

Original Research Article

Framing in Media Coverage of the Ukraine Conflict: Comparing TikTok Commentators Sima Nan and Aaron Parnas

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Abstract. This mixed-methods study investigates how media narratives surrounding Russia's invasion of Ukraine are constructed for Chinese and American audiences by comparing differences in moral framing adopted by TikTok commentators across the two national contexts. Using a computational content analysis informed by Moral Foundations Theory, the study examines 470 short-form political commentary videos published between January and October 2023 to identify the dominant moral domains and sentiment patterns embedded in the discourse. The quantitative analysis maps the distribution of virtue- and vice-oriented language across five key moral foundations, revealing distinct patterns in how each commentator foregrounds harm, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity in relation to the conflict. Complementing these findings, a qualitative frame analysis explores how moral domains and sentiment are strategically deployed to construct causal interpretations, articulate moral evaluations, and imply treatment recommendations regarding the actors involved. Together, the analyses demonstrate how TikTok-based political commentary reflects broader ideological tendencies within Chinese and American media environments, while also illustrating how platform-native creators selectively mobilize moral language to shape narratives of blame, justification, and responsibility. By integrating computational and interpretive approaches, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of moralized war discourse in digital media and highlights the growing role of short-form video platforms in shaping public interpretations of international conflict.

Keywords Extended Moral Foundations Dictionary; news framing; Ukraine conflict; Sima Nan; Aaron Parnas

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been widely characterized not only as a military confrontation but also as a profound moral crisis (Miliband, 2022). However, it remains unclear which moral concerns are most prominently emphasized in shaping public understandings of the conflict on TikTok. Framing research shows that war coverage frequently invokes moral interpretations, particularly those related to responsibility, justice, and the human consequences of violence (Liu, 2023). Such interpretations are embedded within the “central organizing ideas” that structure media narratives (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). As Entman (1993) argues, frames function by promoting specific problem definitions, causal explanations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations. Building on this scholarship, the present study examines how influential TikTok commentators from China (Sima Nan) and the United States (Aaron Parnas) employ moral framing in their discussions of the Ukraine conflict.

This study draws on Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), which conceptualizes moral judgment as grounded in five core domains: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt, 2012). These moral foundations shape how individuals interpret political and social issues and are known to vary systematically across ideological orientations. Existing research suggests that liberal audiences tend to prioritize care and fairness, whereas conservative

audiences place greater weight on loyalty, authority, and sanctity (Stoneman & Wright, 2025; Saganić & Matešić, 2025; Wang et al., 2023). However, more recent studies indicate that ideological differences in moral reasoning may be less polarized than previously assumed, with substantial overlap in the moral intuitions drawn upon by liberals and conservatives alike (Blumenau & Lauderdale, 2025).

Media framing plays a crucial role in activating these moral intuitions. When media narratives foreground specific moral foundations, such as care for civilian suffering or loyalty to national or ideological groups, they may elicit distinct emotional and evaluative responses shaped by audience predispositions. Empirical evidence from digital platforms supports this claim. For instance, research examining posts on X (formerly Twitter) during the early stages of the Ukraine conflict found that loyalty-related moral language was especially prevalent, highlighting the capacity of moral framing to shape political attitudes and emotional engagement during international crises (Amjadi & John, 2025).

Each moral foundation incorporates both virtue and vice dimensions, providing discursive resources for praising or condemning political actors and actions (Haidt & Joseph, 2007). In the context of the Ukraine conflict, emphasizing certain moral attributes over others can influence how responsibility is assigned and how events are interpreted. To examine this process, the present study employs a computational content analysis using the Extended Moral Foundations Dictionary (eMFD) (Hopp et al., 2021) to identify the dominant moral foundations in TikTok short-form political commentary videos posted by Sima Nan and Aaron Parnas, as well as the moral valence of their language (virtue vs. vice). These quantitative findings are supplemented by a qualitative frame analysis that examines how moral foundations and evaluative tone are embedded within broader narratives of problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and proposed responses (Entman, 1993). Together, this mixed-methods approach clarifies which moral foundations are most salient in TikTok commentary on the Ukraine conflict and how moral framing varies across national contexts.

Moral Foundations Theory

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) identifies five primary moral foundations that underpin human moral judgment (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt, 2012). Among these, care/harm and fairness/cheating are commonly described as individualizing foundations, as they emphasize individual well-being, rights, and protection from harm. The care/harm foundation centers on compassion and sensitivity to suffering, while fairness/cheating reflects concerns with justice, equality, and reciprocity, often manifesting in critiques of actors perceived as violating established norms or rules.

The remaining three foundations, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation, are classified as binding foundations because they emphasize group cohesion, social order, and shared moral obligations. Loyalty/betrayal highlights the moral significance of group solidarity and collective defense. Authority/subversion emphasizes respect for legitimate hierarchy and social order, framing obedience as a moral virtue. Sanctity/degradation concerns ideas of purity and moral contamination, whether physical, cultural, or symbolic. Each foundation can be expressed through language that conveys either virtue or vice, with virtue terms signaling moral approval and vice terms indicating moral transgression (Haidt & Joseph, 2007; Hopp et al., 2021). Although some scholars have proposed additional moral dimensions, MFT maintains that these five foundations provide the most parsimonious framework for understanding moral reasoning (Graham et al., 2009; MoralFoundations.org, 2022).

The relative emphasis placed on each moral foundation varies across political ideologies. Prior research shows that liberals tend to favor care- and fairness-based arguments, while conservatives are more responsive to frames invoking loyalty, authority, and sanctity (Feinberg & Willer, 2019). Audience support for political positions also depends on the alignment between moral language and ideological orientation: liberals respond more favorably to harm- and fairness-focused appeals, whereas conservatives show stronger support when authority and sanctity are emphasized (Day et al., 2014). Accordingly, examining the moral foundations present in online discourse surrounding Russia's invasion of Ukraine provides insight into how audiences with differing ideological orientations may interpret the conflict.

News Media Framing of Conflict

Framing theory explains how communicators select and emphasize certain aspects of reality to construct meaningful narratives. Entman (1993) argues that framing involves the strategic use of “keywords” and “stock phrases” that privilege particular interpretations of events. Through this process, frames organize information into coherent narratives (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987) and can shape audience understanding. By promoting specific problem definitions, causal explanations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations, frames influence how audiences interpret politically significant events such as wars. As Tankard (2001) observes, the power of framing lies in its ability to structure debate in ways that often go unnoticed by audiences. In coverage of the Ukraine conflict, the moral foundations foregrounded within media frames can play a central role in guiding moral judgment, responsibility attribution, and policy preferences.

Framing the Ukraine Conflict (2022–2025)

Recent scholarship has increasingly used framing theory to examine media representations of the Ukraine conflict. Nordenstreng et al. (2023) analyzed television news coverage, showing how regional narratives reflected divergent political agendas. Young and Omosun (2025) examined visual framing, demonstrating how images of victims and aggressors contribute to competing moral interpretations of the war. Ofori (2024) investigated cross-national journalism practices, revealing variation in framing strategies and source selection among allied countries.

Research on national media contexts has also expanded. Ji et al. (2024) identified domestication strategies in Chinese media that aligned war coverage with domestic political discourse. Similarly, Lee et al. (2024) compared media framing in China, South Korea, and Japan, showing how narratives were used to legitimize allies and condemn adversaries. Roman et al. (2025) examined portrayals of Ukrainian refugees in Russia, Poland, and the United Kingdom, identifying contrasting frames of hospitality and exclusion.

Methodologically, recent studies have adopted diverse approaches. Verbytska (2024) employed topic modeling to trace shifts in dominant frames between 2022 and 2023, while Musi (2024) analyzed hashtag-based argumentative framing in digital discourse. Stawski and Szews (2024) documented how early international press coverage constructed moral evaluations and problem definitions. Finally, Dehdarirad and Alcántara-Plá (2025) applied semiotic analysis to Spanish political discourse, revealing cognitive patterns underlying the framing of Ukrainian refugees.

Collectively, this body of research underscores the continued relevance of framing theory for understanding how war narratives are constructed and contested across both traditional and digital media platforms. Three research questions address how TikTok commentators in China and the United States morally framed the Ukraine conflict, and how these TikTok commentators employed MFT’s moral domains to advance a “causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993) about the conflict. To be specific, the study is guided by the following three research questions:

1. To what degree do the moral domains that dominate Ukraine conflict coverage vary by TikTok Commentators (Sima Nan, Aaron Parnas)?
2. How does the sentiment (vice vs. virtue) of the moral domains in the coverage differ between TikTok commentators and among moral foundations?
3. How does each TikTok commentator’s framing of the conflict use moral domains and sentiment to promote a moral appraisal of the conflict?

Methodology

Selection of Influential TikTok Commentators

To identify influential commentators on the Ukraine conflict across short-video platforms, this study employed a targeted, Python-assisted search on TikTok (international version) and Douyin (mainland China). The objective was to select one representative political commentator from each national platform context for comparative analysis.

Commentators were selected based on four criteria: (1) possession of a verified account with sustained political commentary; (2) top-ranked status by follower count within the respective national context (the United States or China); (3) publication of at least 100 Ukraine-related videos during the study period; and (4) consistent use of war-related hashtags relevant to the Ukraine conflict.

On TikTok, searches were conducted using the hashtags #UkraineConflict, #UkraineWar, #RussiaUkraineWar, and #RussiaUkraineConflict. Based on these criteria, Aaron Parnas (username: @aaronparnas1) was identified as the leading U.S.-based commentator. As of September 7, 2025, his account had accumulated approximately 4.26 million followers and featured extensive political commentary focused on the Ukraine conflict.

A parallel procedure was conducted on Douyin using the Chinese hashtags #俄乌战争 (“Russia–Ukraine War”), #俄罗斯 (“Russia”), #乌克兰 (“Ukraine”), and #俄乌冲突 (“Russia–Ukraine Conflict”). Applying the same selection criteria, Sima Nan (username: @司马南日记) was identified as the most prominent Chinese political commentator addressing the conflict. As of September 7, 2025, his account had amassed approximately 35.76 million followers, making it the most-followed Chinese-language political account engaging with Ukraine-related content.

Together, these two commentators were selected as representative cases to examine how political commentary on the Ukraine conflict is framed and disseminated across distinct national and platform contexts.

Timeframe Selection and Account Limitations

Aaron Parnas’s previous TikTok account was permanently banned, and his current verified account (@aaronparnas1) contains publicly available content only from October 2022 onward. Moreover, following the outbreak of the Israel–Hamas conflict on October 7, 2023, the Ukraine conflict ceased to be a central focus of his political commentary.

To ensure thematic consistency and analytical relevance, the sampling period was therefore defined as January 2023 to October 2023. This ten-month window represents the final phase during which the Ukraine conflict remained a prominent topic in Parnas’s content. All video samples and associated engagement metrics were drawn exclusively from this period to ensure topical alignment and data reliability.

Data Collection and Preprocessing

All short-form videos published by Sima Nan and Aaron Parnas during the selected timeframe were systematically collected, reviewed, and coded. The initial dataset comprised 160 videos from Sima Nan and 344 videos from Aaron Parnas.

The unit of analysis in this study was the textual content of each video. For both TikTok and Douyin, video speech was converted into text using automatic speech recognition (ASR), and the resulting transcripts served as the primary input for subsequent analyses. As Douyin transcripts were originally in Chinese while the Extended Moral Foundations Dictionary (eMFD) is English-based, all Chinese transcripts were translated into English using machine translation.

To enhance translation reliability, a two-person verification procedure was employed. Two bilingual reviewers independently checked the machine-translated transcripts against the original Chinese text and resolved discrepancies through discussion. In addition, language quality control procedures were implemented, including spot-checking a subset of transcripts for transcription and translation accuracy and applying basic text-cleaning rules (e.g., removing obvious ASR artifacts, duplicated fragments, and non-linguistic noise) prior to lexicon-based coding.

Because moral foundation detection relied on an English-language lexicon and Chinese content was translated into English, some semantic nuance may have been lost or shifted during ASR and translation. This limitation may introduce measurement bias in cross-platform comparisons and is addressed in the discussion.

eMFD Filtering and Final Sample

The Extended Moral Foundations Dictionary (eMFD) was applied to assess the presence and relative proportion of moral language in each video. As a filtering criterion, videos with a moral-to-non-moral word ratio (*moral_nonmoral_ratio*) of 1 or lower were excluded to ensure that retained samples exhibited a substantive predominance of moral framing.

Based on this criterion, three videos from Sima Nan (Video IDs: 84, 92, and 153) were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 157 videos. For Aaron Parnas, 31 videos were excluded due to insufficient moral content (Video IDs: 4, 7, 10, 13, 18, 21, 41, 61, 68, 71, 75, 88, 91, 96, 101, 111, 116, 119, 165, 256, 273, 275, 277, 278, 285, 287, 288, 302, 324, 326, and 331), yielding a final dataset of 313 videos.

The resulting filtered dataset, comprising 157 videos from China and 313 from the United States (N = 470), serves as the empirical foundation for the subsequent comparative analysis.

Computational Content Analysis

A computational content analysis was conducted using the Extended Moral Foundations Dictionary (eMFD) to identify the dominant moral foundation associated with each unit of analysis (Hopp et al., 2021). The eMFD comprises 3,270 lexicon entries corresponding to the five moral foundations proposed by Moral Foundations Theory. Each lexical item is assigned a continuous score between 0 and 1, reflecting the strength of its association with each moral domain.

All 470 texts were analyzed using the open-source Python package *eMFDscore*, which applies a bag-of-words approach to detect dictionary matches. For each matched term, the algorithm assigns a probability indicating the moral domain with which the term is most strongly associated. Based on these term-level probabilities, five domain-specific scores (ranging from 0 to 1) were generated for each text. The moral domain with the highest score was identified as the dominant moral foundation for that video. In addition, the algorithm classified the dominant moral foundation as expressing either virtue or vice.

For statistical analysis in SPSS, numerical codes were assigned to key variables: commentator (1 = Aaron Parnas, 2 = Sima Nan), dominant moral domain (1 = care/harm, 2 = fairness/cheating, 3 = loyalty/betrayal, 4 = authority/subversion, 5 = sanctity/degradation), and sentiment orientation of the dominant moral foundation (1 = vice, 2 = virtue).

Frame Analysis

Although the computational content analysis employed in this study enables a systematic identification of dominant moral domains, it does not capture how morally charged language is embedded and interpreted within specific media contexts (Kraft & Klemmensen, 2024). To address this limitation, a qualitative frame analysis was conducted to examine how moral meanings were constructed around morality-laden expressions in the coverage. Two members of the research team carried out this analysis following a grounded theory and constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), independently reviewing all video-texts included in the sample.

Each video-text was examined in relation to the moral foundation category assigned by the extended eMFD software. For instance, when a video-text was classified under the care/harm domain, the researchers closely analyzed relevant concepts, phrases, and lexical patterns associated with care or harm. These elements were systematically compared and synthesized to identify the dominant patterns of moral evaluation, causal interpretation, and treatment recommendations articulated in the coverage (Entman, 1993). The researchers subsequently discussed their interpretations and reconciled differences until consensus was reached. This analytical procedure was applied to all 470 video-texts in the dataset.

Ethical Considerations

This study analyzed publicly available video content published on TikTok and Douyin. No human subjects were recruited, no experimental procedures were conducted, and no personal data were collected from individuals. As the data consist entirely of publicly accessible media content produced and disseminated

voluntarily by the commentators in their public capacity, institutional ethical review and informed consent were not required for this research.

The Findings

Research Question 1 (RQ1) examines the extent to which dominant moral foundation domains differ across commentators in the coverage of the Ukraine conflict. Among all the video-texts analyzed, the most frequently occurring moral foundation was care/harm (65.1%), followed by authority/subversion (15.3%), fairness/cheating (12.6%), and loyalty/betrayal (6.6%). The sanctity/degradation foundation was rare overall (0.4%) and appeared only in Aaron Parnas's video-texts (0.6%).

While both commentators most frequently employed the care/harm foundation, chi-square tests revealed statistically significant differences between Aaron Parnas and Sima Nan in their use of dominant moral foundations: $\chi^2(4, N=470) = 28.81, p < .001$. Sima Nan relied overwhelmingly on care/harm (80.3% of his video-texts), with very limited use of fairness/cheating (9.6%) and authority/subversion (9.6%), and almost no use of loyalty/betrayal (0.6%) or sanctity/degradation (0%). By contrast, Aaron Parnas drew more heavily on authority/subversion (18.2%) and fairness/cheating (14.1%), and was also far more likely to employ loyalty/betrayal (9.6% vs. 0.6%). These results suggest that Aaron Parnas employed a more diverse set of moral foundations in framing stories, whereas Sima Nan concentrated overwhelmingly on care/harm.

Table 1. Dominant moral foundations used by TikTok commentators (%)

Account	Dominant moral foundation for each video-text (and % within each commentator)				
	Care/harm	Fairness/cheating	Loyalty/betrayal	Authority/subversion	Sanctity/degradation
Aaron Parnas	180 (57.5)	44 (14.1)	30 (9.6)	57 (18.2)	2 (0.6)
Sima Nan	126 (80.3)	15 (9.6)	1 (0.6)	15 (9.6)	0
Total	306 (65.1)	59 (12.6)	31 (6.6)	72 (15.3)	2 (0.4)

Table 2. Sentiment by dominant moral foundation and TikTok commentators (%)

Account	Percentage of negative sentiment in text					
	Care/harm	Fairness/cheating	Loyalty/betrayal	Authority/subversion	Sanctity/degradation	Total
Aaron Parnas	98.3	93.2	50.0	91.2	100.0	91.7
Sima Nan	100.0	93.3	100.0	93.3	0	98.7
Total	99.1	93.3	66.7	92.7	100.0	94.9

RQ2 examined the extent to which the sentiment orientation (vice vs. virtue) of moral foundation domains varied across TikTok commentators and moral foundations. While both TikTok commentators predominantly employed negative sentiment in their coverage, chi-square tests revealed statistically significant differences between Aaron Parnas and Sima Nan in their use of sentiment, $\chi^2(1, N = 470) = 8.02, p < .01$.

As shown in Table 2, Aaron Parnas exhibited a somewhat more balanced sentiment distribution, with 91.7% of his video-texts coded as negative and 8.3% coded as positive. In contrast, Sima Nan relied almost exclusively on negative sentiment, with 98.7% of his video-texts classified as negative and only 1.3% as positive.

Sentiment orientation also varied substantially by moral foundation. Care/harm and authority/subversion were overwhelmingly associated with negative sentiment for both commentators, exceeding 90% negativity across accounts. In contrast, loyalty/betrayal displayed a markedly lower proportion of negative sentiment, particularly in Aaron Parnas's discourse, where only 50.0% of video-texts coded under this foundation were negative, indicating more frequent use of virtue-oriented framing. Fairness/cheating was predominantly negative for both commentators, while sanctity/degradation appeared infrequently and was uniformly negative when present.

Taken together, these findings suggest that although negative sentiment dominates moral framing in the discourse of both commentators, Aaron Parnas employed positive sentiment more frequently than Sima Nan, especially within the loyalty/betrayal moral foundation.

RQ3 focused on how each commentator's framing of the war used words associated with moral domains and sentiment to provide a "causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993) regarding the conflict. The findings are presented from the most to least used moral domains.

Care/Harm

Sima Nan

In contrast to Western TikTok commentators, who often frame Ukraine as an innocent victim through the care/harm foundation and foreground civilian suffering, Sima Nan draws on the same foundation in a more critical and satirical manner. Rather than focusing exclusively on Ukrainian civilians' tragedies, his video texts portray Ukrainians' "bleeding" and "sacrifice" as consequences of the Ukrainian government's choices and of Western manipulation.

For example, in a video posted on January 11, 2023, titled "Ukrainians have finally realized: We are bleeding," the narration emphasizes Ukrainians' recognition of ongoing "bleeding," while attributing their hardship primarily to government mismanagement and dependence on the West rather than to Russian aggression alone. Similarly, in a January 20, 2023 video, "China celebrates the New Year, the U.S. spends money on war," he juxtaposes Chinese New Year festivities with U.S. war spending to underscore Ukraine's suffering and vulnerability within a Western-driven war machinery. In both cases, the care/harm foundation is mobilized less to elicit sympathy for Ukraine than to criticize Ukraine's leadership and its allies.

Overall, Sima Nan's care/harm framing highlights the ironic and accusatory dimensions of "harm," depicting Ukrainian suffering as self-inflicted or externally exploited. This stands in sharp contrast to Western commentators' care/harm framing, which typically centers on humanitarian appeals and calls for external assistance.

Aaron Parnas

In the 313-item corpus, 180 video texts posted by Aaron Parnas were coded as primarily invoking the care/harm moral foundation, accounting for 57.5% of his content and representing his most dominant moral frame. Within these care/harm-coded texts, 177 (98.3%) were classified as vice-oriented (negative) and only 3 (1.7%) as virtue-oriented (positive), yielding a mean sentiment score of 1.02. Taken together, these results suggest that the care/harm frame was used almost exclusively to foreground war-related violence, destruction, and humanitarian crisis.

Substantively, these video texts repeatedly emphasized the severe harm inflicted on Ukrainian civilians and society by Russian military actions, thereby reinforcing a sense of urgency and crisis. For example, a video posted on February 2, 2023 referenced Ukraine's national security adviser warning of an imminent large-scale Russian offensive, advancing an "imminent threat" narrative. On February 6, 2023, a post discussing the Battle of Bakhmut described intense assaults by Russian forces and the Wagner Group, portraying Ukraine as a victim under siege. Similarly, a February 10, 2023 video highlighted Russia's preparations for a second full-scale offensive, reinforcing a narrative of sustained harm.

Overall, Parnas's care/harm framing consistently constructed a "victim versus perpetrator" binary, casting Russia as the aggressor and Ukraine as the suffering victim. In doing so, his video texts reinforced

moral condemnation of Russia's actions and helped legitimate appeals for international sympathy and support for Ukraine.

Authority/Subversion

Sima Nan

In the authority/subversion category, Sima Nan's video texts consistently criticize rhetoric and actions framed as challenging established hierarchies and social order. In the 157-item corpus, 15 video texts (9.6%) were coded under this foundation, of which 14 were vice-oriented (negative) and 1 was virtue-oriented (positive). These texts frequently highlight statements by Ukrainian leaders and media actors, portraying them as performative and disruptive to order. For example, a video posted on February 4, 2023, titled "Ukraine Retaking Crimea This Summer? How Likely Is It?", criticizes Ukraine's high-profile claims about retaking Crimea by the summer, framing such rhetoric as unrealistic and provocative.

In some instances, Sima Nan employs satire and metaphor to underscore discomfort with disrupted hierarchies. In a February 21, 2023 video, "Kishida steals Biden's spotlight; Biden stumps Zelenskyy," he likens international politics to a dining setting, suggesting that "a subordinate should not spin the table when the leader is serving food," and mocks Japanese Prime Minister Kishida for "improperly" stealing the spotlight from President Biden. At the same time, these video texts reinforce established authority by drawing on Russian official rhetoric. For instance, a video posted on March 2, 2023, titled "Putin's Speech on the Anniversary of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict (Part 1)," quotes President Putin's anniversary remarks and emphasizes Russia's fulfillment of its "moral duty," positioning Russia as a representative of legitimate authority while implicitly casting Ukraine and the West as subversive forces.

Overall, Sima Nan's authority/subversion framing links authority with stability and legitimacy, while associating subversion with chaos and danger. By criticizing Ukraine and the West for "overstepping" or "provoking," while simultaneously legitimizing Russian authority, these video texts contribute to moral condemnation of challenges to order and reinforce the justificatory appeal of authority in the broader discourse surrounding international conflict.

Aaron Parnas

In the 313-item corpus, 57 video texts posted by Aaron Parnas were coded under the authority/subversion moral foundation, accounting for 18.2% of his content. Of these, 52 (91.2%) were classified as vice-oriented (negative) and 5 (8.8%) as virtue-oriented (positive), with a mean sentiment score of 1.09, indicating a predominantly critical tone. A defining feature of this category is its emphasis on portraying Russia's military operations and political strategies as "subversive," while simultaneously framing Western actors—particularly the United States—as central to sustaining authority and international order.

In the vice-oriented texts, Parnas repeatedly foregrounds Russian offensives and threats. For example, in a video posted on February 1, 2023, he stated that Russia was preparing for a new large-scale offensive and linked its timing to the one-year anniversary of the war, thereby heightening urgency and reinforcing Russia's image as a subversive actor. Similarly, a February 21, 2023 video characterized President Biden's unannounced visit to Kyiv as a "historic moment," framing it as a signal of unwavering U.S. support for Ukraine and, by contrast, as evidence of Russia's increasing isolation and weakened standing in the international system.

In the smaller set of virtue-oriented cases, "authority" is constructed through Western political support and symbolic actions. For instance, a February 8, 2023 video covering Biden's invitation to Ukraine's ambassador to attend the State of the Union address interprets the gesture as evidence of close U.S.–Ukraine relations and as a marker of U.S. leadership in safeguarding international order. Although such virtue-oriented examples are limited, they contribute to the overall binary by balancing the emphasis on subversion with affirmations of legitimate authority.

In sum, Parnas's authority/subversion framing reflects a binary opposition: Russia as the subversive challenger and the West as the defender of authority. This narrative strategy contributes to perceptions of

Russian military and political threat while also reinforcing Western leadership claims in maintaining the international order. More broadly, it illustrates how moral foundations can be selectively mobilized in short-form video narratives within wartime information environments.

Fairness/Cheating

Sima Nan

Within the fairness/cheating foundation, Sima Nan's video texts consistently critique perceived asymmetries in international relations, displaying three recurring narrative features. First, they emphasize an imbalance between Ukraine and the United States in the distribution of wartime costs and benefits: Ukraine is portrayed as bearing heavy human and economic burdens, while the U.S. is depicted as extracting strategic gains through financial aid and political influence, constructing a "U.S. profits while Ukraine suffers" narrative of unfairness. Second, the texts underscore the alleged "hypocrisy" of Western assistance, arguing that support is conditional and embedded in financial and military dependencies. This dynamic is described as trapping Ukraine in a cycle of "aid-war-repayment," reducing it to an instrument within U.S. geopolitical strategy. Third, the overall tone is overwhelmingly vice-oriented (negative), closely tied to themes of "deception" and "exploitation," which further reinforce the semantic frame of unfairness and victimhood.

For example, in a video posted on January 14, 2023, titled "I pay, you fight, you repay: Ukraine trapped in a financial cycle," the narration bluntly describes Ukraine as caught in a predicament of "I pay, you fight, you repay." This example aligns with the coding results (dominant_moral_code = 2, fairness/cheating; dominant_sentiment_code = 1, negative).

Taken together, the analysis indicates that fairness/cheating-coded content follows a consistent pattern: exposing unequal transactional relationships and alleged mechanisms of political manipulation, reinforcing criticism of the U.S. and the West, while simultaneously emphasizing Ukraine's constrained agency and victimized position within the war narrative.

Aaron Parnas

In the 313-item corpus, 44 video texts posted by Aaron Parnas were coded under the fairness/cheating moral foundation, accounting for approximately 14.1% of his content. Of these, 41 were vice-oriented (negative) and only 3 were virtue-oriented (positive), with a mean sentiment score of 1.07. This predominantly negative orientation suggests that the fairness/cheating frame was used largely to foreground Russia's alleged violations and deceptive conduct in the war, with a clear emphasis on critique.

Three recurring features characterize this content. First, the video texts emphasize Russia's transgressions across military, diplomatic, and cyber domains, portraying it as a "deceiver" that undermines international rules. For instance, a video posted on February 1, 2023 referenced U.S. accusations that Russia had violated nuclear arms control agreements and refused international inspections, framing this as an attack on the integrity of global institutions. Similarly, a February 15, 2023 post reported that Russian hackers nearly breached multiple U.S. natural gas facilities, characterizing the act as a malicious assault on critical civilian infrastructure and suggesting covert efforts to undermine fair competition and international security.

Second, these video texts frequently invoke international treaties and security mechanisms to amplify the implications of Russia's actions, extending the fairness/cheating narrative beyond harm to Ukraine and toward broader threats to global order and collective interests. A March 15, 2023 video covering Russia's downing of a U.S. drone is illustrative: while Russia claimed the drone had "violated temporary airspace rules," the narration frames this as evasive blame-shifting and deliberate distortion, thereby reinforcing Russia's image as deceptive.

Third, the small set of virtue-oriented cases primarily functions as contrast by positioning the United States and its allies as actors defending fairness through exposure, sanctions, and countermeasures. In these instances, Western responses are framed as legitimate efforts to uphold rules and accountability.

Taken together, Parnas's fairness/cheating framing constructs a sharp binary: Russia as a violator and deceiver versus the United States and its allies as rule-enforcing defenders of fairness and order. By anchoring

this narrative in concrete events—such as nuclear treaty disputes, cyber incidents, and the drone episode—his video texts repeatedly attribute deception and rule-breaking to Russia while reaffirming Western leadership claims in safeguarding international fairness. Overall, the frequent use of this foundation indicates that fairness/cheating serves as a central moral resource in Parnas’s narrative system for evaluation and symbolic boundary construction between adversaries.

Loyalty/Betrayal

Aaron Parnas

In the 313-item corpus, 30 video texts posted by Aaron Parnas were coded under the loyalty/betrayal moral foundation, accounting for approximately 9.6% of his content. These were evenly split between 15 virtue-oriented (positive) and 15 vice-oriented (negative) texts, with a mean sentiment score of 1.5. This balance suggests that the foundation was not used merely as a one-directional emotive register; rather, it functioned as a dual narrative resource to commend “loyalty” and “unity” while condemning “betrayal” and breaches of trust. Temporally, loyalty/betrayal-coded texts clustered between February and July 2023 (February: 4; March: 10; April: 6; May: 3; June: 2; July: 5), coinciding with several salient moments in the Russia–Ukraine war. This pattern indicates that the loyalty/betrayal foundation was often mobilized around critical events or sensitive junctures to foreground either alliance cohesion or adversarial violations of trust.

At the content level, the loyalty/betrayal foundation served two contrasting functions. On the virtue-oriented side, it was used to affirm commitments and solidarity among allies. For example, a video posted on February 20, 2023, titled “Breaking: Biden Makes Surprise Visit,” describes the U.S. President’s unannounced visit to Kyiv under air-raid sirens as a symbolic enactment of alliance loyalty and commitment under pressure. Similarly, a February 17, 2023 video, “BREAKING: IMPORTANT MEETING HAPPENING,” covers a meeting between Lukashenko and Putin in Moscow, framing it as evidence of coalition-building and cooperation in a tense environment and thus coding it as a positive loyalty narrative.

Conversely, the foundation was also employed to foreground betrayal and breaches of trust. A February 20, 2023 video titled “Breaking: Largescale Nuclear Test Likely Imminent” suggests that Russia might proceed with a large-scale nuclear test at a sensitive diplomatic moment, framing this as a violation of commitments and an escalation that undermines trust. A July 20, 2023 entry emphasizes rising global grain prices and food-security risks linked to Russian escalation, implicitly coding the disruption of international arrangements (e.g., the Black Sea Grain Initiative) as a breach of trust. Likewise, a July 17, 2023 video notes that Putin could face legal risks from an International Criminal Court arrest warrant if attending an international summit; within the loyalty/betrayal framing, this is presented as evidence of deteriorating trust between Russia and the international community.

In sum, Parnas’s loyalty/betrayal framing constructs a binary narrative structure: surprise visits, high-level meetings, and public endorsements are framed as demonstrations of loyalty and unity among allies, whereas escalatory actions, withdrawals from arrangements, and other disruptive moves are framed as breaches of trust by adversaries. Concentrated in critical windows, this foundation strengthens an “us”–“them” boundary by amplifying allied cohesion while stigmatizing perceived disloyalty, thereby reinforcing identity-based moral evaluation within the wartime information environment.

Discussion

This study offers a comparative account of how moral framing operates in TikTok-based political commentary on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, drawing on a mixed-methods analysis of 470 short-form videos produced by Chinese Douyin commentator Sima Nan and U.S. TikTok commentator Aaron Parnas. Across both accounts, care/harm emerged as the most frequently mobilized moral foundation, yet the two commentators deployed it in fundamentally different ways. Aaron Parnas constructed a consistent victim–perpetrator binary, casting Russia as aggressor and Ukraine as innocent victim, while Sima Nan drew on the same foundation with an ironic and accusatory register, framing Ukrainian suffering as the product of governmental mismanagement

and Western exploitation rather than Russian aggression alone. This divergence illustrates a key theoretical point: the frequency with which a moral foundation appears does not determine its ideological function. The meaning of moral language is shaped by the broader national and political discourse within which it is embedded.

The supplementary foundations of authority/subversion and fairness/cheating further crystallize these national divergences. Aaron Parnas employed authority/subversion to position the West as the legitimate guardian of international order and Russia as its subversive challenger, while his fairness/cheating framing foregrounded Russian violations of treaties, arms control agreements, and cyber norms. Sima Nan reversed this moral architecture: authority/subversion was invoked to criticize Ukraine and Western powers for “overstepping” and “provoking,” and fairness/cheating discourse centered on what he depicted as U.S. financial exploitation of Ukraine’s wartime dependence. The consistency of these inversions across two foundations points to a systematic pattern rather than incidental framing choices: moral language is not merely descriptive but functions as a tool for constructing ideologically coherent narratives of blame, legitimacy, and responsibility.

The loyalty/betrayal foundation reveals a further structural asymmetry between the two commentators. Aaron Parnas employed this frame bidirectionally, celebrating acts of alliance solidarity such as President Biden’s unannounced visit to Kyiv as expressions of collective loyalty, while simultaneously condemning Russian actions such as the suspension of grain agreements and nuclear escalation as betrayals of international trust. Sima Nan, by contrast, made almost no use of this foundation. This disparity suggests that loyalty/betrayal is more readily available as a moral resource within Western political discourse, where alliance identity and collective defense carry strong normative weight, whereas it holds far less rhetorical purchase in the Chinese commentary environment, where critiques of Western power structures dominate the moral vocabulary.

Sentiment patterns reinforce these differences. Vice-oriented language predominated across both accounts, yet the two commentators diverged in how they balanced negative and positive valence. Parnas periodically incorporated virtue-oriented framing, particularly within the loyalty/betrayal domain, to affirm alliance cohesion and Western resolve, a rhetorical strategy that produces a morally polarized but not entirely one-sided narrative. Sima Nan’s discourse, by contrast, was overwhelmingly negative across all foundations, sustaining a tone of unrelenting critique directed at Ukraine and the West. This contrast points to different logics of emotional mobilization: Parnas employed a dual-directional structure that alternates condemnation with affirmation to heighten moral contrast, while Sima Nan relied on cumulative negativity to build a coherent and consistent critical stance.

These findings carry implications for several strands of existing scholarship. The predominance of care/harm aligns with prior research documenting the centrality of humanitarian framing in Ukraine conflict coverage (Stawski & Szews, 2024; Young & Omosun, 2025), yet this study complicates that picture by showing how care/harm language can simultaneously serve opposing political functions depending on context, a pattern that goes beyond what traditional framing studies, which tend to treat foundations as directionally fixed, have typically captured. The divergent mobilization of authority/subversion and fairness/cheating across Chinese and American commentary extends the findings of Ji et al. (2024) and Lee et al. (2024), who documented domestication and legitimation strategies in national media coverage of the conflict, by demonstrating that the same dynamics operate at the level of individual platform-native creators. The near-exclusive reliance on vice-oriented sentiment across both commentators resonates with Amjadi and John’s (2025) finding that loyalty-related moral language dominated early social media discourse on the conflict; however, the present study shows that sentimentality is not uniform. Parnas’s strategic use of virtue framing within the loyalty/betrayal domain represents a distinct rhetorical register absent from Sima Nan’s discourse. Finally, the cross-national asymmetry in moral foundation use partially challenges Blumenau and Lauderdale’s (2025) argument that ideological differences in moral reasoning may be less polarized than previously assumed: while both commentators converge on care/harm at the level of foundation frequency, the interpretive divergence between them suggests that convergence in foundation use does not necessarily imply convergence in moral reasoning.

Taken together, these findings affirm the value of Moral Foundations Theory as a framework for analyzing politically divergent online discourse. The results show that MFT's five foundations provide a productive lens not only for identifying which moral concerns are foregrounded in conflict communication, but also for revealing how the same foundation can sustain opposing ideological narratives depending on the national and political context in which it is deployed. More broadly, this study contributes to growing scholarship on the role of short-form video platforms in shaping public moral reasoning about international conflicts, demonstrating that platform-native commentators can function as effective moral entrepreneurs who translate geopolitical events into emotionally resonant and ideologically coherent narratives for their audiences.

Conclusion

This study examined how TikTok-based political commentators in China and the United States employ moral framing in their coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and how such framing diverges across national contexts. The study yields three principal findings. First, care/harm was the dominant moral foundation for both commentators, yet its deployment served opposing narrative functions: Aaron Parnas used it to construct a victim–perpetrator binary condemning Russian aggression, while Sima Nan deployed it ironically to critique Ukrainian leadership and Western involvement. Second, the supplementary foundations of authority/subversion and fairness/cheating were consistently mobilized in mirror-image ways, with each commentator attributing legitimacy to his own national context and subversion or exploitation to the opposing camp. Third, sentiment analysis revealed that vice-oriented language predominated across both accounts, though Aaron Parnas introduced virtue framing within the loyalty/betrayal domain to affirm alliance solidarity, whereas Sima Nan maintained an almost exclusively negative register throughout.

These findings carry implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, they extend Moral Foundations Theory into the domain of cross-national digital conflict communication, demonstrating that MFT's foundations are not neutral analytical categories but ideologically malleable resources whose meaning is determined by context. The finding that identical foundations sustain opposing narratives across Chinese and American commentators challenges any straightforward mapping of moral language onto political orientation and calls for greater interpretive caution in computational moral analysis. Practically, the results underscore the growing influence of platform-native short-form video creators as moral entrepreneurs who translate distant geopolitical events into emotionally resonant, nationally calibrated narratives. The systematically divergent moral universes to which Chinese and American audiences are exposed, through commentators like Sima Nan and Aaron Parnas respectively, have tangible consequences for cross-cultural understanding, international public opinion, and the prospects for shared moral reasoning about global conflicts.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. The reliance on automatic speech recognition and machine translation for Chinese-language transcripts introduces a risk of semantic distortion in eMFD-based coding, potentially affecting the comparability of findings across languages. The single-commentator design, while suited to in-depth comparative analysis, limits the generalizability of results to the broader landscape of political commentary in each national context. Future research should address these constraints by expanding the comparative scope to additional national contexts and multilingual settings, incorporating a wider range of platform-native creators, and employing experimental methods to assess whether and how exposure to divergent moral frames causally shapes audience attitudes, policy preferences, and cross-national empathy. Such work would deepen our understanding of how short-form video platforms are redefining the moral grammar of international conflict communication in an era of increasing informational fragmentation.

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