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Incompatible Interpretive Worlds: TikTok, Douyin, and Geopolitical Narratives of the Russia–Ukraine War

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Abstract

This study compares the ways TikTok and its mainland Chinese counterpart, Douyin, have mediated the Russia–Ukraine war, generating divergent geopolitical narratives. It examines the political role of platform dissemination in contemporary warfare by analysing how platform logics and governance contexts shape public sense-making of conflict. On TikTok, war narratives emerge through creator-led circulation, cross-border viewing, translation, and comment-mediated interpretation, producing forms of transnational witnessing that are affective, participatory, and contested. In contrast, Douyin operates within the Chinese domestic discourse system, where official emphasis on neutrality, stability, and diplomatic restraint shapes its dominant interpretive framework. In the corpus, footage of frontline violence appears less consistently prominent, while explanatory narratives attributing the war to NATO expansion or Western provocation appear frequently in high-visibility content. This distribution should not be interpreted as an explicit pro-Russian diplomatic stance. Rather, it reflects the importance of sovereignty-oriented reasoning and nationalist sentiment in Chinese political communication. Drawing on comparative qualitative content analysis of high-engagement, platform-curated war-related videos retrieved through hashtag-based sampling on TikTok and Douyin, this study argues that the two applications produce incompatible interpretive worlds: one organised around transnational humanitarian witnessing and contested moral interpretation, and the other around institutionally anchored geopolitical explanation, sovereignty-oriented reasoning, and participatory nationalist uptake.

Keywords

Douyin; geopolitical narratives; platform governance; Russia–Ukraine war; TikTok

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1. Introduction

Digital platforms have become central infrastructures through which contemporary wars are witnessed, narrated, and emotionally processed. In conflict settings, platforms do not simply relay information; they shape how violence becomes visible, interpretable, and shareable. Short-video environments are consequential because they combine rapid circulation, audiovisual immediacy, and vernacular forms of performance that translate disruption and trauma into legible clips. Research on TikTok in wartime contexts shows how creators use platform-native genres to produce affective and participatory modes of witnessing (Divon & Eriksson Krutrök, 2024; Heřmanová et al., 2025). Platformed war communication is therefore not only about facts or propaganda; it is also about the narrative and emotional cues through which audiences make sense of conflict (Marino, 2024).

The Russia–Ukraine war is a revealing case of this transformation. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, TikTok has become a major arena for war-related storytelling where refugees, civilians, media actors, and other users narrate lived experience and circulate imagery to transnational audiences. Marino (2024) shows how refugee storytelling on TikTok developed into a repertoire of visibility strategies shaped by platform affordances and audience attention, while large-scale data work suggests that the invasion accelerated TikTok's entry into geopolitical communication (Steel et al., 2023). Yet most platform-focused research on the war, produced in English, remains centred on Western-facing environments, leaving cross-governance comparisons underdeveloped.

This gap matters because platforms are not neutral intermediaries. They function as socio-technical infrastructures that organise public life through datafication and selection: the ordering and surfacing of content that governs attention and visibility (Poell et al., 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018). This is important for TikTok-style short-video environments, where exposure is centred on algorithmic recommendations rather than follower networks. Visibility is therefore a central analytic object: platform affordances shape what kinds of expression are possible (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), distribution systems shape what becomes repeatedly salient (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022), and reduction or downranking can limit circulation without requiring outright deletion (Gillespie, 2022). These dynamics also shape epistemic cues by influencing what kinds of war evidence appear credible, repeatable, and widely encountered.

The comparison between TikTok and Douyin is valuable because both applications share appearance, functionality, and platform affordances while operating in different markets and under different governance forces. Kaye et al. (2021) conceptualised this phenomenon as "parallel platformization." Therefore, their separation into an international-facing product and a mainland China-facing product makes it possible to examine how a shared platform family becomes differently configured across governance environments. J. Liu and Yang's (2022) "dual-track framework" similarly explains how platform companies separate content and technology governance when adapting to conflicting regulatory contexts. Douyin scholarship suggests that visibility is shaped through governance strategies that encourage politically legible communication forms, including "positive energy" and playful patriotism (Chen et al., 2021), and creator-facing practices that support self-regulation and participatory surveillance (Ye et al., 2025). Despite surface similarities, TikTok and Douyin may therefore produce different architectures of visibility, shaping which interpretations of the same war become dominant.

Against this backdrop, this article compares high-visibility Russia–Ukraine war content on TikTok and Douyin to examine how platform conditions shape narrative dominance and geopolitical meaning. Empirically, the study draws on a comparative qualitative content analysis of 80 high-visibility videos from TikTok and 80 from Douyin, collected through matched hashtag searches and platform-based visibility criteria. Analytically, it focuses on: (a) dominant narratives, interpretive frames, and emotional tones; (b) observable visibility cues and participatory practices, including remixing, translation, and commenting; and (c) how visible narratives assemble into broader strategic geopolitical storylines. The analysis links platform visibility and framing to strategic narratives and interpretive worlds. The study asks:

> RQ1: What dominant war narratives, interpretive frames, and emotional tones characterise high-visibility Russia–Ukraine content on TikTok compared with Douyin?
>
> RQ2: How do TikTok and Douyin make certain war narratives more visible, and what observable cues and participatory practices support that visibility?
>
> RQ3: How do the most visible narratives on each platform form distinct strategic geopolitical storylines, and how do these storylines shape different interpretive worlds of the same war?

Conceptually, the article treats these geopolitical storylines as strategic narratives: structured accounts that organise causality, role assignment, and legitimacy in ways that shape how publics understand international politics (Miskimmon et al., 2012). While strategic narratives are often discussed as elite projects, recent work shows that crises and social media environments can generate hybrid narrative forms shaped by affective and connective dynamics (Newsom et al., 2022; Zakharchenko, 2025). Building on these insights, this article argues that TikTok and Douyin produce different interpretive worlds of the Russia–Ukraine war because platform-specific visibility conditions shape which frames become prominent, how they accumulate into strategic narratives, and what geopolitical meanings they support.

2. Analytical Framework: Framing, Platform Visibility, and Strategic Narratives

The Russia–Ukraine war has been referred to as the "first TikTok war" (Bösch & Divon, 2024; Stokel-Walker, 2022), reflecting the platform's rapid emergence as a significant real-time information battlefield.

2.1. Framing War Narratives on Short-Video Platforms

Framing theory provides an analytical vocabulary for examining how creators construct interpretations of war through the repeated selection of actors, emotions, causal explanations, and moral implications. It explains how the media selects and emphasizes certain aspects of reality to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral evaluations, and suggest possible responses (Entman, 1993). Existing research suggests that war-related content on TikTok is usually presented in a way that combines the immediacy of documentary-style footage with the platform's unique emotional narrative style. Content creators often intentionally create an emotionally resonant effect by showcasing their own emotional states to elicit appropriate emotional responses (Divon & Eriksson Krutrök, 2024; Primig et al., 2023). Similarly, Marino (2024) notes that TikTok's live-streaming feature enables Ukrainian refugees to communicate with a global audience in a familiar, user-friendly, and viral manner, offering a first-hand perspective of the conflict's brutality.

By contrast, Douyin operates within a different platform ecosystem. Although TikTok and Douyin have the same corporate origin and a similar infrastructure for short videos, Douyin is embedded in China's domestic system of platform governance. Douyin has partnered with numerous government agencies to host various promotional activities, attracting many government departments to join the platform (L. Liu & Ma, 2019). Short video platforms like Douyin are increasingly leveraging traditional media resources to spread positive energy, adopting an approach that combines grassroots and mainstream appeal and subtly influences users' values (Wang & Li, 2020). In terms of platform governance, Zhang and Cao (2022) argue that the positive construction of political communication and public opinion spaces through short videos cannot be realised without official media guidance on the expression of public political opinion. In this context, framing is produced not only by individual users or creators but also by platform governance, official accounts, moderation practices, and visibility allocation. In this study, framing therefore connects micro-level video analysis to broader geopolitical meaning: repeated frames become analytically visible through narrative category, emotional tone, violence visibility, causality attribution, role assignment, and legitimacy cues.

2.2. Platform Visibility and Participatory Amplification

While existing research has examined war narratives and emotional storytelling, less attention has been paid to how certain narratives become more visible than others within platform environments. Platform studies research suggests that social media visibility is structured through algorithmic regimes that encourage continuous participation and engagement (Jontes et al., 2023), while creators adapt their practices and interaction strategies in response to platform visibility logics (Cotter, 2019).

On TikTok, the recommendation environment makes engagement and participatory circulation central to visibility, although the ranking logic remains proprietary. Zulli and Zulli (2022) argue that TikTok's platform logic encourages imitation, replication, and circulation, enabling content to spread through participatory networks. A study by Divon and Eriksson Krutrök (2024) indicates that war-related influencers use platform-specific language—such as memes, humour, sound effects, and participatory formats—to encourage content sharing and audience engagement. At the same time, the content that users encounter and engage with on TikTok is influenced by the algorithmic "For You" feed (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Consequently, TikTok visibility can be understood as emerging from the interplay between platform-curated recommendations, creator adaptation, and user engagement practices. In the case of Douyin, visibility is shaped by moderation systems and governance structures that prioritise socially and politically acceptable forms of expression (Chen et al., 2021). However, despite growing research on algorithms, participation, and platform governance, there remains limited comparative analysis of how TikTok and Douyin differently amplify war-related narratives through platform-specific visibility mechanisms. This matters because visibility is the mechanism through which some frames become repeatedly encounterable and can therefore accumulate into broader strategic narratives.

2.3. Strategic Narratives and Interpretive Worlds

Beyond the level of individual videos, repeated and highly visible frames may accumulate into broader strategic narratives about legitimacy, victimhood, threat, and international order.

From this perspective, strategic narrative theory provides a framework for analysing how political actors construct and circulate narratives intended to shape public understandings of international politics

(Miskimmon et al., 2014). Strategic narratives do not simply describe events. They organize events into coherent explanations about who is responsible, whose suffering matters, and how conflicts should be morally understood. Applied to TikTok and Douyin, this perspective suggests that platform-specific frames may accumulate into distinct "interpretive worlds" of the same war. Recent studies of conflict communication on digital platforms further support this approach. Tang et al. (2026), in their comparison of China Global Television Network Europe and Euronews coverage of the Israel–Hamas conflict on TikTok, show that international media actors adopt divergent, platform-aware discursive strategies that reflect their geopolitical affiliations and institutional mandates. Similarly, Zakharchenko (2025) argues that wartime narratives on social media may emerge not only through elite communication but also through affective publics and emotionally connected online users. He describes the pro-Russian social media narrative as largely reflecting Russia's official strategic narrative.

However, existing studies remain limited in two respects. First, much research on platformed war communication focuses on Western-facing or international platform environments. Second, few studies systematically compare TikTok and Douyin as parallel short-video infrastructures that mediate the same conflict under different governance conditions. This article addresses this gap by examining how high-visibility Russia–Ukraine war content on the two platforms forms distinct narrative repertoires, visibility patterns, and strategic geopolitical storylines.

3. Data and Methods

3.1. Research Design and Data Collection

This study uses a comparative case design to examine how two structurally similar short-video platforms—TikTok as international-facing and Douyin as mainland China-facing—mediate the Russia–Ukraine war under different governance environments. Rather than reconstructing proprietary algorithms, it compares observable visibility outcomes: which war narratives become prominent, which multimodal features accompany prominence, and how they assemble into geopolitical storylines.

The dataset comprises 80 high-visibility posts from TikTok and 80 from Douyin, retrieved through hashtag-based sampling and screened for relevance to the Russia–Ukraine war. Data were collected during the following windows: Douyin main corpus, 23 March–21 April 2026; Douyin comment subsample, 8 April 2026–28 April 2026; TikTok main corpus, 13 March–29 April 2026; and TikTok comment subsample, 13 March 2026–17 April 2026. Because these windows were not identical, the comparison is treated as a near-contemporaneous rather than perfectly synchronous snapshot. Posting dates were not restricted: Older posts were included if they remained visible on high-visibility surfaces during collection.

Here, "high-visibility" means posts appearing near the top of each platform's default ranked hashtag results, not posts meeting a fixed engagement threshold. Because comparable play/view counts were not consistently visible on Douyin, visibility was operationalised through ranked position, retrieval hashtag, and visible engagement indicators. Duplicates were removed, and sampling continued until 80 unique relevant posts were collected from each platform. Data were collected through the mobile apps on Android phones, with the interface language set to English for TikTok and Chinese for Douyin.

To reduce personalisation effects, the researchers did not like, comment, or follow accounts during sampling. The accounts were not newly created but had no prior Russia–Ukraine war engagement history. Visibility is therefore treated as a capture-time snapshot that may still reflect personalisation and regional discovery dynamics.

3.2. Sampling, Metadata, and Comment Subsample

Videos were located through platform-specific war-related hashtags used as retrieval tools rather than inclusion criteria. Hashtags were identified iteratively: broad war-related terms were used first, followed by recurring hashtags found in relevant posts. This reflected each platform's content vocabulary rather than imposing identical search terms. Examples included #ukraine, #ukrainewar, #kyiv, #zelensky, #putin, #frontline, #ukrainerefugee, and #russiainvasion on TikTok, and #俄乌冲突 (Russia–Ukraine Conflict), #俄乌战争 (Russia–Ukraine War), #俄乌 (Russia–Ukraine), #乌克兰 (Ukraine), #俄罗斯 (Russia), #普京 (Putin), #泽连斯基 (Zelensky), and #俄乌新闻 (Russia–Ukraine News) on Douyin. Candidates were drawn from each platform's default ranked hashtag results until 80 unique relevant posts were retained per platform, with no fixed quota per hashtag. The retrieval hashtag, collection timestamp, and rank interval were recorded for each post.

A post was included if it made a substantive reference to the Russia–Ukraine war, including war impacts, frontline or aftermath imagery, commentary on causality or legitimacy, humanitarian consequences, diplomacy, or leader speeches/meetings explicitly connected to the war. Posts were excluded if war-related hashtags were used for unrelated content, such as other conflicts, entertainment, dance videos, trend hijacking, or unrelated political commentary. Relevance was determined through manual review of each post's caption, spoken content, subtitles, on-screen text, and visual material against these inclusion and exclusion criteria.

For each post, the dataset records metadata, including account type, posting date, capture timestamp, caption, hashtags, duration, primary language, participatory format markers, and translation indicators. Publicly visible engagement metrics were recorded where available. On TikTok, this included likes, comment counts, and play/view counts where displayed; on Douyin, likes and comment counts were recorded, as comparable play/view counts were not consistently visible. Share/repost indicators were recorded where visible but were not treated as core comparable metrics because platform displays and metric meanings are not fully equivalent.

A purposive comment subsample was collected to analyse comment-mediated uptake. The study does not infer audience demographics such as age or gender, which cannot be reliably determined from publicly visible platform data. Instead, audience orientation is examined through observable address and uptake, including language, captions, hashtags, translation/subtitling, account type, and selected top comments. For each platform, 20 posts were selected by comment volume and coverage of key narrative types. The top three comments under each post's default ordering were recorded, along with visible comment-like counts where available. Commenter usernames were not retained.

3.3. Coding and Analysis

Following a qualitative content analysis approach, coding focused on observable multimodal features (Schreier, 2012). Both authors are proficient in Chinese and English and familiar with Chinese and Anglophone cultural

and digital-media contexts. Interpretations of culturally specific expressions considered linguistic, audiovisual, and platform-specific contexts. The two authors used a shared codebook: one coded the full TikTok corpus and the other coded the full Douyin corpus. To calibrate category use, both authors independently double-coded 10 TikTok posts and 10 Douyin posts drawn from posts meeting the study's inclusion criteria, without further stratification. Disagreements were resolved through refinement of code definitions and decision rules, which were then applied to the remaining posts.

To address RQ1, each post was coded for dominant narrative frame, emotional tone, and violence visibility. Narrative frames included witnessing/aftermath, explanatory geopolitics, humanitarian solidarity, military/frontline, diplomacy/solution, and propaganda/credibility dispute. Emotional tones included grief, outrage, fear/anxiety, irony/satire, defiance/hope, and neutral/informational tone. Violence visibility was coded as none, indirect, or explicit: none referred to posts without visible violence; indirect referred to aftermath or mediated signs such as damage, smoke, military vehicles, distant explosions, mourning, or displacement; and explicit referred to visible injury, death, bodies, close-range combat, or graphic harm. To address RQ2, posts were coded for observable platform-logic indicators, including hashtag surface, rank interval, account type, engagement display, translation/subtitling, remix markers, and comment uptake in the subsample. To address RQ3, recurring geopolitical storylines were identified by coding causality attributions, role assignments, legitimacy cues, and sovereignty/anti-hegemony positioning. Categories labelled as no explicit causal attribution, no clear role assignment, or no explicit legitimacy cue refer to posts where the relevant geopolitical meaning was not directly stated; mixed role assignment refers to posts that combine more than one role position.

Translation was coded as present only when a post contained creator- or uploader-added subtitles or on-screen text in a language different from the primary spoken or written language of the source content. On TikTok, this included English subtitles added to Russian, Ukrainian, or other non-English speech. On Douyin, foreign-language clips accompanied by Chinese subtitles were coded as translation present because the subtitles mediated the content for domestic audiences. Monolingual content without added cross-language subtitles was coded as translation absent. This coding excludes interface-level auto-translation tools.

3.4. Analytic Scope, Platform Logic, and Limitations

This study does not claim direct access to TikTok's or Douyin's internal recommendation or moderation rules. Platform logic is analysed through observable visibility conditions, including ranked hashtag surfaces, account type, engagement displays, translation/subtitling, remix markers, comment uptake, and broader moderation/governance context. These indicators show what became visible during collection but not internal algorithmic causality. Hashtag-based sampling may miss war-related videos circulating through recommendation feeds without explicit hashtags, and high-visibility ranked results are not representative of all Russia–Ukraine war content. Capture-time visibility may also be affected by ranking changes, language setting, device history, account history, location, and personalisation. Engagement metrics and comment data are treated as contextual rather than directly equivalent cross-platform measures; the comment subsample indicates visible participatory uptake rather than general audience opinion. Because the collection windows were not identical, the comparison is treated as near-contemporaneous rather than perfectly synchronous.

4. Findings

4.1. Visibility Ecology of the Corpus

Figure 1 shows that TikTok and Douyin surface the Russia–Ukraine war through markedly different speaker ecologies.

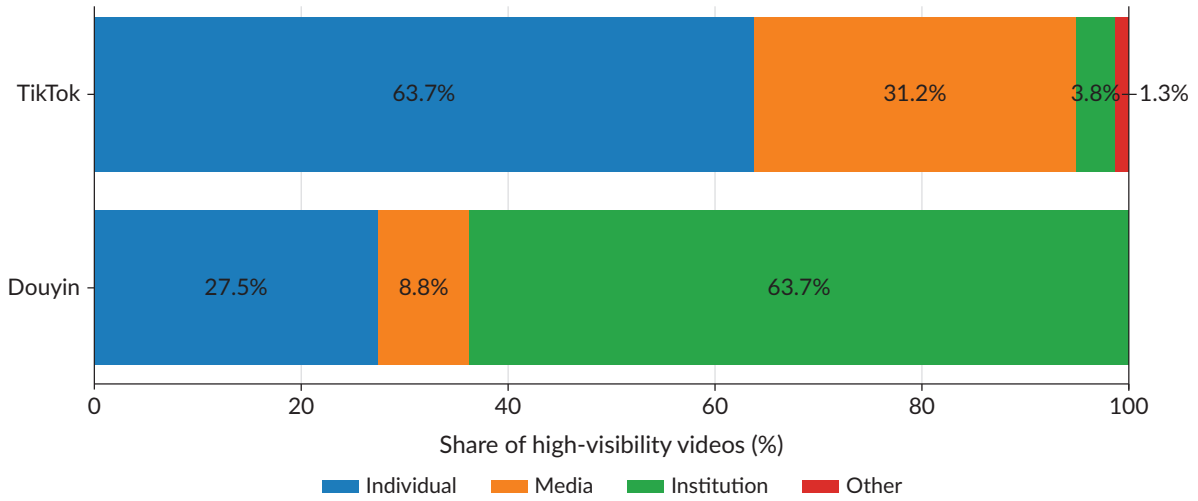


Figure 1. Account type distribution by platform.

TikTok's high-visibility war content is primarily creator-led, with individual accounts forming the largest share of the corpus, followed by media accounts, while institutional accounts are marginal. Douyin shows the inverse pattern: high-visibility content is predominantly institution-led, with individual and media accounts playing smaller roles. This contrast suggests that the baseline conditions of visibility differ across the two platforms.

Figure 2 extends this comparison by showing differences in mediation cues and visibility concentration.

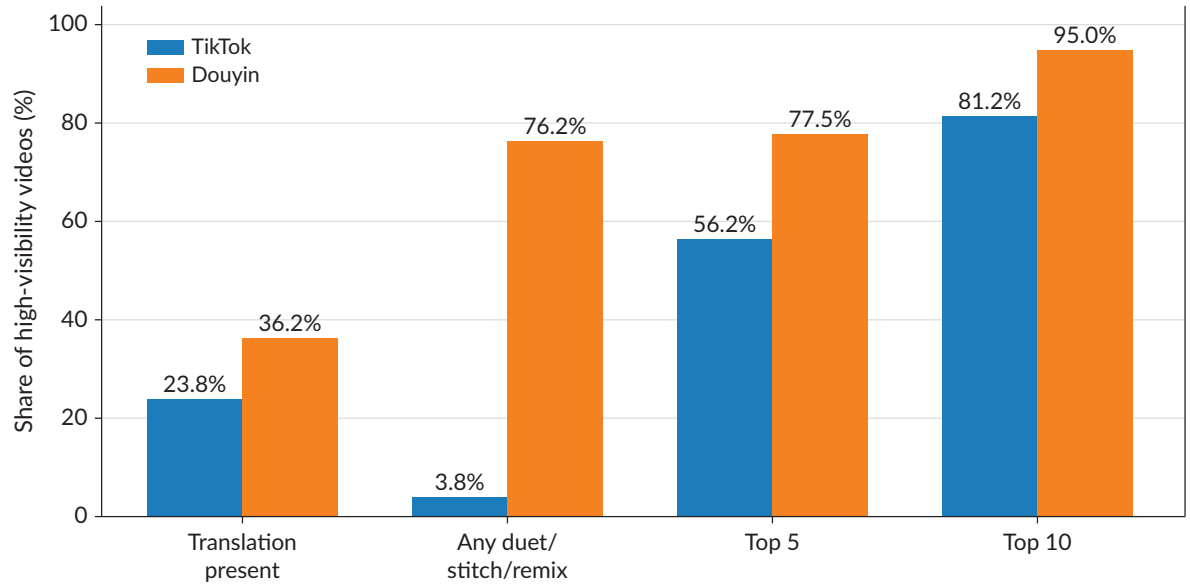


Figure 2. Visibility and mediation cues by platform.

Translation is more frequent on Douyin than on TikTok, consistent with the role of Chinese subtitling in rendering foreign-language war content legible for domestic circulation. Douyin also displays more visible duet/stitch/remix markers, indicating that recirculation is more often explicitly marked through visible re-use affordances. Finally, Douyin's high-visibility posts are more concentrated at the top of ranked surfaces than TikTok's.

Hashtag patterns further reflect these visibility differences. TikTok posts were commonly retrieved through broad English-language and attention-routing tags, especially #ukraine (58.8%), #russia (23.8%), #news (15.0%), #fyp (13.8%), and #putin (12.5%). This suggests an ecology organised around wide, transnational issue labels and platform-native visibility cues. Douyin posts, by contrast, clustered around more conflict-specific and China-facing tags, including #俄乌冲突 (Russia–Ukraine Conflict, 23.8%), #俄罗斯 (Russia, 10.0%), #俄乌战争 (Russia–Ukraine War, 8.8%), #乌克兰 (Ukraine, 6.2%), and #联合国 (United Nations, 3.8%). These patterns are treated as retrieval and visibility cues rather than as independent evidence of platform meaning.

4.2. Narrative Patterns and Emotional Tones

4.2.1. Platform Distributions of Frames, Tones, and Violence Visibility

Table 1 shows a narrative-emotional divergence. TikTok's high-visibility corpus is dominated by humanitarian solidarity and witnessing/aftermath frames, usually carried through grief, fear/anxiety, defiance/hope, and indirect visual exposure to destruction. Douyin's corpus is dominated by explanatory geopolitics, military/frontline, and diplomacy-oriented frames, more often communicated through a neutral/informational tone and with no visible violence. Explicit violence was rare on both platforms.

Table 1. Narrative, tone, and violence visibility by platform.

Dimension	Main TikTok pattern	Main Douyin pattern
Dominant frames	Humanitarian solidarity, 35.0%; witnessing aftermath, 30.0%	Explanatory geopolitics, 38.8%; military/frontline, 18.8%
Secondary frames	Military/frontline, 13.8%; diplomacy/solution, 8.8%	Witnessing aftermath, 16.2%; diplomacy/solution, 12.5%
Dominant tones	Grief, 25.0%; neutral/informational, 23.8%; fear/anxiety, 20.0%; defiance/hope, 18.8%	Neutral/informational, 37.5%; grief, 17.5%; defiance/hope, 17.5%
Violence visibility	Indirect violence, 56.2%; no visible violence, 41.2%; explicit violence, 2.5%	No visible violence, 66.2%; indirect violence, 30.0%; explicit violence, 3.8%

4.2.2. TikTok and Douyin Exemplar Vignettes

TikTok video 1 (see Figure 3) exemplifies a witnessing aftermath frame through creator-led, place-based documentation of destruction. The video places the creator in the foreground of a heavily damaged residential high-rise, with shattered windows and blast damage visible across multiple floors, while the street-level environment shows debris and a disrupted everyday landscape. The dominant tone is fear/anxiety (with an undertone of grief), produced by the creator's embodied presence in these spaces and the accumulation of similar devastated sites. Violence is visible indirectly: The clip does not show bodies or

graphic injury, but renders harm legible through architectural rupture, rubble, and the aftermath of strikes. The caption explicitly frames the post as a corrective to misrecognition—"For Russians who believe in propaganda"—positioning the images as both testimony and counter-claim to competing narratives.

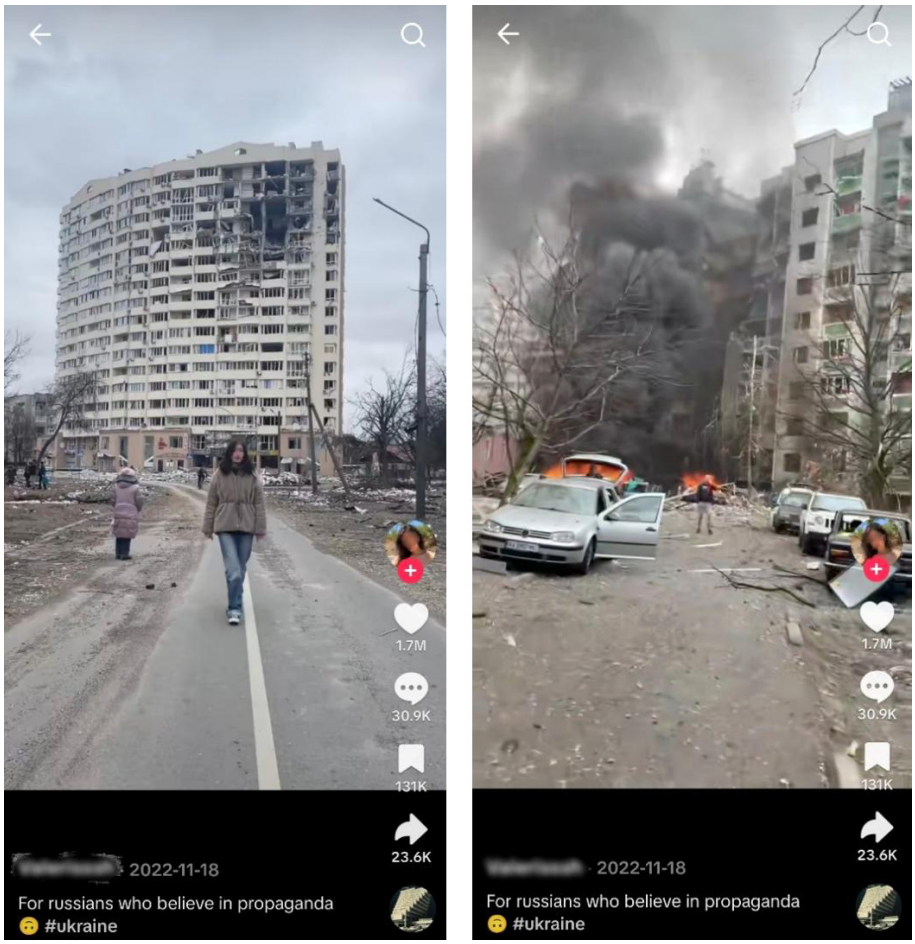


Figure 3. TikTok video 1: Witnessing aftermath (fear/anxiety; indirect violence).

Douyin video 13 (see Figure 4) presents an explanatory geopolitical frame through a persuasive audiovisual argument. The creator argues that NATO's eastward expansion has threatened Russia's security, forcing it to go to war with Ukraine. She contends that the US instigated the Russia–Ukraine war, while Russia is fighting for its survival. If Russia is defeated, China will become the West's next target. Crucially, the video transforms abstract geopolitical concepts into concrete, immediate threats by presenting synchronized audio-visual evidence, thereby validating its reasoning. For example, when the narrator states that "for Putin, this war is unavoidable," footage of Putin delivering a speech is shown in the background. Similarly, when the US's profit from war, invasion of other nations, and NATO's military aid are discussed, scenes of war are shown, such as columns of tanks, rocket fire, and US military helicopters landing. Violence visibility is indirect. By skilfully linking the argument to carefully selected, highly recognizable figures and scenes, the audience perceives a narrative that is empirically substantiated rather than speculative. At the end of the video, the creator explicitly states this conclusion: "If Russia fails in this round of confrontation, China will become the West's next target," accompanied by footage of bustling Chinese streets. This implies that the West's next target is not an abstract state apparatus, but "you"—the person walking down this street right

now, living an ordinary life. In this way, the video transforms a grand sense of geopolitical anxiety into the defensive, nationalistic instinct of ordinary people to protect their homeland.

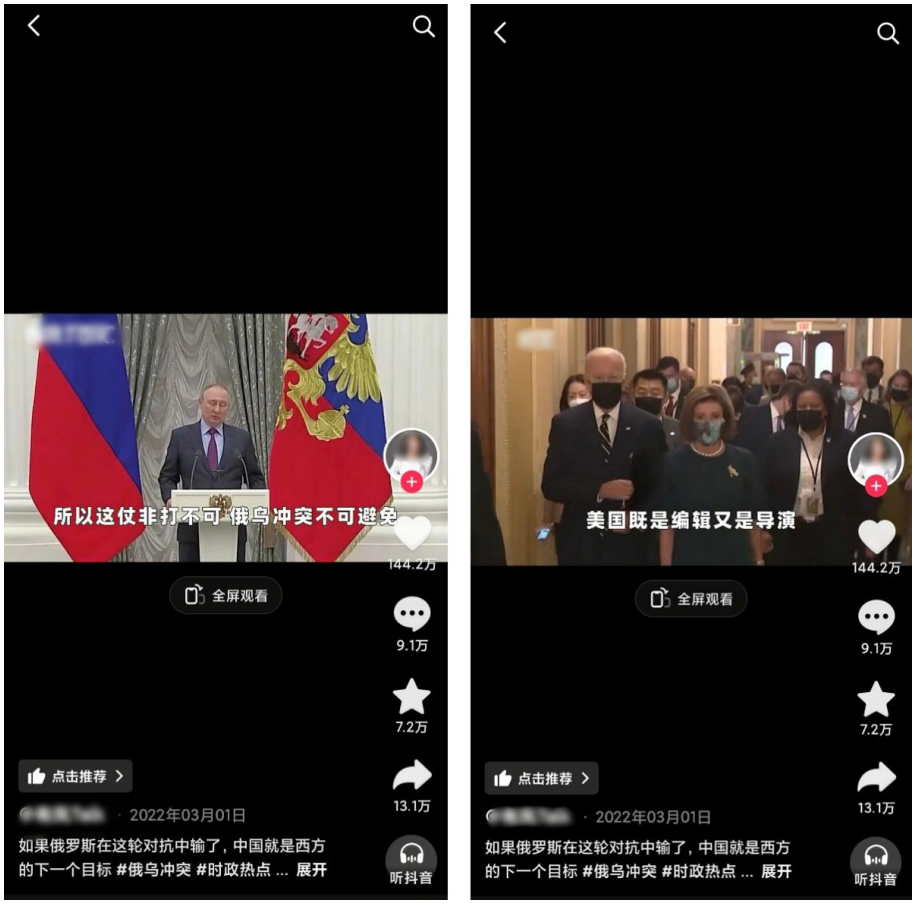


Figure 4. Douyin video 13: Explanatory geopolitics (neutral/informational; indirect violence).

4.3. Visibility Mechanisms and Participatory Uptake

4.3.1. TikTok: Transnational Witnessing and Comment-Mediated Sense-Making

On TikTok, participatory visibility is less strongly marked through explicit remix affordances than through creator-led circulation, cross-language mediation, and comment-mediated interpretation. Individual and media accounts dominate TikTok's high-visibility corpus. This actor ecology helps explain why TikTok's visible war narratives are more often anchored in witnessing, solidarity, and reposted broadcast fragments than in institutionally stabilised geopolitical explanation.

In this dataset, explicit duet/stitch/remix markers are rare, appearing in only 3.8% of TikTok posts. Participation therefore appears less as platform-labelled remixing and more as interpretive work around visible clips. Translation also plays a role: 23.8% of TikTok posts contain creator- or uploader-added subtitles or on-screen translation, enabling war content to circulate across linguistic publics. Comment uptake shows how meaning remains negotiable. In the TikTok top-comment subsample, the most frequent categories are support/solidarity, political blame/evaluation, and humour/irony, alongside smaller but important instances

of credibility checking and fear/witnessing. Comments such as "I live in Kyiv, and I am scared" extend affective witnessing, while "staged 😂" performs suspicion or grassroots credibility checking. A further comment, "Sending all my love from Australia to all the amazing Ukrainian people never give up hope. Slava Ukraine 🇺🇦," shows how TikTok comment spaces can turn war witnessing into transnational solidarity. TikTok's participatory visibility is therefore best understood as a combination of creator-led witnessing, cross-lingual mediation, and comment-driven sense-making, through which war narratives remain emotionally intense but also open to contestation, as users may affirm, question, reinterpret, or challenge the credibility and moral framing of visible war content.

4.3.2. Douyin: Participatory Nationalism and Geopolitical Alignment

On Douyin, comment uptake operates differently. Rather than opening high-visibility war narratives to broad interpretive contestation, comments more often reinforce geopolitically and nationally legible readings of the Russia–Ukraine war. In the Douyin top-comment subsample, the largest category is pro/anti stance-taking, followed by patriotic/nationalistic comments and humour/irony. These comments frequently frame the conflict through Western provocation, NATO expansion, Russian defensiveness, and China's own national security.

Comments such as "华约都取消了，北约是不是应该取消!!!!!!" (the Warsaw Pact has already been dissolved, so shouldn't NATO be dissolved too?!) interpret the war through an anti-NATO frame. Another comment, "支持普京大帝的合理主张，坚决维护国家主权和领土完整" (support Emperor Putin's reasonable position and resolutely safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity), turns support for Russia into a sovereignty-based political stance. At the same time, patriotic and nationalistic comments frequently translate this distant geopolitical conflict into reflections on China's own security, stability, and national strength. Comments such as: "我们不是生在一个和平的年代，而是生在一个和平的国家" (we don't live in peaceful times; we live in a peaceful country), "生在红旗下真幸福" (it's such a blessing to be born under the red flag ["Red Flag" represents "China"]) and "祖国强大，才能享有和平" (peace is only possible when our country is strong) shift the focus of interpretation away from the war itself and towards an appreciation of domestic order and state protection. In this sense, the Russia–Ukraine war is incorporated into a broader narrative of national security and patriotic reassurance. Furthermore, humour and irony reinforce this interpretative environment. Comments such as "给你台阶就下嘛 乌你干啥呢" (Ukraine, when someone gives you a way out, just take it. What are you doing?) and "不知道的还以为你包围了莫斯科" (anyone who didn't know better would think you had surrounded Moscow!) already use playful mockery to defuse the complexity and brutality of war, reducing it to everyday interpersonal friction or online bickering. This reframes geopolitical conflict through playful mockery and everyday interpersonal language.

This participatory nationalism often emerges even when institutionally amplified Douyin videos maintain a comparatively restrained or ambiguous geopolitical stance. Among the institution-affiliated videos in the corpus, strategic causality is coded as "no explicit causal attribution" in 30 videos, while neutral/informational tone remains the dominant emotional register. However, the comment environment attached to these videos is considerably more explicit. Among the 51 sampled top comments under institution-affiliated videos, 28 comments (54.9%) are coded as pro/anti stance-taking. Importantly, these comments are predominantly supportive of Russia while criticising Ukraine, NATO, and the US. This contrast suggests that on sensitive geopolitical issues, Chinese state media often avoids excessively confrontational

or openly partisan language in order to preserve an image of diplomatic restraint, neutrality, and institutional authority. Yet such ambiguity does not necessarily imply geopolitical neutrality. Instead, it creates an interpretive space in which audiences can articulate more explicit nationalist and pro-Russian readings. In this sense, institutional videos and participatory comments appear to perform different communicative functions. Official accounts maintain legitimacy and strategic restraint, while users carry out the more affective and confrontational work of geopolitical interpretation through comments, slogans, mockery, and patriotic expression.

This ambiguity becomes even clearer when comparing strategic causality coding with strategic role and legitimacy cues. Among the 30 institution-affiliated Douyin videos coded as having "no explicit causal attribution," 11 videos (36.7%) nevertheless position Russia as the stronger side, likely victor, or geopolitical victim, while 6 videos (20.0%) contain legitimacy cues that justify Russian actions. In other words, many videos avoid direct causal attribution while still embedding evaluative signals about geopolitical strength, legitimacy, or strategic rationality. This suggests that the absence of explicit causal attribution can coexist with more subtle forms of geopolitical alignment embedded within strategic role construction and legitimacy framing.

4.4. Strategic Geopolitical Storylines and Interpretive Worlds

Building on the frame/tone contrasts (RQ1) and the visibility ecology and uptake dynamics (RQ2), this section examines how high-visibility war content on TikTok and Douyin assembles into distinct strategic narratives, recurring storylines about causality, role assignment, legitimacy, and geopolitical order. Rather than treating platform differences as merely topic differences, the analysis shows that each platform's most visible content stabilises a different interpretive structure through which the war becomes intelligible. Across the corpus, TikTok's strategic narratives converge on a moralised victim–aggressor logic anchored in Russian aggression and humanitarian defence, while Douyin's strategic narratives more often combine strategic ambiguity with outward attribution toward Western provocation and sovereignty-oriented geopolitics. Table 2 summarises these contrasts.

TikTok's most visible posts are organised around a relatively clear victim–aggressor structure: 50.0% attribute causality to Russian aggression, 75.0% position Ukraine as victim, and the most common legitimacy cues support Ukrainian resistance (35.0%) or condemn invasion (32.5%). Even when there is no explicit causal attribution, TikTok's strategic narrative tends to remain anchored in humanitarian harm, moral evaluation, and the legitimacy of defence.

Douyin's strategic narrative structure is different. Causality is most often coded as no explicit causal attribution (65.0%), but explicit attribution more frequently points to Western provocation (18.8%) and Ukraine blame (11.2%) than to Russian aggression (1.2%). Role assignment is also less victim-centred: Ukraine is never coded as the primary victim in this high-visibility sample, 40.0% of posts have no clear role assignment, while Russia is more often positioned as strong/victor (23.8%) or the West as aggressor (18.8%). Legitimacy cues follow the same pattern: Douyin posts most often justify Russia's actions (35.0%) or call for negotiation (30.0%), while condemnation of the invasion is absent. Sovereignty/anti-hegemony cues are also more frequent on Douyin (23.8%) than on TikTok (12.5%), reinforcing the tendency to frame the war through strategic rivalry and international order rather than civilian victimhood.

Table 2. Strategic narrative indicators by platform.

Dimension	Indicator	TikTok (%)	Douyin (%)
Strategic causality	Russia aggression	50	1.2
	No explicit causal attribution	41.2	65
	Western provocation	6.2	18.8
	Ukraine blame	1.2	11.2
	NATO expansion	1.2	3.8
Strategic role assignment	Ukraine victim	75	0
	No clear role assignment	10	40
	Mixed role assignment	3.8	7.5
	Russia strong/victor	2.5	23.8
	West aggressor	0	18.8
	Russia victim	3.8	8.8
	Russia aggressor	5	1.2
Legitimacy cues	Supports Ukraine resistance	35	1.2
	Condemns invasion	32.5	0
	No explicit legitimacy cue	21.2	28.7
	Calls for negotiation	6.2	30
	Justifies Russia's action	5	35
	Mixed	0	5
Sovereignty cue	Present	12.5	23.8

Taken together, these indicators show that TikTok and Douyin produce different interpretive worlds from their most visible Russia–Ukraine war content. On TikTok, the dominant interpretive world is organised around transnational humanitarianism and democratic defence: the war becomes intelligible through Russian aggression, Ukrainian victimhood, condemnation of invasion, and support for resistance. On Douyin, the dominant interpretive world is organised around sovereignty-oriented contestation and strategic competition: The war is more often framed through strategic ambiguity, Western provocation, Russian strategic legitimacy, negotiation, and anti-hegemonic positioning. In short, TikTok's most visible outputs stabilise a humanitarian and resistance-focused storyline, while Douyin's most visible outputs stabilise a sovereignty- and competition-oriented storyline.

5. Discussion

5.1. From Platformed War Visibility to Participatory Strategic Narratives

The findings show that platformed war visibility is not simply a matter of different content appearing on different apps; it is a process through which platforms make particular understandings of war more readily available and intelligible. On TikTok, highly visible content typically revolves around humanitarian testimony, emotional immediacy, and creators' first-hand experiences. Videos frequently foreground destroyed residential buildings, displaced civilians, emotional responses, and close encounters with violence. On Douyin, by contrast, visible narratives tend to interpret the war through geopolitical, diplomatic, military,

and sovereignty-oriented perspectives. Rather than centring civilian vulnerability, they more frequently invoke international order and geopolitics. The differences between the two platforms can be understood as resulting from the different frameworks operating within them. As Reese (2007) argues, frames function as "organising principles" that meaningfully structure the social world by defining certain ideas, categories, and interpretations as more salient than others. Platformed visibility repeatedly foregrounds particular considerations, allowing some frames to become sufficiently recognisable and recurrent to support broader strategic narratives.

The contrast between institutionally restrained videos and strongly positioned comment trends further suggests that political statements on Douyin are often indirect. Many highly visible videos avoid direct causal attribution or openly partisan language. However, their recurring references to Putin's positive and tough image and the friendly communications between Xi and Putin provide audiences with familiar interpretive frameworks and generate strongly nationalist or pro-Russian participatory responses in the comment sections. This mechanism is closely related to China's longer tradition of online propaganda and ideological persuasion. Audiences on Douyin do not encounter geopolitical content in an ideological vacuum. Rather, state-aligned discourse often works through familiar political vocabularies and affective cues that have already circulated across official media and online spaces. Repnikova and Fang (2018) argue that Chinese information management has moved away from exclusively crude and explicit propaganda towards subtler and more orderly forms of persuasion, while political communication under Xi has become increasingly participatory through the co-production of persuasion, in which users repost, circulate, reinterpret, and create politically resonant content. Douyin thus enables a distributed process of political meaning-making: Institutional accounts supply strategically ambiguous but recognisable narrative cues while users render their political implications more explicit through participatory engagement. This dynamic also resembles what Yang and Tang (2018) describe as the "politics of positive energy" through which emotionally resonant and nationally oriented interpretations are produced and circulated within state-aligned discursive boundaries. The Douyin case therefore demonstrates that platformed war visibility does not merely distribute pre-existing frames. Through the interaction of institutional communication, recurrent geopolitical cues, platform visibility, and user participation, it can transform relatively restrained content into more explicit forms of strategic narrative reproduction.

5.2. Visibility Is not Only Algorithmic but Institutional

The findings suggest that platform visibility is not simply technical but geopolitical. Although TikTok and Douyin share similar short-video infrastructures, they have evolved under different governance and regulatory environments (Kaye et al., 2021). The present study shows that these structural differences shape not only content moderation but also how geopolitical interpretations are selectively amplified within platform visibility systems. On TikTok, visibility is comparatively decentralised and creator-driven, allowing affective witnessing and humanitarian narratives to circulate more widely. On Douyin, however, visibility is more strongly organised around institutionally legitimate interpretations of international affairs, where geopolitical meaning is structured through state-affiliated media, diplomatic discourse, and strategic explanation. From this perspective, Douyin's visibility regime functions not merely as a distribution system but as a platformed framing environment in which institutionally amplified geopolitical interpretations become repeatedly circulated and normalised.

This deepens existing research on platform governance. Previous studies of Douyin mainly focus on censorship, moderation, and platform auditing systems (Gao, 2023; Li, 2022), but this study suggests that institutional influence also operates through amplification rather than restriction alone. Platformed geopolitics therefore operates not only through controlling what is removed but also through repeatedly reinforcing what becomes visible, legitimate, and narratively dominant.

5.3. The platforms Produce Different Interpretive Worlds

This study suggests that TikTok and Douyin produce different interpretive worlds of the Russia–Ukraine war. By "interpretive worlds," this article refers to recurring, high-visibility configurations of causality, role assignment, legitimacy, affect, and geopolitical meaning through which platform users are invited to understand the same conflict. This builds on strategic narrative scholarship which stresses that narratives gain traction through the loop of formation, projection, and reception—and that their effectiveness depends on how audiences interpret and respond to them (Miskimmon et al., 2018). In platform settings, that loop is shaped not only by communicators and audiences but also by the visibility infrastructures that repeatedly surface some story elements as "the" war and render others peripheral.

The interpretive worlds are also affective and social, not just cognitive. Papacharissi (2015) argues that digital storytelling enables publics to "feel their way into" unfolding events, connecting them to some actors while distancing them from others. "Humour" is one practice through which these affective publics engage with war, although its functions are context-dependent. Dynel (2024) demonstrates that wartime dark humour can generate diverse and politically polarised forms of participation. In the present sample, TikTok irony sometimes challenges the credibility of war content, whereas selected Douyin comments mock Ukraine and recast geopolitical conflict as everyday banter. When such mockery treats a perceived out-group's setback as an occasion for amusement, it may be interpreted cautiously through the concept of intergroup schadenfreude—pleasure at an out-group's misfortune (Cikara & Fiske, 2013; Leach et al., 2003). However, given that this sentiment is only evident in certain comments, Douyin's examples are best understood as a platformed form of partisan spectatorship. Their everyday banter strips war of embodied proximity, treats Ukrainian setbacks as occasions for ridicule, and folds a distant conflict into China-centred narratives about Western decline, sovereignty, and national strength. In other words, interpretive worlds are sustained not only by what videos depict but by how platformed publics feel their way into what counts as evidence, responsibility, and legitimacy.

The TikTok–Douyin comparison links interpretive divergence to the geopolitical meaning of platforms themselves. As this study focuses on governance and visibility, comparing these distinct yet related products provides an analytical perspective that a TikTok-only regional comparison cannot offer. This approach reveals how product separation, institutional actor ecologies, and conditions of content prominence are configured across ByteDance's domestic and international platform systems, while also incorporating China's domestic short-video environment into the analysis. This is important for conflict communication research because it cautions against treating "social media" as a uniform arena for communication. Platform-specific visibility regimes do not merely circulate pre-existing narratives; they determine which accounts of war are repeatedly encountered, considered emotionally credible and open to political interpretation and action. Platforms thus create different interpretive landscapes around the same conflict (van Dijck et al., 2018; Poell et al., 2019).

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The corpus is relatively small and deliberately focused on high-visibility posts, so the findings should not be read as a representative account of all Russia–Ukraine war content on TikTok or Douyin. Rather, the study identifies recurring patterns in the kinds of war narratives that became prominent within hashtag-mediated visibility surfaces during the collection period. The overlapping but non-identical collection windows may also have introduced some temporal variation into the comparison. The analysis also approaches platform governance through observable visibility outcomes rather than direct access to recommendation or moderation systems; it can show which narratives were repeatedly surfaced and how they were framed but it cannot determine the internal technical reasons why specific posts became visible. In addition, the comment analysis is limited to a purposive subsample of top comments and should be understood as evidence of visible participatory uptake rather than broader audience opinion. Relatedly, the study cannot assess audience age, gender, or other demographic biases; future research could combine platform analysis with surveys, interviews, creator studies, or platform analytics to examine how different audiences receive and interpret Russia–Ukraine war content on TikTok and Douyin. Finally, the findings are temporally and geopolitically specific: Platform policies, geopolitical events, and user practices may shift over time. So, a review of this study in approximately a year may reveal whether these two platforms' "interpretations of the world" will persist or whether they will be recalibrated as the war, diplomatic agenda, platform governance, and user interests change. Future research could test "interpretive worlds" through larger datasets, more comments, and comparisons across other conflicts and platforms. Furthermore, a systematic shot-level visual-geosemiotic analysis of TikTok and Douyin datasets could be conducted. Such research could code camera distance, perspective, composition, on-screen text, and sound–image relations to examine more precisely how visual forms construct proximity to civilian suffering or distance from it. This would facilitate the investigation of the visual dimension as an independent analytical entity.

6. Conclusion

TikTok and Douyin organise different conditions of visibility through which the war becomes politically, emotionally, and geopolitically intelligible. On TikTok, the war is primarily made visible through creator-led witnessing, humanitarian solidarity, emotional proximity, and comment-mediated moral interpretation. Its dominant storyline centres on civilian suffering, Ukrainian victimhood, Russian aggression, and transnational support for resistance. On Douyin, by contrast, the war is more frequently framed through explanatory geopolitics, diplomatic restraint, strategic ambiguity, sovereignty-oriented reasoning, and anti-hegemonic interpretation. Even when institutionally amplified videos avoid explicit causal attribution, recurring cues about NATO expansion, Western provocation, Russian strategic necessity, and China's own security environment provide audiences with a recognisable geopolitical grammar. Comment sections often intensify these cues into more explicit nationalist, anti-NATO, anti-Western, or pro-Russian interpretations.

The article therefore argues that TikTok and Douyin produce incompatible interpretive worlds of the same war. These interpretive worlds are not merely the result of audience preference or isolated content differences. They emerge from the interaction between platform architecture, governance environment, institutional visibility, creator practice, translation, affective uptake, and comment-based participation. TikTok's visible war environment supports a humanitarian and resistance-oriented strategic narrative, while Douyin's visible war environment supports a sovereignty- and competition-oriented strategic narrative. This

comparison demonstrates that platformed war communication should be understood not only as a struggle over information but also as a struggle over the visibility conditions through which certain geopolitical meanings become repeatedly encounterable, emotionally plausible, and politically meaningful.

This study makes three contributions. First, it extends research on platformed war communication beyond Western-facing platform environments by systematically comparing TikTok and Douyin as parallel short-video infrastructures operating under different governance conditions. Second, it contributes to platform governance scholarship by shifting attention from moderation and censorship alone to visibility and amplification: What matters is not only what platforms remove but also what they repeatedly surface and render legitimate. Third, it contributes to framing theory and strategic narrative theory by showing how repeated platform-specific frames accumulate into broader geopolitical storylines. Frames are not merely isolated interpretive tools. Through platform visibility, institutional cues, affective circulation, and participatory uptake, they become stabilised into strategic narratives that shape how audiences understand causality, responsibility, legitimacy, and international order. Overall, the study shows that platforms do not merely host narratives of war; they help produce the interpretive worlds through which war becomes meaningful.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

The study analyzed publicly accessible TikTok and Douyin posts and comments. The compiled dataset is not publicly available.

LLMs disclosure

We used ChatGPT to improve the clarity and grammar of selected passages. No AI tool was used to generate research data, conduct analysis, or write substantive interpretations.

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