-based media outlet, had modest negative effects (-0.2 to -0.3) on the

video's credibility in most models. The results again provide partial support for **H2**, as CGTN's endorsement undermines the credibility of pro-Chinese government videos.

To test **H3**, which posits that the perceived credibility of the treatment mediates its persuasive effects, I employed a mediation analysis within the framework of Imai et al. (2011). This approach provides causal estimates of the extent to which a single treatment condition affects the outcome through the mediator using Monte Carlo draws for nonparametric bootstrap simulations. In mediation analysis, the ATE is decomposed into two components: the Average Causal Mediation Effect (ACME), the indirect treatment effect through the mediator, and the Average Direct Effect (ADE), the direct effect of the treatment. Here, the treatment that I focused on is the additional endorsement of CGTN for respondents who received the influencers' videos, as this is the only treatment condition that consistently shows statistically significant effects on the respondents' objections to the Chinese government's action in Xinjiang, our primary outcome, and the mediator of perceived credibility of the treatment videos.

**Fig. 7. Persuasive effects of CGTN's endorsement mediated by credibility**



Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Fig. 7 presents the mediation analysis results from 5,000 bootstrap simulations.<sup>13</sup> Across four models, the indirect effects of CGTN's endorsement were modest but comparable to the direct effect. More importantly, these effects were at least marginally significant, with p-values ranging from 0.03 to 0.075, whereas all the direct effects were insignificant in all cases after mediation, unlike the results in Fig. 4. These patterns indicate a classic partial mediation in which credibility is the mechanism behind the persuasive effects of CGTN's endorsement. Substantively, CGTN's endorsement reduced the persuasive effects of the videos in reducing respondents' objection to the Chinese government actions in Xinjiang presented in Fig. 4 by 18 to 27% through reduced credibility, providing partial evidence to support **H3**.

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix B4 for the tabulated regression results. The results are robust to unmeasured confounding between the mediator and the outcome variable, as shown by sensitivity tests in Appendix C2.

A point worth discussing is that, in both the full and attentive samples, the indirect effect did not fully capture the total effect of CGTN's endorsement. There are two possible reasons. First, respondents' perceived credibility of the videos may be overestimated for various reasons, such as acquiescence bias when answering questions about a less informed topic (Krosnick, 1991). Thus, the gap in perceived credibility between respondents who receive only the influencers' videos and those who also receive the CGTN's profile is reduced. Second, the presence of CGTN's profile may have prompted respondents to evaluate the pro-Chinese government videos on qualities distinct from credibility and not captured by the credibility question, such as expectations, perceived authenticity, and interest in the videos. For instance, cueing respondents that the treatment video is from a Chinese media outlet may make it seem less relevant to them, thereby encouraging satisficing (Krosnick, 1991). Nonetheless, the insignificant direct effect in Fig. 7 suggests that an alternative mechanism is less likely to account for the remaining unexplained direct effect of CGTN's endorsement.

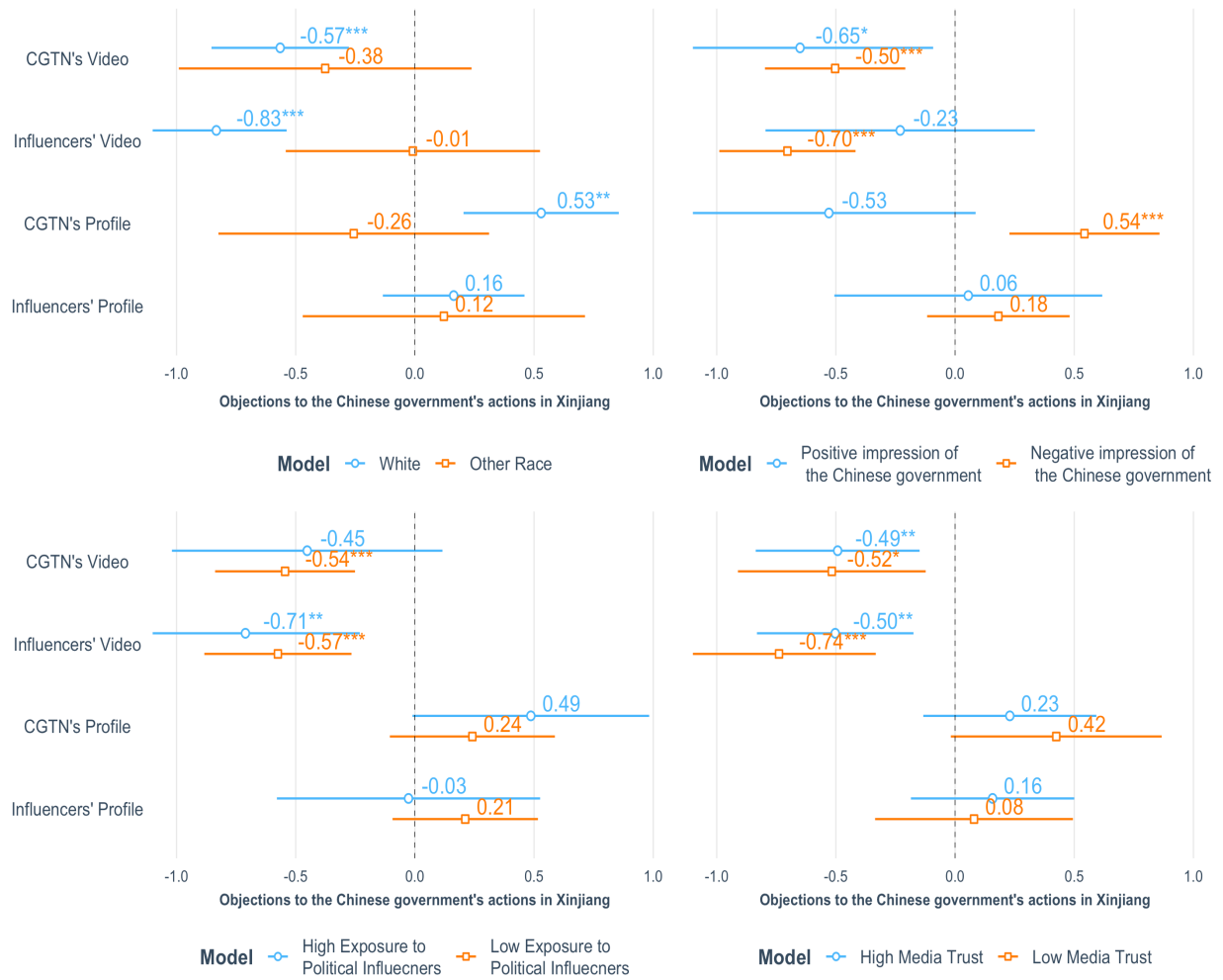
### **Targeted Persuasion and Selection Effects of Influencer-Endorsed/Created Content**

In this section, I explore whether influencer content exhibits heterogeneous effects (HTE) across audience segments and test if influencers' endorsement induces selection consumption, potentially compensating for CGTN's limitations through targeted reach and resonance. Specifically, do influencers perform better within their audiences or achieve breakthrough persuasion and even selection beyond them? Fig. 8 presents heterogeneous treatment effects (HTEs) on objections to the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang. I focused on four audience segments with stronger theoretical underpinnings: racial groups (White vs. other), prior impressions of China (positive vs. negative), exposure to political influencers (high vs. low), and media trust (high vs. low).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Exposure to political influencers and media trust are not included in the main model as they are not directly related to respondents' perception and policy positions toward China. See Appendix E for the survey questions.

**Fig. 8. HTE on objections to the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang**



Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

In the top-right panel of Fig. 8, influencers' videos had a strong negative effect (-0.8) among white respondents and a near-zero effect among non-white respondents, providing compelling evidence supporting my theory that ingroup racial identity substantially enhances perceived persuasiveness by reducing foreignness reactance. The remaining three panels explored factors that delineate distinct audience segments and suggest selective consumption patterns. Among respondents with a prior negative impression of the Chinese government, influencers' videos had a substantially stronger effect (-0.7) than CGTN's videos (-0.5). This demonstrates the capacity of influencers' videos to persuade resistant audiences who are also unlikely to consume content from Chinese sources, given their dislike of CGTN's profile, like the White respondents. Influencers' videos also had a stronger effect on high-exposure

respondents with low media trust, who are natural audiences for influencers and are less likely to consume news from institutional Chinese sources like CGTN.

While these heterogeneous patterns focus primarily on the persuasive effects of pro-Chinese government videos, communication research has long established a reciprocal relationship between the persuasiveness and credibility of media content and media selection (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2022). This selection effect is particularly intriguing given that the presence of CGTN's profiles reduced the persuasiveness and credibility of the pro-Chinese government content. This is further demonstrated by respondents' answers to the pre-treatment question about their preferred information sources, in which they could choose between one of the influencers' profiles and CGTN's profile. I ran multiple binomial tests to determine if their preference is statistically significant and present the results in Table 1.

**Table 1 Results of Binomial tests – probability of respondents selecting CGTN as an information source about China**

| Sample                   | Full Sample | Attentive Sample |
|--------------------------|-------------|------------------|
| Probability of selecting | 0.444***    | 0.455**          |
| CGNT's profile           | (0.154)     | (0.183)          |
| N                        | 1,044       | 739              |

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Table 1 confirms this selection dynamic. Respondents were statistically less likely to select CGTN profiles, indicating a consistent preference for influencer profiles across both samples, confirming my earlier hypothesis (**H4**). This suggests a potential self-reinforcing cycle in which influencers' breakthrough capacity converts skepticism toward traditional media and the Chinese government into strategic engagement pathways, potentially transforming one-time avoiders into repeated consumers of propaganda content through self-selected exposure.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study advances understanding of foreign propaganda in three keyways. First, it refutes claims that foreign propaganda fails to shape democratic citizens' evaluations of authoritarian

regimes—even on contentious human rights issues like Xinjiang (Brady, 2015; Carter & Carter, 2021). Second, it demonstrates credibility as a critical moderator of propaganda’s persuasiveness—CGTN’s endorsement undermines the persuasiveness of pro-China videos via reduced perceived credibility. Third, it reveals influencers as superior conduits for hard-to-reach audiences. Their content is effective and perceived as more credible than that endorsed by Chinese state media among White respondents, media skeptics, and those with prior negative impressions of the Chinese government. All in all, our findings suggest that influencers serve as a gateway for exposing foreign audiences to pro-autocracy propaganda.

The findings of this paper have broader theoretical and policy implications for understanding the role of online opinion leaders in mediating political communication in an increasingly high-choice information environment (Strömbäck et al., 2024). On the one hand, it showcases how influencers excel at persuading audiences fatigued by formal media through diverse, authentic personal storytelling—consistent with evidence from recent studies that soft, everyday content can better engage authoritarian citizens who are weary of overt propaganda (Lu et al., 2025; Zhu & Fu, 2023). On the other hand, influencer-assisted propaganda poses acute challenges to democratic regulation by rendering foreign influence nearly indistinguishable from organic communication. While systematic labeling of authoritarian-linked entities could disrupt these selection cycles and empower discernment, the fluid, dynamic ecology of influencer networks renders implementation difficult. Moreover, regulating online foreign-backed content risks infringing on free expression, creating a dilemma for democratic governments between free speech and transparency.

This paper also suggests a new pillar of authoritarian resilience: diverse support from foreign citizens. While persuasion through everyday domestic propaganda is an essential pillar of authoritarian stability, this paper suggests that the same logic applies to foreign propaganda of authoritarian regimes. Advances in digital communication enable autocrats to expand propaganda beyond traditional targets such as political and economic elites (Dukalskis, 2021) to ordinary democratic citizens. Although these campaigns may not immediately shift specific foreign policy positions—as evidenced by the null policy effects here—they shape general perceptions of the regime through repeated exposure through official institutions and influencers.

This perceptual shift carries long-term strategic implications for autocratic survival, e.g., lowering foreign and diasporic support for activism against authoritarian regimes (Tsourapas, 2021; Yan & Li, 2023), encouraging foreign investment and trade (Brady, 2015), and exporting authoritarian values to democracies (Mader et al., 2022). By cultivating sympathetic ordinary citizens alongside elites, regimes build diversified resilience against external pressures, with influencers serving as the critical transmission mechanism.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations that future research should address. First, although the selected videos reflect typical Chinese government viewpoints and are matched across sources, unobservable differences beyond narrator identity persist. Future work should employ larger video pools to estimate average treatment effects (ATEs) and standardize content through text-based or AI-generated treatments. Second, the one-time experimental design cannot capture long-term exposure dynamics or influencer-follower interactions. Panel studies tracking follower behavior would reveal how influencers cultivate sustained pro-China attitudes, particularly among initial skeptics induced to follow their profiles. Third, the focus on foreign propaganda targeting democratic audiences overlooks influencers' role in domestic authoritarian contexts, where foreigners serve as neutral outsiders (Fang, 2022). Comparative designs testing foreign versus local influencers across topics would illuminate credibility dynamics in domestic versus cross-border settings. Integrating longitudinal exposure, standardized content, and multi-topic comparisons will strengthen causal identification while mapping influencers' full propaganda potential across audiences.

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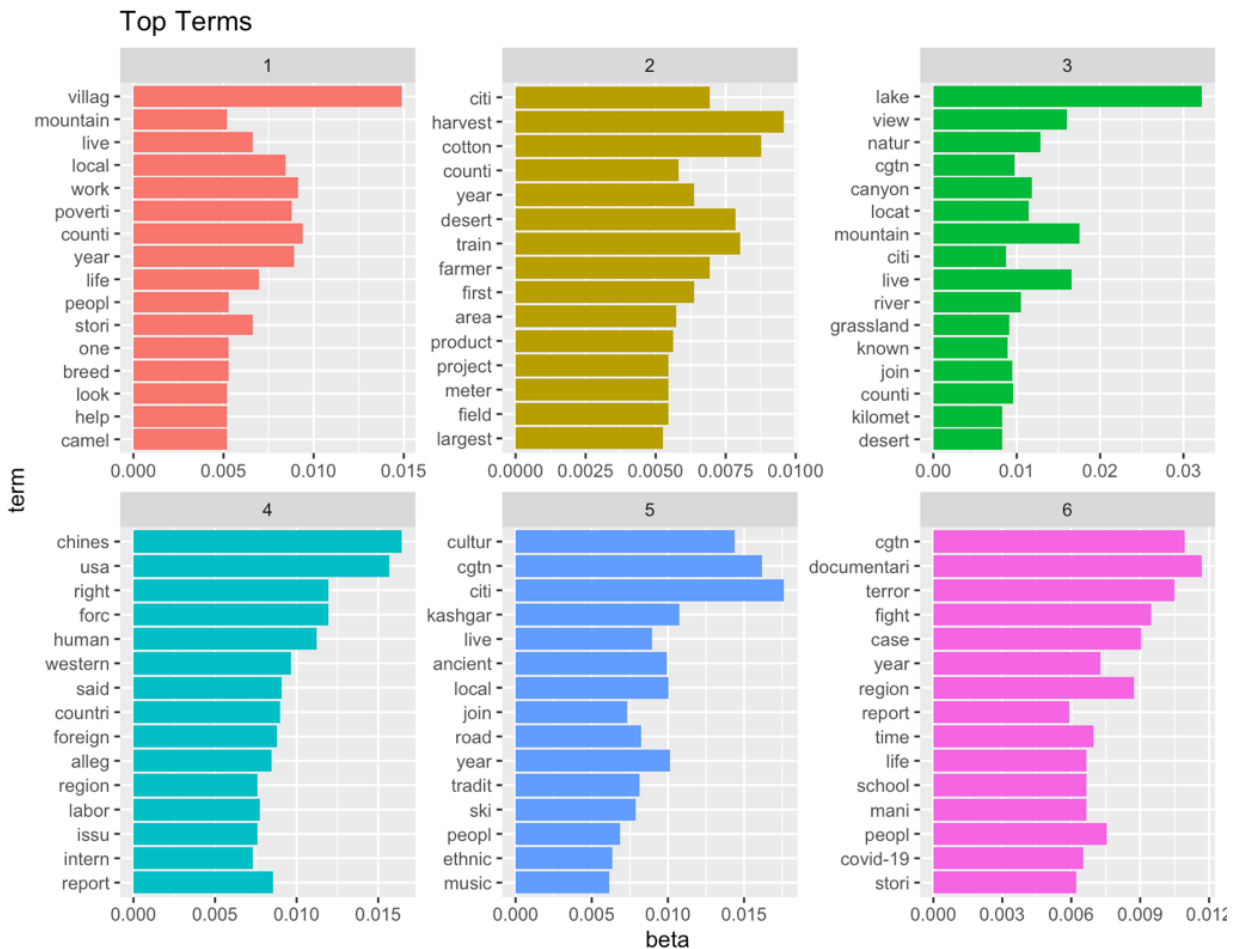
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## Appendix A: Treatment Selection

### *A1 Analysis of CGTN's YouTube Video about Xinjiang*

Following Mattingly et al. (2024), I select CGTN videos by analyzing CGTN's YouTube content on Xinjiang. I downloaded all videos from CGTN's YouTube Channel containing the keyword “Xinjiang” published between January 1, 2020, and April 30, 2024, totaling 1,335 videos. I run an LDA topic model on this text corpus to identify the topics of CGTN's videos based on high-frequency words, as shown in Fig. A1.

**Fig. A1. High-frequency words from LDA topic models of CGTN's Xinjiang-related YouTube videos.**



Among these topics, Topics 1 and 3 (32.4% of all videos) are about Xinjiang's natural scenery. Topics 2 and 5 (37.0%) are about the more sensitive issues of cotton harvesting and the

preservation of traditions and culture in Xinjiang. Finally, Topics 4 and 6 (30.5%) touch upon the most controversial issues of state-led human rights violations in Xinjiang and government policies to fight against terrorism by sending Uyghurs to vocational schools (re-education camps). This evidence suggests that a majority of CGTN's videos about Xinjiang (Topics 2, 4, 5, and 6 – accounting for 67.5% of all videos) are designed to respond to accusations of human rights violations.

The duration of these videos provides another clue to their qualitative differences: videos that touch on Topics 4 and 6 are much shorter (around 8 minutes), while videos covering other topics are longer than 10 minutes and even reach three hours for Topic 3. Thus, I searched for short videos about Xinjiang on CGTN's YouTube using keywords from Topics 2, 4, 5, and 6, and selected three videos corresponding to the three topics mentioned in the main text for further editing.

## *A2 Study of pro-Chinese government influencers outside of China*

The pioneering study of Brockling et al. (2023) and other policy research briefs (Ryan et al., 2021, 2022; Seitz et al., 2022) suggest there are more than one hundred Influencers who share their lives and views on China as foreigners using English on X and YouTube, a few dozen of which show a strong pro-Chinese government attitude. I updated this list by searching for keywords such as Xinjiang, Western lies, and Western propaganda on X and YouTube, and by snowball sampling through their social media network, resulting in more than forty accounts on X or YouTube during the data collection period from June to December 2024. Among the foreign influencers I identified, I selected three videos each from three influencers, according to the following criteria:

1. Having constant interaction with Chinese official entities, such as diplomats, state media outlets, and government departments.
2. Being at least a macro-influencer with more than 100,000 followers on either X or YouTube (Conde & Casais, 2023).
3. Showing clues in their social media profiles and videos that they are typical white English speakers with accents from Anglophone or Western European countries.
4. Supporting the Chinese government's position on Xinjiang.

## Appendix B: Additional Data Analysis

### *B1 Balance of Data*

Table A1 and A2 display the demographic balance among experimental groups and between the survey sample and the 2020 U.S. Census. The figure in each cell shows the mean values for the binary demographic traits of gender, college education, age (equal to or above 40), white race, and residence in the U.S. Census Bureau-defined regions: Northeast, Midwest, South, and West. The figures for the whole sample were computed from the survey results, except for residence, which was provided by the survey platform. I used a two-way ANOVA to compare the experimental groups and found they were balanced across most demographic traits, except for residence in the South. The survey sample also largely resembled the U.S. population, with two traits (Aged > 40 and White race) showing differences of  $\pm 10\%$ .

**Table A1. Balance of Demographics Data - Experimental Groups (Full Sample)**

|                      | Control | CGTN's<br>Video | CGTN's<br>Video +<br>Influencers'<br>Profile | Influencer'<br>Video | Influencer'<br>Video +<br>CGTN's<br>Profile | p-value of<br>ANOVA |
|----------------------|---------|-----------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Male                 | 0.365   | 0.454           | 0.418                                        | 0.357                | 0.387                                       | 0.268               |
| College<br>Education | 0.380   | 0.377           | 0.390                                        | 0.347                | 0.368                                       | 0.913               |
| Age > = 40           | 0.740   | 0.743           | 0.714                                        | 0.745                | 0.753                                       | 0.894               |
| White                | 0.802   | 0.781           | 0.753                                        | 0.730                | 0.790                                       | 0.412               |
| Northeast            | 0.167   | 0.120           | 0.195                                        | 0.224                | 0.188                                       | 0.100               |
| Midwest              | 0.286   | 0.191           | 0.244                                        | 0.240                | 0.231                                       | 0.313               |
| South                | 0.328   | 0.475           | 0.359                                        | 0.352                | 0.371                                       | 0.0333*             |
| West                 | 0.219   | 0.213           | 0.202                                        | 0.184                | 0.210                                       | 0.927               |

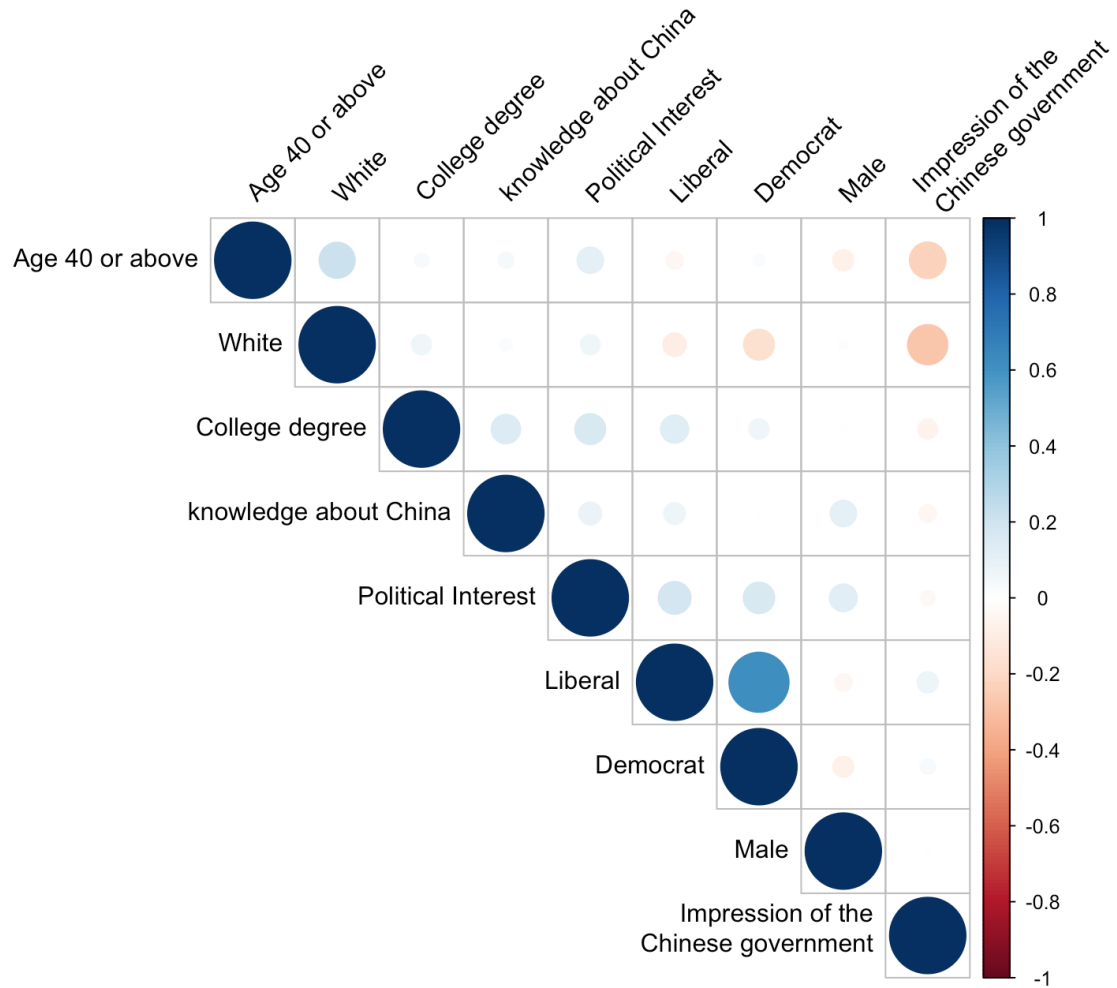
**Table A2. Balance of Demographics Data –  
Full Sample vs. 2020 U.S Census (Aged 18 or above)**

|                   | Whole Sample | 2020 U.S Census |
|-------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Male              | 0.398        | 0.485           |
| College Education | 0.374        | 0.348           |
| Age > = 40        | 0.737        | 0.560           |
| White             | 0.769        | 0.641           |
| Northeast         | 0.181        | 0.171           |
| Midwest           | 0.239        | 0.207           |
| South             | 0.375        | 0.351           |
| West              | 0.205        | 0.232           |

## B2 Correlation matrix of covariates

The variables used in our main model show no strong correlation, except between ‘democrat’ and ‘ideology’.

**Fig. A2 Correlation matrix of covariates**



B3 Tabulated regression results

**Table A3. ATE - Objections to the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang**

|                             | Full sample –<br>unweighted | Full sample –<br>weighted | Attentive sample<br>– unweighted | Attentive sample<br>– weighted |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>CGTN's Video</i>         | -0.515***<br>(0.118)        | -0.528***<br>(0.114)      | -0.514***<br>(0.139)             | -0.528***<br>(0.133)           |
| <i>Influencer's Video</i>   | -0.523***<br>(0.116)        | -0.526***<br>(0.112)      | -0.611***<br>(0.136)             | -0.607***<br>(0.131)           |
| <i>CGTN's Profile</i>       | 0.173<br>(0.117)            | 0.201+<br>(0.113)         | 0.341*<br>(0.149)                | 0.322*<br>(0.143)              |
| <i>Influencer's profile</i> | 0.0749<br>(0.108)           | 0.0840<br>(0.105)         | 0.184<br>(0.140)                 | 0.157<br>(0.135)               |
| Covariate adjusted          | No                          | Yes                       | No                               | Yes                            |
| N                           | 1,044                       | 1,044                     | 739                              | 739                            |

Note: + p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001. Standard errors in parentheses

**Table A4. ATE - Support for dovish actions against the Chinese government**

|                             | Full sample –<br>unweighted | Full sample –<br>weighted | Attentive sample<br>– unweighted | Attentive sample<br>– weighted |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>CGTN's Video</i>         | -0.148<br>(0.113)           | -0.203+<br>(0.105)        | -0.221<br>(0.133)                | -0.241+<br>(0.124)             |
| <i>Influencer's Video</i>   | 0.0290<br>(0.111)           | 0.0167<br>(0.104)         | -0.0446<br>(0.130)               | -0.0412<br>(0.122)             |
| <i>CGTN's Profile</i>       | -0.0762<br>(0.112)          | -0.0522<br>(0.104)        | 0.0915<br>(0.143)                | 0.0686<br>(0.134)              |
| <i>Influencer's profile</i> | 0.172<br>(0.103)            | 0.238*<br>(0.0963)        | 0.233<br>(0.134)                 | 0.253*<br>(0.0454)             |
| Covariate adjusted          | No                          | Yes                       | No                               | Yes                            |
| N                           | 1,044                       | 1,044                     | 739                              | 739                            |

Note: + p < 0.1, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001. Standard errors in parentheses

**Table A5. ATE - Support for Hawkish actions against the Chinese government**

|                             | Full sample –<br>unweighted | Full sample –<br>weighted | Attentive sample<br>– unweighted | Attentive sample<br>– weighted |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>CGTN's Video</i>         | -0.0394<br>(0.116)          | -0.0736<br>(0.111)        | -0.120<br>(0.132)                | -0.135<br>(0.126)              |
| <i>Influencer's Video</i>   | 0.0592<br>(0.114)           | 0.0365<br>(0.109)         | -0.579<br>(0.129)                | -0.0833<br>(0.124)             |
| <i>CGTN's Profile</i>       | -0.0545<br>(0.115)          | -0.0330<br>(0.110)        | -0.0417<br>(0.142)               | 0.00567<br>(0.136)             |
| <i>Influencer's profile</i> | 0.0594<br>(0.106)           | 0.108<br>(0.101)          | 0.00952<br>(0.133)               | 0.0484<br>(0.128)              |
| Covariate adjusted          | No                          | Yes                       | No                               | Yes                            |
| N                           | 1,044                       | 1,044                     | 739                              | 739                            |

Note: +  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Standard errors in parentheses

**Table A6. ATE - Credibility of the video**

|                             | Full sample –<br>unweighted | Full sample –<br>weighted | Attentive sample<br>– unweighted | Attentive sample<br>– weighted |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>Influencer's Video</i>   | 0.0188<br>(0.109)           | -0.00503<br>(0.104)       | -0.0129<br>(0.136)               | -0.0474<br>(0.132)             |
| <i>CGTN's Profile</i>       | -0.195+<br>(0.108)          | -0.215*<br>(0.103)        | -0.283*<br>(0.133)               | -0.274*<br>(0.128)             |
| <i>Influencer's profile</i> | -0.0820<br>(0.100)          | -0.123<br>(0.0950)        | -0.153<br>(0.125)                | -0.175<br>(0.120)              |
| Covariate adjusted          | No                          | Yes                       | No                               | Yes                            |
| N                           | 852                         | 852                       | 547                              | 547                            |

Note: +  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Standard errors in parentheses

*B4 Tabulated results of mediation analysis*

**Table A7. Mediation Analysis**

|                          | Full sample –<br>unweighted | Full sample –<br>weighted    | Attentive sample –<br>unweighted | Attentive sample –<br>weighted |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>ACME</i>              | 0.0983+<br>[-0.0101, 0.211] | 0.0940+<br>[-0.00773, 0.201] | 0.162*<br>[0.0151, 0.323]        | 0.141*<br>[0.00236, 0.297]     |
| <i>ADE</i>               | 0.0743<br>[-0.124, 0.270]   | 0.117<br>[-0.0774, 0.314]    | 0.178<br>[-0.00783, 0.434]       | 0.202<br>[-0.0468, 0.466]      |
| <i>Total<br/>Effects</i> | 0.173<br>[-0.0529, 0.392]   | 0.211<br>[-0.00584, 0.433]   | 0.340*<br>[0.0403, 0.637]        | 0.343*<br>[0.0543, 0.640]      |
| Covariate<br>adjusted    | No                          | Yes                          | No                               | Yes                            |
| N                        | 382                         | 382                          | 249                              | 249                            |

Note: +  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . 95% CI in parentheses

## Appendix C: Robustness Tests

### C1 OLS regression with individual treatment condition

**Fig A3. Persuasive effects of Chinese foreign propaganda by individual treatment condition – objection to the Chinese government’s actions in Xinjiang**

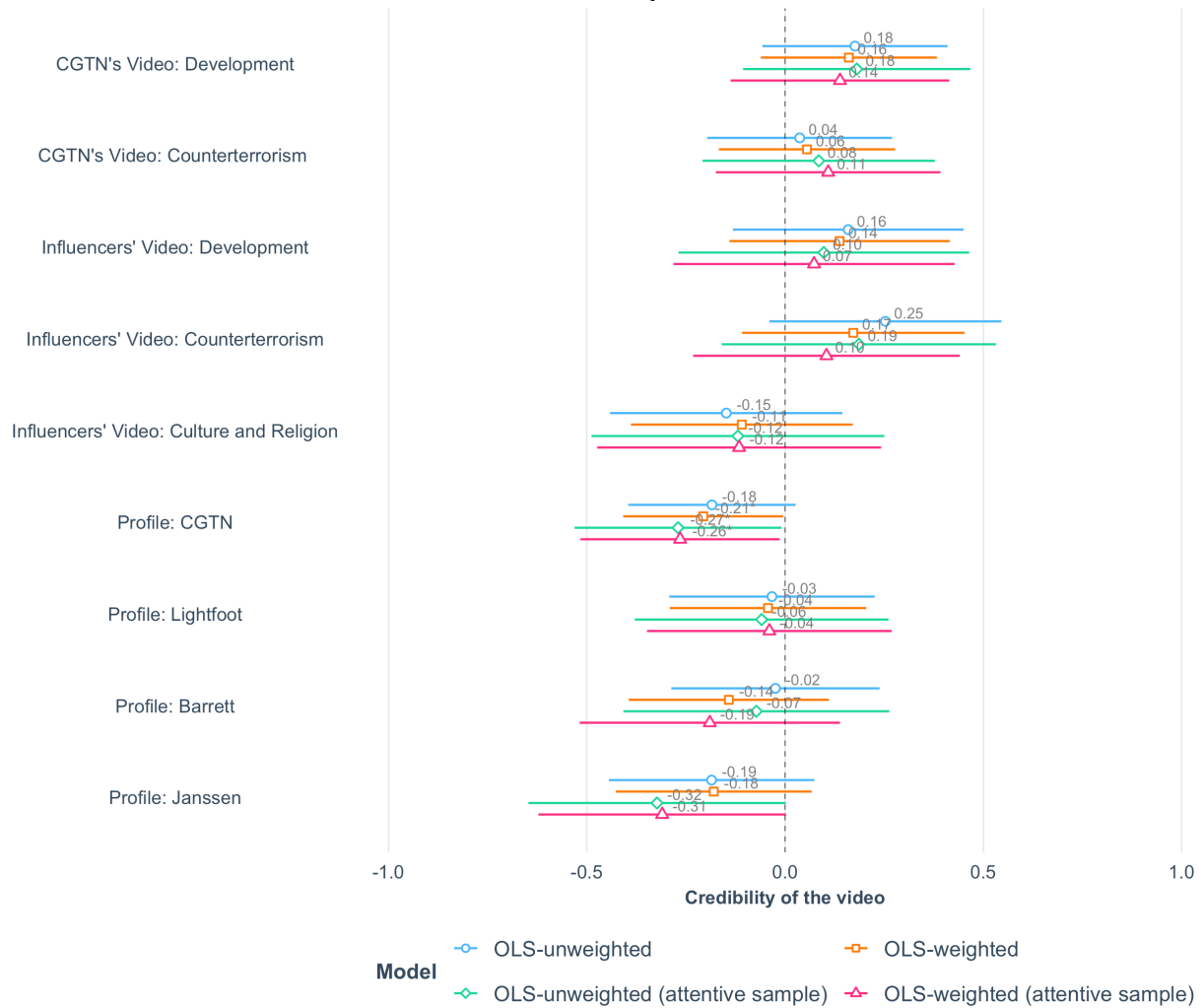


Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Figure A3 shows that all treatment videos reduced objections to the Chinese government’s actions in Xinjiang across models. Development-themed videos produced the largest attitude shifts, as development is core to regime evaluation. Counterterrorism messaging proved effective when delivered by foreign influencers, who positioned security narratives as seemingly independent observations, but ineffective when delivered by CGTN. Cultural and religious content performed relatively stronger when delivered by CGTN than influencers, as

audiences expect state media to be better informed on these matters than outsiders. Consistently, CGTN's profile exerted modest negative effects, while influencer profiles had no detectable effect. For credibility, no treatment except CGTN's profile had modest and significant negative effects, which is like that of Fig. 6

**Fig A4. Persuasive effects of Chinese foreign propaganda by individual treatment condition – credibility of the video**



Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

### *C2 Sensitivity tests of Mediation Analysis*

The robustness of mediation analysis rests on the assumption of sequential ignorability, which consists of two components: (a) treatment assignment is conditionally independent of the outcome and mediator, and (b) the mediator is independent of the outcome given the observed treatment and pre-treatment covariates. In an experimental study, while (a) is always warranted given the random assignment of treatment, (b) could be challenged when the mediator is not randomly assigned and measured after the outcome to avoid a causal effect of the former on the latter via a priming effect, which may, in turn, trigger reverse causality between the two. I address this issue by following Imai et al. (2010) to conduct a sensitivity analysis based on the correlation ( of the error terms between the two regression models used in the mediation analysis, which take the outcome and mediator variables as the dependent variables, respectively. In other words, measures the extent to which the results are affected by omitted confounders.

**Fig. A5 Mediation Sensitivity analysis**

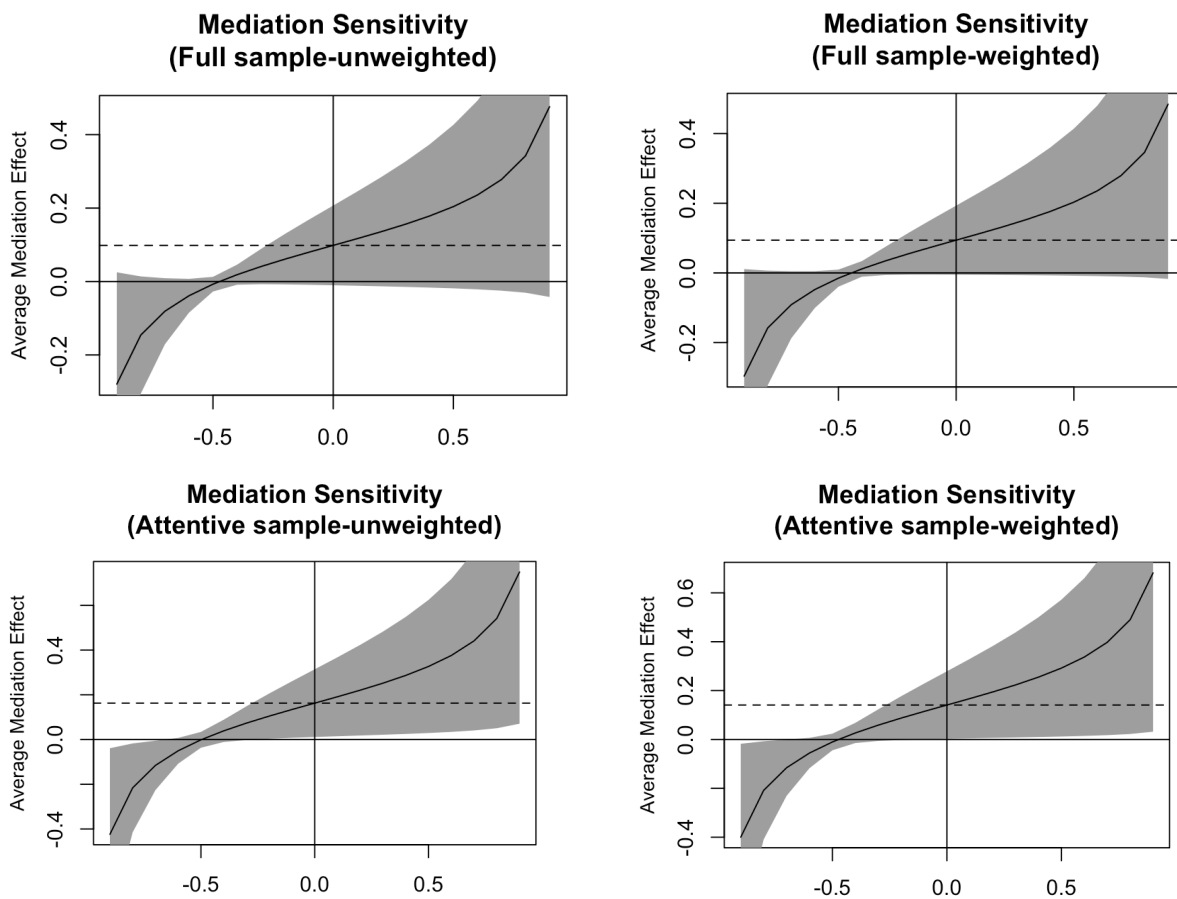


Fig. A5 presents the results, showing the ACMEs and their 95% confidence intervals as a function of  $\alpha$  ranging from -1 to 1. It shows that, for the mediation analysis on CGTN's profile, its ACME disappears when  $\alpha$  is around 0.5 and changes sign significantly when  $\alpha$  is larger than 0.5. While there is no absolute threshold for interpreting the appropriate level of  $\alpha$ , this figure is close to other experimental studies on framing and propaganda (Huang & Cruz, 2022; Imai & Yamamoto, 2013), and such a high correlation of errors in the models is unlikely given all the control variables, suggesting a moderate level of robustness.

## Appendix D: Treatment Videos' Transcripts and Snapshots

### CGTN's Video: Counterterrorism

[Hui Ao Cui, CGTN's Chinese anchor]: In 2015, like most high school graduates, Dilireba Alimu attended a college entrance exam and was admitted to Shenzhen University. Instead of starting her college life, Dilireba was influenced by her friend and flew to Turkey to attend classes, which taught her the Quran at first, but then something else.

[Dilireba Alimu, Uyghur and ex-reeducation camp inmate, in Mandarin with English subtitles]: That class always taught us heretics are taking out land and natural resources. We (Uyghur people) must fight for what belongs to us and battle for Muslims. They also told us there was a terrorist group that was hiring and providing free training for Muslims to become jihadists.

[Hui Ao Cui, CGTN's anchor]: Two years later, Dilireba returned to Kashir, where she attended her brother's funeral. It was around this time that she heard one of her classmates, Hali Del, had carried out a terrorist attack in Istanbul.

[Dilireba Alimu, Uyghur and ex-camper, in Mandarin with English subtitles]: My mom was disappointed with me. She persuaded me to study here (Kashi Vocational Education and Training Center).

[Hui Ao Cui, CGTN's anchor]: As part of China's counterterrorism and extremism measures, Xinjiang launched a vocational education and training program. Most of its attendees are influenced by terrorism and extremist thoughts.

[Mijiti Maihemoti, Uyghur, and Director of Kashi Vocational Education and Training Centre, unknown minority languages dubbed into English]: The people who study here, some of them are suspected of minor criminal offenses, but they do not have to be subject to penalties or criminal punishment. The purpose of establishing the institution is to save and educate them.

**Fig. A6 CGTN's Video: Counterterrorism - video frames every 20 seconds**



### CGTN's Video: Development

[Hui Ao Cui, CGTN's Chinese anchor]: This elementary school is home to a thousand students. 95% of them are ethnic minorities in China. Everything is free here for students: meals, tuition, and textbooks.

[Hui Ao Cui, CGTN's Chinese anchor]: Three years ago, the local government spent 25 million RMB on renovating the dormitories. That's about 3.6 million U.S. dollars. Additionally, every student receives a subsidy of 1,250 RMB a year

[Hui Ao Cui, CGTN's Chinese anchor]: Unlike in what the New York Times article says that boarding schools serve as incubators of a new generation of Uyghurs who are more loyal to the party and the nation.

[Hui Ao Cui, CGTN's Chinese anchor]: The school's party secretary, Luo Zhihong says, what it's really about is education itself and decent living conditions to children coming from impoverished backgrounds.

[Luo Zhihong, party secretary of a state-sponsored kindergarten, Mandarin dubbed into English]: What we're doing here is solving the education problem for families in poverty, so that their kids don't get left behind. Many Uyghur parents now realize the importance of empowering their kids with knowledge. They support Mandarin education because it opens up many opportunities in their kids.

**Fig. A7 CGTN's Video: Development - video frames every 15-20 seconds**



### CGTN's Video: Culture and Religion

[Guan Wang, CGTN's Chinese anchor]: Now, looking back, one might think that much of the world has been against China's re-education center in Xinjiang, right?

[Guan Wang, CGTN's Chinese anchor]: Wrong. Yes, 22 Western countries and Japan wrote a letter to the UN criticizing China's Xinjiang "camps. But 54 countries, most of them muslim-majority countries, defended China's counter-extremism efforts in Xinjiang, commending China in its development policies there, and in "providing care to Muslim citizens."

[Guan Wang, CGTN's Chinese anchor]: And they probably have a point. China has built at least 35,000 mosques, more than France's 2,300, America's 2,106, and Great Britain's 1,600. Even on a per capita basis, Chinese Muslims still triple the amount of mosques their Western peers have. That said, there are real concerns too.

[Guan Wang, CGTN's Chinese anchor]: Many reports said that their mosques have been demolished on a large scale. Is that true?

[Mamat Juma, Iman of Kashgar Id Kah Mosque, unknown minority languages dubbed into English]: It is true that some mosques have been demolished in Xinjiang. Those mosques are in disrepair. And they are in danger of collapse. Therefore, they built new mosques after demolishing them. In any village, people can pray in a mosque at any time.

**Fig. A8 CGTN's Video: Culture and Religion - video frames every 15-20 seconds**



### Influencers' Video: Counterterrorism

[Lee Barrett, English White YouTuber]: Xinjiang is a really big area, right? So, which parts of Xinjiang did you go to?

[Noel Lee, Singaporean Chinese YouTuber]: I had gone to Urumqi.

[Lee Barrett, English White YouTuber]: Urumqi is the capital, right?

[Noel Lee, Singaporean Chinese YouTuber]: I got to check that one, actually. I would think so because it's a very modernized place. And then Kashgar and Houtan.

[Lee Barrett, English White YouTuber]: But do you think generally security is tighter there than in other cities in China? Security was the tightest in Kashgar, followed by Houtan, and then most relaxed in Urumqi. Okay, that's really interesting. Well, why do you think there's that higher level of security?

[Noel Lee, Singaporean Chinese YouTuber]: Well, because Kashgar is the closest to the other countries, right? Neighboring.

[Lee Barrett, English White YouTuber]: Ah, yeah, yeah. So, yeah, that's possible because, you know, there's a lot of speculation that there are people returning who do want to cause disruption in Xinjiang. You know, personally, I think that if they have something like that as a threat that they need to deal with it. I mean, I don't know whether you're aware, but previously, two to four or five years ago, there was [sic] a number of terrorists. I have a good friend who's from Xinjiang. And she's told me a number of times that there was a lot of nervousness then. But she says ... now when she's in Xinjiang ... but when she returns home, she says she feels much more relaxed.

[Noel Lee, Singaporean Chinese YouTuber]: I think we all know about the riots back in the day. But since then till now, there's been no such thing. It's been safe.

**Fig. A9 Influencers' Video: Counterterrorism - video frames every 15-20 seconds**



### Influencers' Video: Development

[Cyrus Janssen, US White YouTuber]:

Professor Thomas Huber and Professor Helwig Schmidt-Klinze are two German scholars who have been studying and visiting China for over 50 years. After considerable research, including a private investigation on the ground in Xinjiang, the two professors' findings directly contradict many of the central allegations upon which this entire narrative is based.

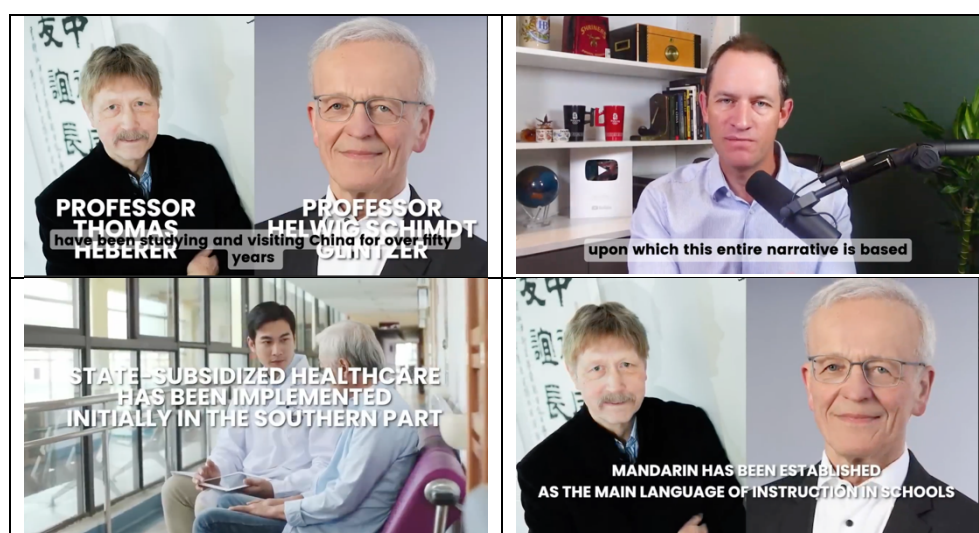
[Cyrus Janssen, US White YouTuber]: The two professors found that the central government had begun modernizations in education, medical care, and employment. This includes the

introduction of 15 years of free education for young Uyghur men and women, including kindergarten, school, and vocational training.

[Cyrus Janssen, US White YouTuber]: In addition, state-subsidized health care has been implemented initially in the southern part of Xinjiang, in addition to free education, with students receiving 200 yuan a month to support their parents.

[Cyrus Janssen, US White YouTuber]: The two China scholars also disclosed that they could not determine a general discrimination against the Uyghur language and culture, but that in Xinjiang, as in all ethnic minority areas. Mandarin has been established as the main language of instruction in schools starting from the secondary level, while the local Uyghur language is still always offered as a subject in all schools.

**Fig. A10 Influencers' Video: Development - video frames every 15-20 seconds**



### *Influencer's Video: Culture and Religion*

[Jason Lightfoot, English White YouTuber]: In Xinjiang, there is [sic] 24,000 mosques in that one single province in China. If you compare that to the entire country of the United States of America, it is 10 times more.

[Jason Lightfoot, English White YouTuber]: Now you're probably going to say, Oh well, America's not an Islamic country. Guess what? Neither is China. They even have minority scripture on the money, on the actual Chinese national currency. Wait, I'm going to show you here. Arabic, you've got Pinyin, Chinese, all different types. We've got another one here.

[Jason Lightfoot, English White YouTuber]: Is there one single piece of evidence that there's [sic] one million people in all of these camps? Any evidence? Where do you get that number from? It's insane that these huge clothing companies like H&M, Adidas, Nike, ... they believe these stories without doing one single bit of research into it themselves.

**Fig. A11 Influencers' Video: Culture and Religion - video frames every 15-20 seconds**



## Appendix E: Codebook of variables

### Pre-treatment Variables

#### 1. *Knowledge of Chinese Politics* [High = 1; Low = 0]:

- High: answer (2) in ChinaQ1 and (2) in China Q2
- Low: did not answer (2) in ChinaQ1 and (2) in China Q2

#### ChinaQ1

Which of the following cities is the capital of the People's Republic of China?

- Hong Kong (1)
- Beijing (2)
- Shanghai (3)
- Guangzhou (4)

#### ChinaQ2

Which of the following persons was NOT the former leader of the People's Republic of China?

- Mao Zedong (1)
- Chiang Kai-shek (2)
- Deng Xiaoping (3)
- Jiang Zemin (4)

#### 2. *Impression of the Chinese government* [Positive = 1; Negative = 0]

- Positive: answer (3) and (4) in China\_Impression
- Negative: answer (1) and (2) in China\_Impression

#### China\_Impression

What is your general impression of the Chinese government?

- Very negative (1)
- Somewhat negative (2)
- Somewhat positive (3)
- Very positive (4)

#### 3. *Profile Selection* [CGTN = 1, Influencer = 0,]

- Influencer: answer (2), (3), or (4) in CGTN\_Preference
- CGTN: answer (1) in CGTN\_Preference

#### CGTN\_Preference

If you were given the following two online sources to seek additional information about China, which of the two would you choose?

- CGTN (1)
- Lee Barrett (2)
- Cyrus Janssen (3)
- Jason lightfoot (4)

4. *Political Interest* [High = 1; Low = 0]
- High: average of Political\_Interest and Political\_Attention 3
  - Low: average of Political\_Interest and Political\_Attention 3

#### Political\_Interest

In general, how interested would you say you are in politics?

- Very interested (4)
- Somewhat interested (3)
- Not very interested (2)
- Not interested at all (1)

#### Political\_Attention

How much attention do you pay to news about politics on TV, radio, printed newspapers, or the Internet?

- A great deal (4)
- A lot (3)
- A little (2)
- None at all (1)

5. *Ideology* [Liberals = 1; Non-liberals = 0]

- Liberal: answered (5) or (4) in Ideology
- Non-liberals: answered (3), (2), or (1) in Ideology

#### Ideology

In general, do you think of yourself as...

- Very liberal (5)
- Liberal (4)
- Moderate, middle of the road (3)
- Conservative (2)
- Very conservative (1)

6. *Media Trust* [High = 1; Low = 0]

- High: answer (4) or (3) in Trust\_PreMedia
- Low: answer (2) or (1) in Trust\_PreMedia

#### Trust\_PreMedia

How much, if at all, do you trust the information you get from the National news media, such as ABC, NBC, CBS, etc.?

- A lot (4)
- Some (3)
- Not too much (2)
- None at all (1)

7. *Exposure to political influencers* [High = 1; Low = 0]

- High: average of the items (a) and (b) 3
- Low: average of the items (a) and (b) 3

#### Influencer

On social media platforms, there are so-called influencers who have many followers and frequently express their opinions on certain topics. Please indicate how often you engage with them in the following manner.

*Mark one answer in each row*

|                                                                  | Never (1) | Seldom (2) | Sometimes (3) | Often (4) |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|---------------|-----------|
| (a) Randomly come across content from influencers about Politics |           |            |               |           |
| (b) Actively search for content from influencers about Politics  |           |            |               |           |

#### 8. *Instructional Manipulation Check* [Pass = 1; Fail = 0]

- Pass: answered (3) in Check 1 – included in the main analysis
- Fail: answered (1), (2), (4), or (5) in Check 1 – filtered in the main analysis

#### Check1

People have different tastes in movies. For this question, however, we are not interested in your taste but to test whether you can pay attention to instruction, which is important for this research. Please select the option ROMANCE!

- Sci-Fi (1)
- Horror (2)
- Romance (3)
- War (4)
- Comedy (5)

#### Outcome Variables

##### 1. *Objection to the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang* [1 – 5]

- Follow the coding of Poutcome1 in reverse order

#### Poutcome1

In your opinion, how acceptable or unacceptable are the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang towards the Uyghurs?

- Very acceptable (5)

- Somewhat acceptable (4)
- Neither acceptable nor unacceptable (3)
- Somewhat unacceptable (2)
- Very unacceptable (1)

2. *Support for Dovish actions* [1 – 5]
  - average of the items (a) and (b) in Poutcome2
3. *Support for Hawkish actions* [1 – 5]
  - average of the items (c) and (d) in Poutcome2

Poutcome2 Would you support or oppose the following U.S. policies against the Chinese government? Mark one answer in each row

|                                                                            | Strongly support (5) | Somewhat support (4) | Neither support nor oppose (3) | Somewhat oppose (2) | Strongly oppose (1) |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| (a) Condemn it publicly                                                    |                      |                      |                                |                     |                     |
| (b) Impose economic sanctions, even with higher consumer costs in the U.S. |                      |                      |                                |                     |                     |
| (c) Threaten military force                                                |                      |                      |                                |                     |                     |
| (d) Use military force                                                     |                      |                      |                                |                     |                     |

4. *Credibility* [1 – 5]
  - Follow the coding of Credibility

#### Credibility

How much trust and confidence do you have in the video when it comes to showing the situation of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs fully, accurately, and fairly?

- A great deal (5)
- A lot (4)
- A moderate amount (3)
- A little (2)
- None (1)

### Post-treatment Variables

#### 1. *Treatment Fact Manipulation Check* [Pass = 1; Fail = 0]

- Pass: selected (4) in Check3
- Fail: did not select (4) in Check3

#### Check3

The video is mainly about ...

*Please select all options you think applicable*

- Education and Development (1)
- (Counter)terrorism and Security (2)
- Religion and Culture (3)
- Xinjiang and the Uyghurs (4)
- Hong Kong and the Hong Konger (5)
- Ukraine and the Ukrainian (6)

#### 2. *Aged above 40* [Aged above 40 = 1; Aged below 40 = 0]

- Aged above 40: answered (1), or (2) in Age
- Aged below 40: answered (3), (4), (5), or (6) in Age

#### Age

How old are you?

- 18 - 29 (1)
- 30 - 39 (2)
- 40 - 49 (3)
- 50 - 59 (4)
- 60 - 69 (5)
- 70 or older (6)

#### 3. *Male* [Male = 1; Female = 0]

- Male: answered (1) in Gender
- Female: answered (2) in Gender

#### Gender

What is your gender?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)

#### 4. *White* [White = 1; Non-white = 0]

- White: answered (1) in Race
- Non-white: answered (2), (3), (4), (5), or (6) in Race

#### Race

Which of the following do you consider to be your primary racial or ethnic group?

- White (1)
- Black or African American (2)

- Latino or Hispanic (3)
- Asian or Asian American (4)
- Native American (5)
- Other (6)

5. *College education* [College degree or above = 1, No college degree = 0 ]
- College degree or above: answered (4), or (5) in Education
  - No college degree: answered (1), (2), or (3) in Education

#### Education

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Some high school or less (1)
- High school graduate or equivalent (e.g., GED) (2)
- Some college or post high school training (3)
- 4-year college degree (4)
- Postgraduate degree (MA, MBA, MD, JD, PhD, etc.) (5)

6. *Democrats* [Democrats: 1; Non-Democrats: 0]

- Democrats:
  - answered (1) in Partisan
  - answered (3) in Partisan and (5) in Partisan\_Degree
- Non-Democrats:
  - answered: (2) in Partisan
  - answered (3) in Partisan and (6), or (7) in Partisan\_Degree

#### Partisan

Generally speaking, you think of yourself as a ...

- Democrat (1)
- Republican (2)
- Independent or Other (3)

#### Partisan\_Degree

You think of yourself as .....

Display these choices if Partisan = Democrat

- A strong Democrat (1)
- A not very strong Democrat (2)

Display these choices if Partisan = Republican

- A strong Republican (3)
- A not very strong Republican (4)

Display these choices if Partisan = Independent or Other

- Someone closer to the Democratic Party (5)
- Someone closer to the Republican Party (6)
- Someone neither closer to the Democratic Party nor the Republican Party (7)