

The 2022 Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Multimodal Framing Analysis of Chinese Mainstream Media Coverage on Douyin

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ABSTRACT

The mainstream media plays an essential role in the modern war in selecting the facts and making them salient. Prior research has concentrated on framing diverse wars from multiple perspectives, either verbal-only, visual-only or both. However, as the Russian and Ukrainian war constantly escalates, the multimodal framing of Chinese media video coverage on social media platforms (Douyin) has yet to be explored systematically and comprehensively. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to analyse how Chinese mainstream media apply multimodal frames (verbal, visual and aural) to construct their tendencies regarding the 2022 Russian and Ukrainian conflict on social media (Douyin). Based on multimodal framing analysis, the findings revealed that Chinese mainstream media on Douyin preferred the verbal frames of the military conflict and human interest, the visual frames of officials, combat and war machines, and the “stirring/tense” aural frame. Meanwhile, they had a neutral position and a pro-Russia slant. These multimodal framing strategies presented distinct relationships with slants. Specifically, only one morality verbal frame statistically correlates with particular slants. Surprisingly, no visual frames have a correlation with different news slants and all the aural frames are observed to have a statistical correlation with distinct slants. This study offers a multimodal perspective to framing analysis in international war reporting in the Chinese context. In practice, it might also offer valuable insights for mainstream media to enhance their narrative strategies when covering war videos on social media platforms.

Keywords: *Framing, multimodal framing analysis, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Chinese mainstream media, Douyin.*

INTRODUCTION

On February 24, 2022, Russia initiated a military invasion against Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. It has caused hundreds of thousands of Russians’ and Ukrainians’ deaths or injuries (OHCHR, 2023), great destruction in local homes, factories, and infrastructures, as well as billions of dollars in economic loss and immense environmental damage (Kirby, 2023). The humanitarian crisis has been exacerbated, and the war has compelled more than six million people to flee Ukraine (ODP, 2023).

Media and war in modern times are highly entangled. The majority of media research on the Russia-Ukraine conflict has primarily focused on the perspectives presented by those two respective belligerents’ media outlets (Da Costa Barreto et al., 2023; Susi et al., 2022). However, there is a scarcity of cross-national studies that examine this conflict from a Chinese perspective. As an important global power, China has an enormous influence, and its media narratives toward national and international audiences demonstrate a balancing act between maintaining domestic stability and shaping its international image. Meanwhile, Chinese media is the national mouthpiece, which can represent national ideologies toward certain issues. Therefore, examining the framing strategies employed by Chinese media is valuable for comprehending the correlation between their media tactics and the potential insertion of bias

in daily narratives to influence public opinion.

Moreover, framing analysis has proven effective in examining diverse news narratives across various wars or conflicts (Bhowmik & Fisher, 2023; Sahakyan, 2024; Young & Omosun, 2023). Whilst for the research on Chinese mainstream media framing strategies, most scholars are interested in focusing on a single media (Zhabotynska & Ryzhova, 2022) or comparing several news outlets (Kuang & Wei, 2018; Wang, 2017), causing a shortage of investigations on the overall Chinese media's orientation towards certain issues. Therefore, the study takes advantage of social media platforms to fill this vacancy. Social media serves as a digital platform utilised by individuals to establish social networks or connections with others who share similar interests, engage in group activities, or partake in personal interactions within the same profession (Suryanto et al., 2024). Especially for Douyin, one of the most popular Chinese social media platforms with substantial users (CNNIC, 2023) and its features (sorted by "likes") can be conducive to accurately locating the most widely circulated and influential news videos regarding the issue to explore the holistic Chinese media narratives and their slants.

Nowadays, multimodality is typical of contemporary news, and some researchers have redirected their focus from textual-only or visual-only towards the multimodal framing strategies employed in global issues, such as human health (Dan, 2018), climate change (Dancygier, 2023), and diverse conflicts/wars (Doufesh & Briel, 2021; Haigh & Bruce, 2017; Zhabotynska & Ryzhova, 2022). Besides, a few studies have investigated the news slant or objectivity of particular media in a Chinese context (Aftab et al., 2020; Fong et al., 2020). However, a comprehensive investigation into the interplay between individual multimodal frames and news slants in video coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict by Chinese mainstream media still remains relatively limited.

Overall, it can be concluded that there is a lack of investigation on the relationship between multimodal frames and holistic media slant toward the Russo-Ukrainian conflict on Douyin in the Chinese context. If these are not fully researched, it will impede the advancement of multimodal war-framing analysis research under the circumstances of Chinese social media, thereby hindering its potential diverse contributions to scholarly discourse. Therefore, to fill these gaps, the objective of this study is to explore how Chinese mainstream media apply multimodal frames (verbal, visual and aural) to construct their bias regarding the 2022 Russian and Ukrainian conflict on social media (Douyin). Hence, this study employs a multimodal framing analysis approach to answer the following questions.

RQ1: How did the selected Chinese video coverage verbally, visually and aurally frame the 2022 Russo-Ukraine conflict on Douyin?

RQ2: What were the news slants (pro-Russia, pro-Ukraine or neutral) of the selected Chinese video coverage regarding the 2022 Russo-Ukraine conflict on Douyin?

RQ3: What is the relationship between multimodal frames and news slants of the selected Chinese video coverage regarding the 2022 Russo-Ukraine conflict on Douyin?

In what follows, this research provides a concise introduction to the fundamental concept and pertinent empirical studies. Additionally, an elaborate exposition of the research methodology is presented. Subsequent sections encompass the findings and ensuing discussion. Ultimately, this study concludes that multimodal framing analysis offers a multidimensional perspective for comprehending international war reporting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

On February 24, 2022, Russia initiated a military invasion against Ukraine, causing significant loss of life, destruction, and economic damage (BBC News, 2023). Both sides continue to dispute the war's cause. Russia blames NATO's eastward expansion, citing a broken 1990 promise, while Ukraine argues its actions are a response to Russia's 2014 Crimea annexation. As a significant global force, China wields substantial influence in mediating the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, as well as upholding global stability. On one side, China has not blamed Russia for starting the war but for the enlargement of NATO as the main cause. After the conflict broke out, China kept a close economic tie with Russia, whereas some Western nations and firms started to sanction Russia in its initial stage, including banning imports of oil and exports of hi-tech products. China has then been accused as "an honest broker" (BBC News, 2023) to Russia. Chinese leader Xi Jinping visited Mosco and met with Vladimir Putin, both in an official and unofficial capacity, from March 20th to 22nd, 2023 (Gan, 2023; Crawford, 2023). On the other side, China has emphasised respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity and has provided Ukraine with over \$2 million in humanitarian aid (Xin, 2022). In addition, China has abstained during United Nations votes on the war in Ukraine (Bourgeois-Fortin et al., 2022). On 26th April 2023, Xi Jinping had a conversation with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy through an hour-long phone call (Dahiya et al., 2023). Zelenskyy depicted it as "long and meaningful" and emphasised "a just and sustainable peace for Ukraine" (Dahiya et al., 2023). Thus, China's position on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has been complicated according to diplomatic actions.

Chinese mainstream media serves as the mouthpiece of China's authorities, which is often criticised in Western journalism (Mattingly & Yao, 2022). Traditionally, the Chinese media system mainly refers to the organ newspaper, radio stations, and television stations of the Party Committee of the central government, provinces, and urban areas, such as People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency (XNA), China Daily, and China Central Television (CCTV). They are identified as government-sponsored and adhere to the principles of the Party spirit. Especially for these international agendas, it has decisive and arbitrary discourse power to frame the issue due to local audiences hardly approaching first-hand information and the shortage of specific news resources.

However, in the wake of contemporary communication technology advancement, mainstream media has faced fierce disempowerment from social media. Social media serves as a digital platform utilised by individuals to establish social networks or connections with others who share similar interests, engage in group activities, or partake in personal interactions within the same profession (Suryanto et al., 2024). It has empowered Chinese netizens who traditionally were one-dimensional accepted audiences to have more autonomous rights to express themselves and participate in political discussions in a "virtual moderated public space" (Wu, 2024), discomfiting the power of mainstream media. To solve this embarrassing situation, in the fourth meeting of the Leading Group for Deepening Reform of the CPC Central Committee, Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping proposed that the integration of traditional and emerging media necessitates adherence to media principles, bolstering internet thinking, and harnessing advanced technology in order to facilitate a modern communication system that fosters competitive and diverse media groups (Xinhua News, 2014). This is an essential strategic plan of the central government in propagating ideology and culture. Research on mainstream narratives on new media platforms in Chinese circumstances is indispensable for future development.

Among these, Douyin, one of the most popular short-video platforms in China, has reached a daily active user base of 400 million and monthly streams of 400 billion (Massive Arithmetic, 2023). The number of users has consistently grown over the years, reaching 500 million in 2022, which accounts for over half of the country's internet users (1,078 million) (CNNIC, 2023). Meanwhile, it provides a comparatively more flexible environment for a wide range of perspectives, opinions, and emotions (Zhang & Li, 2020). It assumes a pivotal role in the continuous media convergence occurring in China by actively advocating for SDGs, fostering public engagement in tackling poverty and social welfare issues, and offering valuable insights to news content producers aiming to enrich their storytelling techniques and enhance user involvement on mobile platforms (Ren, 2024). Therefore, regarding the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian conflict, it is no exaggeration to say that Douyin has become a significant battlefield for war narratives due to its potential large-scale effects.

KEY CONCEPTS AND EMPIRICAL STUDIES

There exist diverse theoretical and empirical viewpoints regarding the analysis of news framing. However, this study specifically adopts Entman's (1993) perspective to elucidate the anticipation of specific components and the portrayal of distinct perceived realities. As he considered, framing essentially includes the "selection and salience" of reality, enabling individuals to understand certain events and "to locate, perceive, identify and label" occurrences.

Derive from that, multimodal framing analysis refers to the analysis of messages that combine various representational and communicative modes, such as text, visuals, and sometimes sound, involving understanding how multimodal elements contribute to framing a particular issue or person (Dan, 2018) so as to shape how an issue is framed and perceived by audiences (Wozniak et al., 2015). Multimodality is typical of contemporary news in which purely verbal or purely visual messages are uncommon (Dan, 2018). Analysing multimodal elements together provides a more complete understanding of how a message is framed.

Thus, it has caused a gradual shift in framing research from the textual-only (Bhowmik & Fisher, 2023; McGlynn, 2020) or visual-only (Da Costa Barreto et al., 2023; Manuel Moreno-Mercado, 2020; Ojala et al., 2017) to multimodal frames employed in global issues, such as human health (Dan, 2018), climate change (Dancygier, 2023), and diverse conflicts/wars (Doufesh & Briel, 2021; Haigh & Bruce, 2017; Zhabotynska & Ryzhova, 2022). For instance, Dan (2018) examined how people living with HIV/AIDS are framed in various communication circumstances through a case study, emphasising the importance of analysing both words and visuals to provide a more comprehensive understanding of media messages (Dan, 2018). Dancygier (2023) investigated the ability of frame analysis to explain the selection of various multimodal artefacts, such as those combining images and text, that tackle climate change concerns. Doufesh and Briel (2021) applied multimodal content analysis to investigate the media portrayal of the demonstrations that took place in Gaza's borders with Israel in 2018. Notably, Zhabotynska and Ryzhova (2022) analysed articles containing political cartoons to identify the political, multimodal and cognitive linguistics of pro-Russia Chinese state media, *Global Times*, regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict between March and May 2022. However, investigating the multimodal framing strategy of conflict/war video coverage, especially for the Russian and Ukrainian conflict, still remains relatively limited.

In addition, researching the holistic media narratives of certain countries toward certain issues in the Chinese context is quite limited. Vast scholars were interested in focusing on a single media or comparing two or several news outlets instead of researching the holistic media slants of certain countries toward certain issues. For instance, Zhabotynska and Ryzhova (2022) analysed the political, multimodal and cognitive linguistics of pro-Russia Chinese state media, *Global Times*, regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict between March and May 2022. Wang (2017) examined how mainland China and Taiwan media represent terrorist attacks in China, in which news representations are interrelated with “coexisting identity and confrontation” between the two. Kuang and Wei (2018) compared party and nonparty newspapers in China about framing nationally and locally sensitive issues. Even though certain political orientations could be figured out to some degree by a limited number of media investigations, they could not be comprehensively identified and perceived.

Other than that, previous research has just simply explored the news slant/objectivity of particular media in a Chinese context (Aftab et al., 2020; Fong et al., 2020). For instance, the study by Aftab et al. (2020) examined how English newspapers in China framed the Indo-Pak conflict over Kashmir in 2019, revealing a positive slant towards Kashmir and a negative slant towards the Indian Government/military. In the research by Fong et al. (2020), they found that Chinese newspapers exhibited strong support for their home country, while Malaysian newspapers displayed varying stances. Nevertheless, a deep investigation of the correlations between that and the multimodal war frames and news slants in the Chinese context has seldom been undertaken.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Given the presence of diverse elements in Chinese video coverage on Douyin, which deviates from the strict narrative formats observed in traditional television news broadcasts, this study employs a three-level multimodal framing analysis encompassing verbal/textual, visual, and aural frames.

In terms of verbal level, five generic frames developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) are employed, and some adjustments have been made to certain war contexts (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005). The final verbal frames include the 1) military conflict frame, emphasising the military action, military operation or military strategy, focusing on troops, equipment, etc.; 2) human interest frame, emphasising the human participants in the event, with more “soft news” focus on the plight of involved parties; 3) responsibility frame, emphasising the certain party/person responsible for the event; 4) economic consequence frame, presenting an event, problem, or issue regarding its economic consequences on an individual, group, institution, region, or country; 5) morality frame, interpreting an event or issue in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions.

In terms of the visual level, it is undoubtedly significant to see the preference for images that Chinese media posed in their video on Douyin. Visual frames are derived from the recognition of design elements and the organisation or combination of visual sensations into “themes” based on established principles of organisation (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). The study coded visual elements based on the presence or absence of actors, objects, and actions in each video, with consultation from prior research (Griffin & Lee, 1995; Major, 2013; Makhortykh & Sydorova, 2017), which are identified as officials (such as national leaders and normal officials), combat (such as military actions and operations), War machines (such as soldiers and arsenal), violence of war (such as victims, casualties and destruction), and experts

(such as professional commentators and anchors/journalists only).

In terms of the aural level, the coder will record the music types of each video. Douyin platform was born as an interactive music platform between the audience and videos. Although some videos can also have no background music, mainstream media would like to combine music and narratives to construct the news. Therefore, the study investigates the music types of each video as they can bring different emotions to the audience, such as stirring/tense, solemn/sorrowful, and other/absent.

METHODOLOGY

This research applies multimodal framing analysis to explore the multimodal war frames and media orientation of Chinese mainstream media concerning the 2022 Russian—Ukrainian conflict on Douyin. All data analysis is conducted with Excel and SPSS. This section will discuss the specific method of the study.

a. Samples and Data Collection

The present study does not focus on specific mainstream media accounts to explore multimodal framing. Instead, it chose the most popular or circulated videos about the 2022 Russian—Ukrainian conflict posted by Chinese mainstream media on Douyin. The keywords such as “俄乌 (Russia Ukraine),” “俄乌冲突 (Russia and Ukraine conflict),” “俄罗斯 (Russia),” “乌克兰 (Ukraine),” “普京 (Putin)” and “泽连斯基 (Zelensky)” were entered into the search bar of Douyin and sorted in descending order according to the number of “likes” to obtain the 50 most popular and widely circulated videos for each keyword. There are several other metrics, such as “views” and “comments”, that can be considered as additional indicators of video popularity. However, the metric of “likes” stands out due to its relative ease of acquisition and difficulty in being controlled or deleted by media accounts.

The duration from February 24th, 2022, to February 24th, 2023, was deliberately selected to coincide with the onset of the Russo-Ukraine conflict. A one-year period is deemed adequate for conducting a relatively comprehensive and systematic investigation. Finally, after excluding the unofficial media accounts and irrelevant and repeated videos, 147 videos were left as an entire sample.

Illustratively, although it cannot capture every single video about this conflict on Douyin, all the “likes” of the selected video, from around 1,532,000 to 5,353, manifest the most related and widely circulated clips responding to the mainstream media regarding this conflict have been collected. Moreover, data collection was conducted on the Douyin mobile application, which differs from its web-based counterpart. At last, the recording process was executed on April 27th, 2023, as there was ample time for the latest videos (circa February 24th, 2023) to gain widespread attention. Although views/likes/comments/shares might continue to update beyond this date, further updates are not taken into consideration in further study.

b. Coding and Analysing Procedure

In order to answer the first question, the study uses codes based on three levels: verbal, visual, and aural. For the verbal framing coding procedure, the present study considers all the verbal and textual elements. The videos posted by mainstream media on social media platforms do not need to strictly follow broadcasting guidelines, combined with the “short” characteristic of the Douyin platform; they sometimes even have no voice and only last several minutes

occasionally. Thus, the descriptions of each video are also taken into consideration. For the visual framing, based on the “theme” of each scene, visual frames are identified as officials (including national leaders), combat, War machines (such as soldiers and arsenal), violence of war (such as victims, casualties and destruction), and experts (such as professional commentators and anchors/journalists only). For the aural framing, the coder records the music types of each video, namely stirring/tense, solemn/sorrowful, and other/absent.

In order to answer the second question, it is coded from three perspectives: 1) “pro-Russia”, 2) “pro-Ukraine”, and 3) “neutral”. Yet, if certain news slants are challenging to discern when examining video content due to the complex texts, analysing the video descriptions is a priority. Overall, for the deductive coding procedure, a set of coding variables should be answered with either “1/yes” or “0/no” for each video by two coders. If more than one verbal, visual, or aural frame is presented in one video, all frames should be coded.

c. *Reliability*

To guarantee the accuracy of the analysis, the first author and the other researcher familiar with framing analysis went through the data over two weeks. After conducting an inter-coder reliability test using Holsti’s CR, the coders scored 0.85, indicating a high level of reliability between them. This means that the statistical data gathered can be confidently utilised. In case of discrepancies, two coders engaged in discussions and reached a consensus on the coding. After that, all the analysis procedures were performed using EXCEL and SPSS.

RESULTS

The simple statistical analysis examined the first research question of how the selected Chinese video coverage multimodally framed the Russo-Ukraine conflict on Douyin in terms of verbal discourses, visual cues, and aural music.

Regarding the multimodal frames (RQ1), the verbal frames are illustrated in Table 1. The military conflict emerges as the predominant frame, constituting 57.82% of videos (85). The human interest frame closely follows with a utilisation rate of 34.01%, encompassing 50 videos. The morality frame is evident in 34 videos, accounting for approximately 23.13%. Furthermore, the responsibility frame is slightly more prevalent than one-fifth, represented by 32 videos. Lastly, among the selected videos, the economic consequence frame exhibits relatively limited usage at only 13.61%, corresponding to a mere count of 20.

Table 1: The frequency and percentage of verbal frames in selected videos (N=147)

Verbal Frames	Frequency	Percentage
Military conflict	85	57.82%
Human interest	50	34.01%
Morality	34	23.13%
Responsibility	32	21.77%
Economic consequences	20	13.61%

Source: Own compilation

In terms of multiple visual frames, Table 2 presents five major visual categories. The images featuring officials are the most preferred for Chinese video coverage on Douyin, with a utilisation rate of 51.02% (75 videos). Following closely are combat and War machines, accounting for 35.37% with 52 videos and 34.69% with 51 videos, respectively. Additionally,

the visual frame depicting the violence of war is portrayed in 20.41% (30) of the selected videos. Finally, experts are the least favoured choice of imagery, constituting only 19.05%, or 28 videos.

Table 2: The frequency and percentage of visual frames in selected videos (N=147)

Visual frames	Frequency	Percentage
Officials	75	51.02%
Combat	52	35.37%
War machines	51	34.69%
Violence of war	30	20.41%
Experts	28	19.05%

Source: Own compilation

In terms of aural frames, as depicted in Table 3, more than half of the videos employed Stirring/Tense music as their chosen aural strategy, amounting to 85 videos. However, approximately 30% of the videos either featured alternative background music or lacked any musical accompaniment, accounting for 44 videos. Lastly, solemn/sorrowful music was utilised in a total of 18 videos, constituting 12.24% of the sample size.

Table 3: The frequency and percentage of aural frames in selected videos (N=147)

Aural frames	Frequency	Percentage
Stirring/Tense	85	57.82%
Others/Absence	44	29.93%
Solemn/Sorrowful	18	12.24%
Total	147	100.00%

Source: Own compilation

The second research question (RQ2) aims to analyse the news slants towards the Russian and Ukrainian conflict in relation to video coverage by Chinese mainstream media on Douyin. According to Table 4, among a total of 147 videos, over half of the sample exhibit no specific position or demonstrate neutral perspectives, accounting for 51.02%. Additionally, 64 videos overtly or covertly express support towards Russia, constituting 43.54%. Following this is a slant favouring pro-Ukraine with only 8 videos, representing 5.44% of the sample.

Table 4: The news slants of selected videos (N=147)

News slants	Frequency	Percentage
Neutral	75	51.02%
Pro-Russia	64	43.54%
Pro-Ukraine	8	5.44%
Total	147	100.00%

Source: Own compilation

The third research question (RQ3) investigates the relationship between different multimodal frame types and news slants in the selected Chinese video coverage of the Russo-Ukraine conflict on Douyin. The findings are presented in Table 5. Regarding verbal frames, there is a statistically significant relationship between the morality frame and slants ($\chi^2 =$

7.818, $p = .020$). The effect size, as measured by Cramer's V (.231), suggests a moderate association. To be specific, according to Adjusted Residual, it can be concluded that the neutral slant (AR= -2.5) appears significantly less than expected when the morality frame is present, indicating a negative association and the pro-Ukraine slant (AR=1.9) occurs slightly more than expected, implying a possible association but not definitively significant. Besides, other verbal frames ($p < .050$) show no statistical relationship with news slants. Surprisingly, no visual frames exhibit a statistical relationship with news slants ($p < .050$).

Table 5: The Chi-square of multimodal frames (N=147)

Multimodal frames	Slants			Adjusted Residual (Slants)		
	χ^2	p	Cramer's V	Neutral	Pro-Russia	Pro-Ukraine
Verbal frames						
Military Conflict	3.244	.197	.149	-1.8	1.7	.3
Human interest	3.270	.195	.149	-.9	1.5	-1.3
Morality	7.818	.020	.231	-2.5	1.7	1.9
Responsibility	4.627	.099	.177	-2.1	2.0	.2
Economic consequences	4.462	.107	.174	-2.0	2.1	-.1
Visual frames						
Officials	2.616	.270	.133	1.6	-1.2	-.8
Combat	1.249	.536	.092	-.9	.5	.9
War machines	3.862	.145	.162	-1.0	1.7	-1.4
Violence of war	3.002	.221	.143	-.5	1.2	-1.5
Experts	.697	.706	.069	-.5	.8	-.5
Aural frames						
Stirring/Tense	10.471	.005	.267	3.2	-3.0	-.5
Others/Absence	11.888	.003	.284	-2.3	3.2	-1.9
Solemn/Sorrowful	11.874	.003	.284	-1.6	.1	3.4

Source: Own compilation

But interestingly, regarding aural frames, there are statistically significant relationships between all the music frames and slants. For the stirring/tense frame, there is a statistically significant relationship between that and slants ($\chi^2 = 10.471$, $p = .005$). The effect size suggests a moderate association (Cramer's V=.267). According to the Adjusted Residuals, the pro-Ukraine slant (AR = 3.2) appears significantly more than expected, indicating a strong positive association. The neutral slant (AR = -3.0) appears significantly less than expected, indicating a negative association. The Others/Absence frame shows a statistically significant relationship between the frame and slants ($\chi^2 = 11.888$, $p = .003$), with Cramer's V (.284) suggesting a moderate association. Specifically, the pro-Russia slant (AR = 3.2) appears significantly more than expected, indicating a strong positive association. The neutral slant (AR = -2.3) appears significantly less than expected, indicating a negative association. The pro-Ukraine slant (AR = -1.9) appears slightly less than expected, suggesting a possible negative association, but not definitively significant. Finally, there is a statistically significant relationship between the Solemn/Sorrowful frame and slants ($\chi^2 = 11.874$, $p = .003$). The effect size suggests a moderate association (Cramer's V= .284). Among these, only the pro-Ukraine slant (AR = 3.4) appears significantly more than expected, indicating a strong positive association.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study on Chinese video coverage of the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian conflict on Douyin showed that they preferred the verbal frames of the military conflict and human interest, the visual frames of officials, combat and war machines, and the “stirring/tense” aural frame. Meanwhile, Chinese video coverage of Douyin indicates a neutral position and pro-Russia slant. These multimodal framing strategies present distinct relationships with slants.

Firstly, multimodal frames were differently presented by Chinese mainstream media on Douyin. Regarding the verbal frames, the study revealed that the military conflict frame was the predominant framing approach, which aligns with previous research conducted by Dimitrova and Strömbäck (2005) as well as Hossain (Hossain, 2014). This suggests that video content depicting warfare places a greater emphasis on reporting on military operations and strategies. This might be because the attributes of war news are full of military strategy, disagreements, and reproaching. The other reason is that most partial conflicts remained escalating in the first year, and military actions undoubtedly became the focus of media coverage.

Meanwhile, the human interest frame was also mainly used by Chinese media on Douyin. For example, the description of a video shows “an elderly Ukrainian woman confused Russian and Ukrainian troops! She held up a Soviet flag to welcome the Russian troops, but then stepped on a Ukrainian soldier’s face right in front of them” (乌克兰老奶奶弄混俄乌军队！举着苏联红旗欢迎俄军，却补乌军士兵当面踩在脚下#俄乌局势). Thus, to a certain extent, Chinese media also considers the emotions and life experiences of civilians and individuals on social media. However, this is not consistent with previous research (Zhang et al., 2024).

In contrast, the morality, responsibility and economic consequences frames were used less frequently, which is inconsistent with some other studies (Ting et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). For example, Zhang and his colleagues (2024) found that the responsibility and morality frames were mainly used by another social media, Weibo, which was related to framing NATO in China during the 2022 war in Ukraine. However, the current study does not show a preference for these frames.

Regarding the visual frames, the images of officials, especially national leaders such as Putin and Zelenskyy, are the prominent visual frames presented in the videos. This is aligned with the study conducted by Luther and Zhou (2005). In 2005, Luther and Zhou proposed a leadership frame, which Chinese media prefer to use for the “activities, actions, or speeches of a leader of a nation, an institution, a government agency, or a group or highlights the discussion and assessment of the leadership” (Kuang & Wei, 2018), especially in international news (Zhang & Fleming, 2005). This can be consistently presented in visual images. Under the war circumstance, this might have been triggered by highlighting not only the authority of the news but also the course of the war and the responsibility of the decision-makers. For example, Putin and Zelenskyy, two leaders of belligerents, are the most mentioned figures because they are on behalf of the direction of the war to some degree. The extensive usage of the leaders’ images represents Chinese characteristics. However, overusing that might cause the news to slant in reporting, especially when only giving a one-sided leadership narrative, which is easily restricted by the short video length.

Additionally, the visual frames of combat and war machines are also, to some degree, mainly presented in these videos. This is due in no small part to the inherent nature of war itself, with its high level of involvement on the battlefield, soldiers, weapons, and so on.

However, the images of violence of war and experts are less employed. Lynch and McGoldrick (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2013) found that individuals who viewed peace journalism frames on television exhibited reduced levels of anger and fear compared to those exposed to war-framed narratives. Additionally, they displayed higher levels of hope and empathy while less inclined to assign blame solely to one side involved in the conflict. Therefore, the impact of the bloody scene should not be overlooked. This might lead to Chinese mainstream media coverage sticking to their rules even on this entertainment platform.

Regarding the aural frames, stirring/tense background music is highly integrated with the Russia-Ukraine conflict on Douyin, whereas the “solemn/sorrowful” aural frames were less applied in selected videos. This indicates that videos are less focused on evoking empathy or sorrow and instead prioritise urgency and tension. The possible reason for this could be attributed to the intense nature of the war, as videos aim to evoke uplifting emotions in the audience. In fact, sound is a powerful acoustic phenomenon that reconfigures our relationships with one another and the world we share (Kanngieser, 2012). It creates knowledge environments and shapes power structures (Kanngieser, 2015; Rae, 2023) in which the social, oral, and aural dimensions are intricately intertwined (Rae, 2023; Wood et al., 2007). The stirring/tense background music brings the audience into a significant and not-to-be-sniffed situation for this war or a certain topic. Meanwhile, the “others/absence” aural aspect remains unneglected. This might be due to Douyin's characteristics as a social media platform for music. Even mainstream media cater to the trend of loose policy environments. Secondly, the news slants of Chinese media on Douyin were somewhat inconsistent with previous studies. Around half of Chinese video coverage seems neutral or does not take a position. This aligned with China's diplomacy, which is commonly regarded as the principle of non-intervention and peaceful settlement of disputes. As can be seen, on Douyin, Chinese media, to a certain degree, still practice their objectivity criterion, insisting on its responsibility as a state's official mouthpiece even in this comparatively loose environment.

However, among the other half, namely tendentious reports, the vast majority of videos display support for Russian authorities, whereas very little show their tendency toward Ukraine. For example, a description of a video presents “Reality can be brutal, and Putin managed to restrain his anger this time!” (现实很残酷，普京这次强忍住了愤怒!), conveyed its sympathy and acknowledgement towards Putin while expressing criticism and reproach towards the opposing parties. Interestingly, in some videos, although not explicitly expressing their support for Russia, the audience is subtly influenced to align with Russia. For instance, when accusing the responsible sides of the war, Ukraine is frequently blamed for causing the war due to its breaking words and constantly expanding eastward. This finding is consistent with the study by Zhabotynska and Ryzhova (2022) as they found the Chinese mainstream media tends to echo a Russian perspective on the Russia and Ukraine conflict, avoiding assigning blame solely on Moscow for its military intervention and demonstrating empathy towards Russia's position. Chinese media on Douyin still construct a narrative or a carefully crafted account aimed at international readers to influence their perspective in favour of Russia.

The reasons for the Chinese attitudes toward Russia and Ukraine are rather complicated. The two countries maintained a standard Communist system until the Soviet Union was dismantled. Currently, even if the two ruling parties are not aligned, they still have close international relations. Moreover, China and Russia are geographically adjacent, so their territorial security is closely intertwined. Therefore, on the one hand, China sticks to its

principles of non-intervention and peaceful settlement of disputes to have most video coverage with a neutral position; on the other hand, news slants supporting Russia can also be very much recognised in these videos.

Thirdly, different multimodal framing strategies present distinct relationships with slants toward Russia and Ukraine. Only one morality verbal frame shows a statistical correlation with particular slants. This might be because when referring to moral evaluation, its inclination is more obvious. For example, the description of a video displays that “Ukrainian military video taunted dead Russian soldier’s mother: Your son is dead, and dogs ate his body” (乌军视频挑衅阵亡俄军母亲：你儿子死了，尸体会被狗吃掉). This implies a moral judgment that Russian soldiers exhibit aberrant and malevolent behaviour, while the Russian populace is portrayed as innocent, indicating a pro-Russian inclination. But surprisingly, no visual frames correlate with different news slants. Partly because the image’s semantics on these videos are somewhat vague and have multiple connotations, it is difficult to discern the bias in the image without interpreting it alongside text.

Last but not least, what is interesting is that all the aural frames are observed to have a statistical correlation with distinct slants. Essentially, sound can introduce innovative connections to the world, transform existing paradigms and construct novel formations (Kangieser, 2015). The effect of emotions upon the voice is recognised by all people (Blanton, 1915), and it is such a crucial element in eliciting emotions. Therefore, the aural framing applied by Chinese mainstream media has a very strong directionality, guiding audiences to different biases to complete the media’s power control.

CONCLUSION

This research conducts a multimodal framing analysis to achieve the primary objective: to analyse how Chinese mainstream media apply multimodal frames (verbal, visual and aural) to construct their slants regarding the 2022 Russian and Ukrainian conflict on social media (Douyin). The findings revealed the preference for the verbal frames of the military conflict and human interest, the visual frames of officials, combat and war machines, and the stirring/tense aural frame. Meanwhile, Chinese video coverage of Douyin indicates a neutral position and pro-Russia slant. These multimodal framing strategies present distinct relationships with slants. Specifically, only one morality verbal frame statistically correlates with particular slants. Surprisingly, no visual frames correlate with different news slants and all the aural frames are observed to have a statistical correlation with distinct slants.

The present study represents one of the pioneering endeavours to identify the correlations between multimodal frames and news slants. This contribution significantly enhances the scope of multimodal perspectives for framing analysis in international reports. Moreover, it holds potential implications for mainstream media in formulating a more compelling narrative strategy for war video coverage on social media platforms. Despite the significance, it is important to consider the findings and interpretations within the limitations of this study. First, due to the method of counting the actors/objects/actions of the scenes, the visual framing analysis might lose some implied meanings. Second, the aural framing analysis in this study is comparatively immature. So, further studies can comprehensively or computably take these into account.

BIODATA

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