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THE PERCEPTION OF THE TIKTOK PLATFORM AS CHINA'S SHARP POWER INSTRUMENT IN US POLITICS

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Abstract

Public diplomacy refers to the methods and tools states and non-state entities use to comprehend cultures, attitudes, and conduct; establish and oversee connections; and influence opinions and behaviors to promote their interests. Each country has its public diplomacy strategy. China, which stands out as a global power, is among the countries that attach importance to public diplomacy. China, which has been identified with the concept of sharp power, also faces accusations from US politicians. Recently, claims from the United States that China-based social media platform TikTok has been carrying out sharp power activities have come to the fore. TikTok is considered to be a major tool for China as it has over one billion active users around the world. However, there are debates as to whether China manipulates the public of other countries through this practice. Censorship and manipulation, the two main concepts of sharp power, are used in TikTok or does TikTok exist independently? This article aims to explore whether the TikTok platform, one of China's important public diplomacy tools, is perceived as a threat by American politicians. For this purpose, TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew's US Congress testimony was analyzed by content analysis method. As a result, it has been confirmed that American politicians perceive TikTok as a sharp power instrument of the Chinese Communist Party. It has been observed that concerns have been expressed about the concepts of censorship, manipulation, propaganda, control, and influence, which are the five elements of sharp power. It has been found that the TikTok platform is perceived as a propaganda device, a psychological warfare weapon, and not a public diplomacy tool or soft power element.

Keywords : Sharp power, TikTok, China's public diplomacy, China-USA relations.

JEL Classification : Z00.

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TIKTOK PLATFORMUNUN ABD SİYASETİNDE ÇİN'İN KESKİN GÜÇ UNSURU OLARAK ALGILANMASI

Öz

Kamu diplomasisi, devletlerin ve devlet dışı kuruluşların kültürleri, tutumları ve davranışları anlamak; bağlantılar kurmak ve yürütmek; çıkarlarını desteklemek için fikirleri ve davranışları etkilemek için kullandıkları yöntem ve araçları ifade eder. Her ülkenin kendine has bir kamu diplomasisi stratejisi bulunmaktadır. Küresel bir güç olarak öne çıkan Çin de kamu diplomasisine önem veren ülkeler arasındadır. Keskin güç kavramıyla anılan Çin, ABD'li siyasetçilerin de suçlamalarıyla karşılaşmaktadır. Son zamanlarda ABD'den Çin merkezli sosyal medya platformu TikTok'un keskin güç faaliyetleri yürüttüğü iddiaları gündeme gelmiştir. TikTok, dünya genelinde bir milyardan fazla aktif kullanıcısı olması sebebiyle Çin için önemli bir araç olarak kabul ediliyor. Ancak Çin'in bu uygulamayla diğer ülke halklarını manipüle edip etmediği konusunda tartışmalar bulunmaktadır. Keskin gücün iki ana kavramı olan sansür ve manipülasyon TikTok'ta kullanılıyor mu yoksa TikTok bağımsız olarak mı var oluyor? Bu makalenin amacı, Çin'in önemli kamu diplomasisi araçlarından biri olan TikTok platformunun Amerikalı politikacılar tarafından bir tehdit olarak algılanıp algılanmadığını araştırmaktır. Bu amaçla TikTok CEO'su Shou Zi Chew'in ABD Kongresi'ndeki ifadesi içerik analizi yöntemiyle analiz edilmiştir. Sonuç olarak Amerikalı politikacıların TikTok'u Çin Komünist Partisi'nin keskin güç aracı olarak algıladıkları doğrulanmıştır. Keskin gücün beş unsuru olan sansür, manipülasyon, propaganda, kontrol ve etkileme kavramlarına yönelik kaygıların dile getirildiği görülmüştür. TikTok platformunun bir kamu diplomasisi aracı veya yumuşak güç unsuru olarak değil, propaganda aracı, psikolojik savaş silahı olarak algılandığı tespit edildi.

Anahtar Kelimeler : Keskin güç, TikTok, Çin'in kamu diplomasisi, Çin-ABD ilişkileri.

JEL Sınıflandırması : Z00.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the concepts of soft power and public diplomacy can be traced back to the influential work of Joseph Nye. Nye introduced the concept of soft power in the early 1990s, emphasizing the significance of a country's capacity to attract and persuade others through its culture, values, and policies (Golan, 2013). Soft power is frequently attained through diplomatic engagement, cultural exchanges, and the promotion of a country's values and ideas. It relies on the establishment of relationships and credibility to influence the preferences and actions of others.

The concepts of soft power and public diplomacy have gained prominence in the context of globalization and the increasing interconnectedness of societies. They represent a shift in diplomatic practice from traditional state-centric approaches to a more people-centered and relationship-oriented approach (Hayden, 2017). Soft power and public diplomacy acknowledge the importance of engaging with foreign publics, understanding their viewpoints, and building trust and credibility to advance a country's interests.

On the contrary, hard power refers to the utilization of military force, economic sanctions, or other coercive measures to achieve a state's objectives. Hard power relies on the threat or application of force to compel compliance or deter aggression. It is often associated with conventional notions of power and statecraft.

The concept of sharp power emerged in response to changing dynamics in global politics and the use of non-traditional tools by states to influence and manipulate foreign societies. Sharp power pertains to the use of non-traditional and coercive means by states to manipulate and influence foreign societies, frequently employing disinformation, propaganda, economic coercion, and other tactics (Skoneczny & Cacko, 2021). Unlike soft power, which relies on attraction and persuasion, and hard power, which

involves the use of military force or economic sanctions, sharp power operates through subtler and indirect methods, often involving disinformation, propaganda, and information manipulation.

Walker (2018) defines sharp power as a strategy employed by authoritarian states, such as China and Russia, to constrain free expression and manipulate political environments in democracies. According to Walker, sharp power encompasses censorship and manipulation efforts to undermine independent institutions and exploit the asymmetry between free and unfree systems.

The concept of sharp power typically focuses on countries like China and Russia in the literature. Cole (2018) delves into the ideological foundations of the Chinese Communist Party's foreign influence operations and investigates the various agencies and mechanisms crucial to the execution of sharp power activities. He also raises the question of how democratic societies should respond once they recognize the undermining impact of sharp power on their institutions. Leonova (2019) clarifies the Western audience's perception of the attributes linked to the concept of "sharp power" as it pertains to China, Russia, and Iran. The author suggests potential strategies and solutions to address the identified issues.

Glazunova et al. (2022) consider the Russian outlet RT as a tool of sharp power and reveal that RT, in different languages, seeks to influence its target audience by exploiting the political fault lines in which the target audience finds itself. Also, Wu (2019) investigates China's dissemination of false information aimed at Hong Kong's protesters opposing the extradition bill, illustrating the workings of the digital authoritarian system that China has established for its sharp power initiatives. Nevertheless, there are differing perspectives on sharp power. Makhmud (2020) questions the assertion that sharp power is exclusive to authoritarian powers and suggests that it may be more of an ideological phenomenon aimed at shaping international foreign policy discourse.

Many studies discuss the relationship of the TikTok platform, which has become a rising phenomenon in recent years, with the Chinese government in different dimensions and evaluate it as China's soft power. TikTok is actually the international version of the Chinese mobile short video app Douyin (Kaye vd., 2020). TikTok and Douyin have many similarities in appearance and functionality, but they cater to different markets in different countries and their management is separate (Kaye et al., 2020). Officially, TikTok does not include infrastructures or policies directly related to internet governance in mainland China (Kaye et al., 2020). But the global rise of TikTok, along with other Chinese digital apps, highlights China's growing digital power, which is increasingly recognized as a replacement for soft power (Su, 2022).

The research conducted by Melin (2021) reveals that China possesses the capability to wield TikTok as a tool for political influence. This implies that they can utilize the app for purposes such as manipulation, censorship, dissemination, control, and exerting influence if they so choose. One of the findings suggests that while the association between the Chinese government and TikTok is evident, establishing a direct connection based on the fundamental elements of sharp power within the empirical data proved to be challenging.

This research, in contrast, is limited to understanding how this platform is perceived by US politicians, rather than trying to determine whether TikTok actually functions as a sharp power tool. The focus will be on China's public diplomacy strategy, its goals and methods, and how these policies are generally perceived.

China's soft power and public diplomacy strategy are based on its culture, political values, and foreign policies, as in many other countries (Wheeler, 2013). Strategically, China's development model is presented as an alternative to the West, making it an attractive actor in some countries, such as on the African continent (Wheeler, 2013). For example, Confucius Institutes, which are part of China's soft power diplomacy, aim to increase China's cultural influence abroad, but its soft power capacity is not limited to these official institutes (Wheeler, 2013).

However, TikTok's status as part of Chinese soft power is complicated by the economic and geopolitical upheavals of this platform, and in particular by the ongoing power rivalry between China and the US (Poon, 2022). Despite being a commercial company, TikTok's relationship with the Chinese

government raises concerns and ambivalence about Chinese political interference and influence in other countries (Poon, 2022). For this reason, there are discussions in different countries about the TikTok platform being considered as an influence tool by China and being viewed with suspicion.

TikTok can be considered a part of Chinese soft power due to its origins in China and its potential to strengthen China's digital power and cultural influence. However, its relationship with the Chinese government, its impact on national discourse, and its entanglements with economic and geopolitical factors complicate its role in Chinese soft power.

TikTok is also seen as a potential threat by the US due to concerns about data privacy, national security, and the influence of the Chinese administration on this platform. The US government has expressed concerns that TikTok could be used as a tool for Chinese espionage and data collection, as it is owned by the Chinese tech giant ByteDance (Myles, 2023). In recent years, the US government has taken some steps to address these concerns. In 2020, former US President Donald Trump issued resolutions to ban TikTok in the US, citing national security concerns (Myles, 2023). However, these bans were later blocked by the courts.

The Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) also played a role in assessing the potential risks posed by TikTok. In 2019, CFIUS launched an investigation into ByteDance's acquisition of social media app Musical.ly, which later merged with TikTok. The investigation focused on user data protection and concerns over the Chinese government's potential for influence (Myles, 2023). These investigations brought with it more skepticism from the US administration and the public to the TikTok platform.

The US government's concerns about TikTok are based not only on its ownership in China, but also on alleged data privacy breaches. TikTok collects a significant amount of user data, including location information and browsing history. There have been concerns that this data could be accessed by the Chinese government and thus used for targeted advertising and influence campaigns to influence US politics (Myles, 2023). Following these discussions, TikTok made an effort to address the concerns by establishing a subsidiary and data centers in the US to store user data (Kaye et al., 2020). However, discussions about TikTok's potential threat to national security and data privacy are still ongoing.

As the latest example of these concerns, TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew testified before the US Congress regarding the app's data security and privacy settings, as well as its connections with Beijing. The congressional hearing lasted for five and a half hours. The US Congress, with representatives from both the Democratic and Republican parties, had previously introduced a bill that would grant new powers to the Biden administration to ban TikTok. The US government's stance generally revolves around the idea that TikTok collects all user data, including their comments, posts, and interactions, and that the Chinese government could potentially use this data to manipulate US politics and public opinion.

The questions posed to the CEO of TikTok in the US Congress reveal that this social media platform may have been perceived by American politicians as China's sharp power instrument. The term "sharp power" is a relatively new concept in the field of international relations and political science, and there is not a widely accepted definition. Coined by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig in a 2017 report released by the National Endowment for Democracy, "sharp power" denotes the utilization of unconventional and frequently hidden methods by authoritarian governments to engineer and sway political structures and public sentiment abroad (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). In contrast to the conventional tenets of "soft power," which hinge on attraction and persuasion, sharp power encompasses strategies such as disseminating false information, launching cyber attacks, exerting economic pressure, and manipulating social media platforms to mold narratives and subvert democratic procedures. The fundamental elements of sharp power are censorship, manipulation, and propaganda. Sharp power is expressed through actions such as limiting freedom of expression, creating confusion, and disrupting the political environment in democratic systems (Walker, 2018).

In light of these discussions, this research tries to reveal whether TikTok, as a social media platform, is perceived by American politicians as a sharp power instrument of China. In this context, the

questions and answers directed by the members of the US Congress to the TikTok CEO will be evaluated and it will be analyzed whether all the features of the sharp power concept are available.

I. METHOD

Governments struggle to gauge the precise impact of their public diplomacy endeavors on foreign audiences or their role in advancing their foreign policy objectives (Pahlavi, 2007). Nevertheless, methods such as public opinion surveys or discourse analysis are used to understand the impact of public diplomacy activities on the target community. For example, the study prepared by the European Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) about the perception of the EU and of EU's policies abroad, media analysis, public opinion polls, and in-depth interviews were conducted (2015). When these methods are applied to the right sample, they provide reliable findings for understanding the effects of public diplomacy activities of a country on the public, media, and intellectuals of other countries.

In this research, in order to measure the perception of China's sharp power in US politics, Walker's approach will be adopted. According to him, sharp power is an approach to international affairs that typically involves efforts at censorship or the use of manipulation to sap the integrity of independent institutions. As described by Walker, the five fundamental elements of sharp power are censorship, manipulation, propaganda, control, and influence (Walker, 2018). This study will focus on TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew's testimony before the US Congress and the transcript of questions and answers during the session will be analyzed with the content analysis method.

Content analysis is a widely used method for analyzing perception in various research fields. It involves systematically categorizing and quantifying textual data to gain insights into individuals' -and in this example politicians'- perceptions and interpretations. In qualitative content analysis, examining the data is closely tied to the process of organizing it. The main focus is on addressing the research questions, while also paying attention to any changes or new ideas that arise during the organization of the data. The outcome of this kind of analysis is often a comprehensive understanding of the subject being studied (White & Marsh, 2006). By adopting this approach, this research tries to understand how TikTok is perceived by American politicians as an instrument of China's public diplomacy. This research seeks answers to the following questions:

- Is the TikTok platform perceived as a threat by American politicians?
- Are the five fundamental elements of sharp power included in the risk perception of American politicians?
- What are the arguments that make up the threat perception of American politicians?

II. SAMPLE

The technique employed for sampling in this study is called purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling approach. Purposive sampling in content analysis refers to deliberately choosing the texts based on particular criteria that align with the research focus. This technique, commonly used in qualitative research, ensures that the chosen sample is relevant and representative of the subject being studied. Rosmalina (2023), Ekowati et al.,(2023); Adeduntan & Omiyefa (2022); Soebagyo et al.,(2021); Palmer & Mirehie, (2022); and many other researchers explore the use of purposive sampling in various research projects. These studies employ content analysis and purposive sampling to select certain texts that match specific criteria relevant to the research topic.

Purposive sampling lets researchers specifically target texts with desired characteristics or experiences that relate to the research goals. It facilitates a deep understanding of the subject being

examined by selecting texts that offer insightful and meaningful data. For this purpose, the full transcript of the US Congress testimony of TikTok CEO will be used as a sample for content analysis (Hendrix, 2023).

TikTok CEO Chew testified before the US Congress regarding the app's data security and privacy settings, as well as its connections with Beijing. The congressional hearing lasted for five and a half hours. The US Congress, with representatives from both the Democratic and Republican parties, had previously introduced a bill that would grant new powers to the Biden administration to ban TikTok. The US government's stance generally revolves around the idea that TikTok collects all user data, including their comments, posts, and interactions, and that the Chinese government could potentially use this data to manipulate the US.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

III.I. Public Diplomacy and Soft Power

Public diplomacy is a broad concept that encompasses various fields. Countries resort to methods such as shaping perceptions, establishing a positive image, and gaining a reputation among the citizens and intellectuals of other countries to protect their foreign policy interests and maintain political power. Public diplomacy can also be summarized as the management of a country's foreign policy and the protection of national interests through direct social interaction and communication with the citizens or governments of other countries. "Public diplomacy is the process by which a government communicates with foreign publics in an attempt to understand and influence their attitudes and behavior" (Tuch, 1990).

The concept of public diplomacy, dating back to the 1960s, started to be used more frequently after the September 11 terrorist attacks (Yağmurlu, 2007). With the growing importance of influencing the international public and media agenda, public diplomacy has become an essential element of foreign policy (Yağmurlu, 2007). In today's world, where technology has advanced and communication has reached high levels of speed, several factors have started to serve public diplomacy. Tools such as media and culture have contributed to the deepening and complexification of public diplomacy, enabling it to establish a more intricate network. Governments, acting with this awareness, have employed various methods to develop their strategies and expand the scope of implementation. It would not be accurate to confine the concept of public diplomacy within the frameworks of communication and international relations alone. In this period of intensified interdisciplinary boundaries, it is more appropriate to position public diplomacy at the intersection of economics, foreign policy, public relations, and public administration (Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, 2020).

The connection between soft power and public diplomacy is intrinsic. Soft power outlines the theoretical framework for comprehending how nations can exert influence via attraction and persuasion, while public diplomacy functions as the pragmatic tool for engaging foreign publics and cultivating relationships. Public diplomacy endeavors have the potential to augment a nation's soft power by molding perceptions, fostering cultural understanding, and generating affirmative attitudes toward the nation.

According to Nye (2008), soft power is defined as the ability to affect others to obtain desired outcomes through attraction and persuasion, rather than coercion or payment. Soft power involves the use of intangible power resources, such as culture, ideology, and institutions, to shape preferences and influence the behavior of others. It is based on the idea that a country's attractiveness and the appeal of its values and ideas can generate influence and cooperation.

Soft power and public diplomacy are interconnected notions frequently intertwined within the realm of international relations. Soft power pertains to a nation's capability to sway and guide the actions of others through appeal and persuasion, avoiding coercion or force (Winkler & Nye, 2005). This

involves employing cultural, ideological, and normative assets to shape the inclinations and behaviors of other global actors (Winkler & Nye, 2005).

On the other hand, public diplomacy serves as a specific approach employed by states to engage foreign publics and establish connections, comprehension, and influence (Gilboa, 2008). It encompasses the endeavors and initiatives undertaken by governments to communicate with and interact with overseas audiences, with the objective of advocating their nation's principles, culture, policies, and interests (Rexhepi & Sahiti, 2021).

The relationship between soft power and public diplomacy is symbiotic, with public diplomacy often seen as a method to amplify a nation's soft power (Wei, 2020). Public diplomacy actions, including cultural exchanges, educational initiatives, and media outreach, are purposefully structured to shape perceptions, foster trust, and cultivate favorable sentiments toward a nation, thus bolstering its soft power (Rexhepi & Sahiti, 2021).

Public diplomacy plays a role in constructing a positive perception of a nation, elevating its allure, and constructing connections grounded in shared values and interests (Matosian, 2021). Through engagement with foreign audiences and the promotion of cultural empathy, public diplomacy contributes to a nation's soft power reservoir, heightening its sway and persuasiveness on the international stage (Wei, 2020).

It's crucial to acknowledge that public diplomacy serves purposes beyond solely advancing soft power. It also addresses other objectives, like furthering national interests, advancing foreign policy ambitions, and managing global crises (Hayden, 2017). Public diplomacy encompasses a wide array of undertakings, encompassing public addresses, media offensives, cultural events, and digital diplomacy, all geared toward engaging and influencing foreign audiences (Hayden, 2017).

III.II. Sharp Power as an Emerging Concept

Discussions surrounding the concept of sharp power center around its definition, attributes, ramifications, and instances of its deployment by various nations. A study conducted by Richter (2022) underscores the scarcity of research on sharp power and proposes a theoretical framework for its examination. The author categorizes sharp power based on three core principles: undermining the legitimacy of foreign institutions, shaping public perceptions, and exerting pressure on individual actors within the host state. In another article by Skoneczny & Cacko (2021), sharp power is defined as a strategy for impacting participants in international relations, and the authors delve into the distinctive methods by which it is deployed.

The term "sharp power" gained prominence following a report from the National Endowment for Democracy, which scrutinized the influence operations of China and Russia (Richter, 2022). This report underscored the defining attributes of sharp power, its outcomes, and the tactics employed in influence campaigns. Conversations about sharp power also encompass its interconnectedness with other forms of power. Aras (2022) observes that China's endeavors in economic and political realms have prompted the application of the concept of sharp power to describe China's actions.

Sharp power is expressed through actions such as limiting freedom of expression, creating confusion, and disrupting the political environment in democratic systems (Walker, 2018). Sharp power, which includes efforts of manipulation and censorship, exploits the asymmetry between authoritarian and free systems to limit freedom of expression and disrupt the political environment in democratic regimes. Furthermore, a state employing sharp power attempts to protect local public groups or domestic order from democratic appeals coming from outside (Walker, 2018). China supports state power over individual rights and aims to promote this ideology globally. This demonstrates the use of sharp power in its domestic context (Walker, 2018). In recent years, factors such as China's increased military expenditures, its emergence as a powerful actor in the Asia-Pacific region, the significant influence of

platforms like TikTok in the media landscape, and China's growing technological and economic investments have contributed to its association with the concept of sharp power.

There are also researchers who approach the concept of sharp power cautiously. Makhmud (2020) questions Western scholars' claim that sharp power is inherent exclusively to authoritarian powers and suggests that the concept is more of an ideological phenomenon than a scientific one. In summary, discussions about sharp power revolve around comprehending its essence, identifying its expressions, and scrutinizing its impact on global relations. The concept is still evolving, and this research aims to contribute to these discussions.

III.III. China's Public Diplomacy Strategies and Relations With USA

Studies on China's foreign policy strategy show that the country is particularly focused on developing its military and economic capacity to realize its foreign policy objectives and, in conjunction with this, aims to increase its influence regionally and globally. Dethlefsen (2004) highlights China's focus on economic development, territorial integrity, and the desire to be an influential player on the world stage. Pradt (2016) discusses China's new foreign policy characterized by money politics, military diplomacy, and assertiveness in international relations. Zheng (2015) emphasizes President Xi Jinping's grand strategy, which involves a distinctive diplomatic approach and proactive engagement in regional and international affairs.

China's foreign policy is characterized by the amalgamation of both hard and soft power components, intending to facilitate a "soft rise" for the nation (Wang, 2008). Central to China's grand strategy is the concept of a "peaceful rise/peaceful development," which endeavors to project an unthreatening image and foster global stability. This strategic approach entails a blend of economic development, military modernization, and diplomatic engagement.

Furthermore, China's foreign policy incorporates public diplomacy as a strategic instrument for advancing its interests and shaping international perceptions. China's public diplomacy endeavors underscore the significance of fostering horizontal interaction and communication to mediate its foreign policy (Huang & Wang, 2022). To this end, China has initiated numerous campaigns and programs aimed at enhancing its soft power and engaging with foreign audiences (Yang, 2020).

China's practical implementation of foreign policy reflects a flexible and pragmatic interpretation of the non-intervention principle, encompassing different forms and extents of intervention (Sørensen, 2019). China actively engages in regional and global affairs, actively participating in international matters and shaping its foreign policy discourse (Yang, 2020). It is worth noting that China's foreign policy discourse not only mirrors its domestic social realities but also contributes to the formulation and enforcement of its foreign policy objectives and actions (Chen, 2014).

China has conducted its public diplomacy activities by aiming to promote its culture and civilization. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Chinese culture became fashionable in Europe (Sak, 2014). During those centuries, China was perceived as a developed and wealthy country in the eyes of the West. China, adopting various strategies at different times, began to increase its diplomatic activities following the rise of the Communist Party to power in 1949.

In the early 1970s, China-US relations became more complex. The image that the US was trying to construct for China portrayed it as a country in decline. In response, China sought to create an image of a peaceful and developing nation to rectify this perception. Particularly after the 1990s, China's economic development would give rise to issues such as economic security in its relationship with the US (Zubair & Hussain, 2020). Alongside China's image-building efforts during that period, the economic competition of China, the Tibet issue, human rights concerns, and cyber espionage have overshadowed the diplomatic endeavors. Besides its economic development, these issues have created the perception that China is not actually peaceful, and it is widely seen by many people around the world as an aggressive and authoritarian state. To improve its image, Chinese leaders resort to soft power.

Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasizes soft power and follows a pragmatic approach to foreign policy based on public diplomacy initiatives to clearly convey China's intentions (Zubair & Hussain, 2020). The Propaganda Office established by the Chinese Communist Party is responsible for improving China's image (Akçadağ, 2012). The purpose of China's public diplomacy activities is not only to improve its image but also to create a peaceful environment that is necessary for its own economic development. China's foreign policy is built on the principle of living together in peace. This principle emphasizes five themes: respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other countries, non-aggression based on reciprocity, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, equality, and mutual benefit (Sandıklı, 2009).

China aims to become visible on the international stage, break down preconceptions, and build trust by projecting an image of a reliable, cooperative, peaceful, and developed country. (Akçadağ, 2010) As China continues to rise economically and engage in global collaborations, public diplomacy activities have become an integral part of its foreign policy. China's participation in the Six-Party Talks, aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear weapons program, its peaceful stance towards Iran's nuclear policies, and its role in formations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China-Africa Summit, and China-Latin America Summit are some of the activities it has undertaken. (Akçadağ, 2010)

At the core of China's diplomatic activities in America is the goal of countering the anti-China rhetoric in mainstream American media and ultimately establishing long-term good relations with the United States. (Zubair & Hussain, 2020) China primarily seeks to achieve these objectives through the media. China Central Television (CCTV), in particular, reaches a global audience via satellite broadcasting. Additionally, China actively utilizes the Internet as a communication tool. (Akçadağ, 2010) Through Chinese-language media organizations and broadcasting outlets in America, China endeavors to communicate its perspectives, news, and views from its own standpoint. The aim is to amplify China's narrative and promote a better understanding of its point of view. In this regard, China has strategically prioritized the use of international broadcasting and communication as a means of effective public diplomacy in order to showcase its cultural heritage. Examples of these activities include exhibitions, scholarships, language education programs for students, Confucius Institutes, satellite broadcasting, and social media campaigns (Zubair & Hussain, 2020).

China's presence in American mass media, including cable, radio, and print media, reflects its desire to establish direct communication with the American public without intermediaries. By presenting itself to the American people from its own perspective rather than through American media, China highlights its contemporary society and technological advancements. China's use of media access as part of its public diplomacy efforts aims to directly introduce itself to the American audience. (Zubair & Hussain, 2020) Finally, China adopts a proactive strategy to counter the dominance of pro-American media. This strategy underscores how China's growing economic power has shaped its strategy of engagement with the world through a deep focus on external communication. (Varrall, 2020)

From the perspective of the United States, China is seen as a significant alternative power center that challenges the long-held hegemonic power of the United States in global politics and the economy (Oğuzlu, 2023). Some of China's actions, such as the disputed position of islands in the East China Sea and its military modernization efforts, including the establishment of military bases to enhance its naval power, contribute to this perception (Dasgupta, 2021). Economically, the Belt and Road Initiative, initiated by China in 2013, offers many advantages in terms of economic, political, cultural, and technological exchanges for participating countries. This initiative has gradually attracted attention and garnered significant interest (Çatal, 2019). Consequently, the United States is concerned and utilizes negative rhetoric globally to portray China as a disruptive actor with strategic moves that pose a threat.

Examining recent developments, it is evident that China is attempting to make itself more visible against the United States. For instance, its involvement in mediating the Russia-Ukraine conflict and its desire to reconcile Saudi Arabia and Iran demonstrate its presence in key issues. This situation confirms America's concerns and is described by Oğuzlu as "China's attempts to break through the encirclement and containment efforts of the United States and increase the number of countries that can act in

harmony with it" (Oğuzlu, 2023). In conclusion, the allegations that China wields sharp power tools to influence the foreign policy decision-making processes of Western democratic countries and expands its dominance in international politics by "misusing" soft power tools reflect the concerns of the United States in the face of China's rapid rise (Bilener, 2019).

III.IV. TikTok as a Sharp Power Instrument

TikTok was launched in China in September 2016. Initially, it emerged as a platform for sharing short-form videos with lip-syncing and dance performances overlaid on pre-recorded sounds. However, it later transformed into a full-fledged video application that offers content suitable for all types of audiences and allows every user to create their own content (Iqbal, 2022). In November 2017, TikTok successfully entered the overseas market by acquiring Musical.ly for \$1 billion and merging it into its own platform. This move allowed China to add 80 million U.S. users to its platform. TikTok became the most popular app in 2019 and 2020, perceived as a real competitor to Facebook's dominance over Western social networks (Iqbal, 2022).

TikTok has many features that differentiate it from other platforms. Firstly, one possible reason for TikTok's immense user base is the increased desire for content creation during the pandemic period. The urge to create something may have led to billions of downloads and subsequent popularity of the application. Secondly, users can easily create and share content with minimal effort due to the app's simple interface. Additionally, the focus span required for short videos is quite low, which is another reason why users prefer it. TikTok's algorithm is highly personalized and the "For You" page curates videos based on users' watched videos, liked content, followed accounts, and saved posts, creating a personalized feed. This allows users to constantly discover content that aligns with their interests. Considering all these factors, it seems quite reasonable that TikTok has gained such popularity.

Despite its negative image, China's entry into the global social media race for the first time and its ability to compete with the US in this regard have been achieved by TikTok. This has been met with different reactions from various governments. TikTok, with its large user base, holds significant power. In other words, we can perceive it as a platform that can quickly bring people together and mobilize them on a particular issue.

There are also studies that do not explicitly describe the TikTok platform as sharp power but focus on its negative political effects on users. These discussions mainly revolve around TikTok's popularity, its political consequences, and the challenges it encounters. Vijay & Gekker (2021) point out TikTok's rise as a political player in India, expressing concerns about divisive content, hate speech, and how the platform is held accountable. Miao et al. (2021) discuss TikTok's transformation from an ambitious digital platform to a security concern tied to the state, underlining the significance of the political aspect in understanding TikTok's global spread. Lin (2020) explores TikTok's journey from China to its presence in distinct global platform ecosystems, representing the influence of Chinese platform principles on the world stage. Another report titled "China's 'new media' create new markets and new risks" (2020) highlights concerns in the United States that TikTok's data policies and censorship pose a threat to national security. These researches offer clues that TikTok can be qualified as a sharp power.

IV. FINDINGS

IV.I. Perception of Censorship

Analyzing the US Congressional testimony reveals that representatives are concerned that TikTok is censoring some of the content which is generated by users. Republican Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers stated that China aims for global amnesia regarding its censorship of an American teenager who exposed the Chinese Communist Party's acts of genocide and mistreatment against Uighur Muslims (Hendrix, 2023). Another Republican Congressman Bill Johnson referring to "the Citizen Lab

report” claims that highly precise censorship settings used in Douyin exist within TikTok as well, albeit deactivated. “Thus, even though Citizen Lab may have hesitated to state the evident conclusion” Johnson argues “that TikTok's source code contains numerous backdoors and censorship mechanisms linked to the Chinese Communist Party.”(Hendrix, 2023) These statements also include sharp power's element of control, in that he claims that censorship is practiced in line with the interests of the Chinese Communist Party. Bill Johnson reveals his perception of the threat of censorship, and with a stern warning that he does not believe the TikTok CEO's answers:

“Why are you allowing TikTok to continue to have the capacity for censorship? And yet you claim here that you don't. Let me remind you of something. Do you realize that making faults and misleading statements to Congress is a federal crime?”. (Hendrix, 2023)

Referring to another research published by the National Cybersecurity Center in Lithuania, Congressman Neal Dunn claims that phones marketed to Europeans came with a built-in list of 449 words and expressions that would be subject to automatic censorship on the device. Among the censored phrases were "Voice of America" and "Democratic movement," among others (Hendrix, 2023). Rep. Randy Weber argues that numerous reports, hearings, and leaked internal documents have provided evidence that TikTok has consistently engaged in the censorship or reduction of visibility for content that critiques the policies of the Chinese Communist Party, both within the United States and internationally (Hendrix, 2023).

Considering the allegations made by American politicians to the TikTok CEO, it is seen that the perception that the censorship mechanism is directly controlled by the Chinese Communist Party and that technological facilities are used to implement this mechanism is dominant. Representatives also find Chew's answers unsatisfactory and consider him misleading.

IV.II. Perception of Manipulation

American politicians have a perception that the TikTok platform collects and processes the data of American citizens in line with China's strategic goals and uses them to manipulate American public opinion. Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers claims that TikTok conducts widespread surveillance on all users, allowing the Chinese Communist Party to exploit this as a means to influence the entirety of America. She lacks confidence that TikTok will genuinely adopt American ideals, “which encompass freedom, human rights, and innovation”. According to her TikTok has consistently opted for increased control, surveillance, and manipulation (Hendrix, 2023). She also states that “TikTok is a weapon by the Chinese Communist Party to spy on you, manipulate what you see, and exploit for future generations” (Hendrix, 2023).

When talking about manipulation, American politicians emphasize that they are aware that this practice is implemented by many social media platforms. But what is different for TikTok is that they are worried that this manipulation will happen in line with the goals of the Chinese Communist Party. Rep. Jay Obernolte argues that technology giants employ robust AI tools to analyze user data and generate remarkably precise forecasts of human actions, subsequently aiming to influence and control those behaviors (Hendrix, 2023). Similarly, Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester argues that platforms like TikTok possess the capability to readily influence and weaken user independence through addictive functionalities, intrusive data-gathering methods, and the spread of false and misleading information. (Hendrix, 2023).

What American politicians understand from the concept of manipulation is more about highlighting some content and directing users in this way. This is why Rep. John Curtis asks Chew if he can confirm that no TikTok employees manually manipulated Chew's Washington visit video to get more views (Hendrix, 2023). The questions and answers about manipulation show that American politicians generally think that social media platforms manipulate by analyzing user data and their control of algorithms. Therefore, they believe that the TikTok platform has the potential to influence American youth and voters.

IV.III. Perception of Propaganda

There is a lot of evidence that American politicians have a perception that TikTok is a propaganda tool of the Chinese Communist Party. Rep. Frank Pallone claims that the Chinese communist government might mandate TikTok to compromise device security, gain unauthorized access to American user data, spread pro-communist propaganda, and challenge American interests. There's also the potential for the Chinese Communist government to initiate disinformation campaigns via TikTok, which is already plagued with false information, illegal activities, and hate speech (Hendrix, 2023).

Representative Bob Latta points out that Chew, in a video, urged American users to unite and back TikTok, opposing any potential move by the US government to prohibit TikTok within the United States. Latta considers this move as a type of propaganda that the Chinese Communist Party would like to mobilize other countries' citizens (Hendrix, 2023). Rep. Marc Veasey argues that TikTok serves as an immensely influential and far-reaching propaganda tool, enabling the Chinese Communist Party to exploit the platform for shaping public sentiment and compromising the integrity of our democratic elections (Hendrix, 2023). Rep. Randy Weber claims that there are reports which show that TikTok accounts operated by media entities were used as a propaganda tool by the Chinese Communist Party to disseminate divisive content leading up to the recent midterm election. Rep. Weber highlights his concerns more clearly with the following statements.

“TikTok is indoctrinating our children with divisive woke and pro-CCP propaganda, all while threatening our national security with Chinese spyware.” (Hendrix, 2023).

Considering these and similar statements during the session, it can be stated that American politicians have the perception that the TikTok platform is working as a propaganda device of the Chinese Communist Party and that it poses a serious threat to American national security.

IV.IV. Perception of Control

American politicians have a strong perception that the TikTok platform functions under the control of the Chinese government. Accordingly, the platform is considered to have control over the content produced by its users. Highlighting or downvoting user-generated content is planned in line with the strategic goals of the Chinese government.

Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers claims that approximately 150 million Americans could potentially have their sensitive information gathered by the CCP, giving China the power to influence the perceptions and beliefs of American citizens. TikTok has consistently been caught contradicting its claim of being independent from the CCP through ByteDance. Presently, Chinese laws mandate companies like ByteDance to conduct surveillance on behalf of the CCP. Consequently, any Chinese company is obligated to provide the CCP with access and control capabilities as an inherent aspect of their design. Rep. Frank Pallone argues that TikTok is controlled by Beijing communists (Hendrix, 2023). Rep. Kathy Castor states that the issue of control is a much broader issue than TikTok in China: “There are other malign actors across the world who gather data to use it as an element of social control and influence and worse.” (Hendrix, 2023).

When the comments of American politicians are analyzed, it is seen that while evaluating the TikTok platform in the context of the concept of control, it is widely perceived that China has control over the features of the platform and the policies it follows, thus having the opportunity to have an influence on American citizens.

IV.V. Perception of Influence

American politicians have the perception that the TikTok platform exerts influence on American citizens by controlling and manipulating the content it offers to its users. While Rep. Kathy Castor claims social media platforms generally influence people's behavior, Rep. Frank Pallone specifically mentions TikTok as an instrument of the "Beijing Communist government" to control and influence users (Hendrix, 2023). So the concepts of control and influence are usually referred together. Rep. Earl "Buddy" Carter goes one step further and states that The Chinese Communist Party is employing psychological tactics on TikTok as a deliberate form of warfare to manipulate children's perspectives and opinions (Hendrix, 2023). These evaluations show that, as a social media platform, they tend to evaluate TikTok as an influence operation tool, a hard power element, rather than a soft power tool. Rep. Randy Weber expressed his concerns about the Chinese Communist Party has organized or employed TikTok to influence users using algorithms, content creation funded by the state, or in any other possible manner.

In the face of all these accusations, TikTok CEO Chew has tried to prove that the platform is independent of the influence and control of the Chinese government or the Chinese communist party. However, most of Chew's answers were found unsatisfactory by American politicians. Ultimately, all these questions and the dialogue with the TikTok CEO provided useful information to reveal the sharp power perception of American politicians.

CONCLUSION

The USA ranks first in the world with 116 million TikTok users. This popular platform, where users interact with each other by producing content, also functions as a medium where large-scale data about users are produced. Discussions about TikTok, a Chinese-origin platform, have increased in recent years and have led to the emergence of a serious threat perception in the eyes of American politicians. As a result of this perception, TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew testified before the US Congress. In this session, representatives from both the Republican party and the Democratic party revealed their perceptions that the TikTok platform functions as a sharp power instrument by their questions to Chew.

As a result of this research, it has been confirmed that American politicians perceive TikTok as a sharp power instrument of the Chinese government. It has been observed that concerns have been expressed about the concepts of censorship, manipulation, propaganda, control, and influence, which are the five elements of sharp power. It has been found that the TikTok platform is perceived as a propaganda device, a psychological warfare weapon, and not a public diplomacy tool or soft power element.

Censorship, manipulation, propaganda, control, and influence, which are considered characteristics of sharp power, are interrelated concepts and can often overlap. Therefore, we cannot delineate sharp boundaries between these concepts. In fact, the concept of sharp power, approached holistically, focuses on how a country manipulates its soft power tools and attempts to steer public opinion of adversaries by restricting their access to accurate information through oppressive methods. To manipulate the target community in alignment with strategic objectives, data on this community must first be collected and processed, which is directly related to the concepts of surveillance and control. The analysis reveals that American politicians also harbor skepticism toward the TikTok platform, primarily due to their perception of threats against the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party. While they may not explicitly define it as such, it can be inferred that they regard the TikTok platform as a potential national security risk.

When evaluating the comments made by American politicians in a broad sense, it becomes evident that their perceptions of the TikTok platform sometimes draw from scientific studies or government reports, while at other times, they rely on hearsay, thereby leading to biased opinions. As

highlighted in the analysis, a senator defines American values as "freedom, human rights, and innovation" and portrays the Chinese government as a threat to these values. Consequently, they seek to substantiate their criticisms by initially positioning the Chinese government and the TikTok platform, which they associate with it, in a negative light. In essence, while it is generally deemed commonplace for social media platforms to engage in surveillance, control, and manipulation of their users, the TikTok platform's execution of these functions is perceived as a threat due to its connection with China.

Finally it has been observed that the threat perception of American politicians is very strong and it has been discovered that it does not tend to change in the face of the answers given by Chew. American politicians have the perception that especially children and young people are under the influence. In addition, it is thought that the Chinese government can intervene in the internal affairs of the United States, disrupt the democratic system, and interfere in the elections by using the data of American users. Although it is emphasized that all social media platforms have similar surveillance and control mechanisms, attention is drawn to the possibility of "foreign intervention", especially by emphasizing that TikTok is under the control of the Chinese Communist Party. Therefore, American politicians express their concerns because of the Chinese origin of TikTok, rather than the strong hegemony of social media companies on platforms. As a result, when the perceptions of American politicians are evaluated, the influence activities of Western-based social media companies in other countries are ignored and the activities of the TikTok platform in the USA are highlighted. It has been seen that they prioritize the US hegemony in the global sense and have the idea that strategic measures should be taken against TikTok.

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