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To cite this article: Bumgi Min & Luwei Rose Luqiu (2021) How Propaganda Techniques Leverage Their Advantages: A Cross-national Study of the Effects of Chinese International Propaganda on the U.S. and South Korean Audiences, *Political Communication*, 38:3, 305-325, DOI: [10.1080/10584609.2020.1763524](https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1763524)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1763524>



Published online: 23 May 2020.



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# How Propaganda Techniques Leverage Their Advantages: A Cross-national Study of the Effects of Chinese International Propaganda on the U.S. and South Korean Audiences

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## ABSTRACT

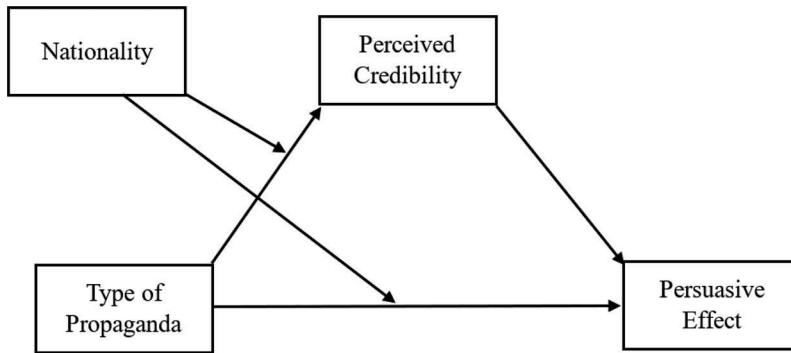
The aim of this study is to explore the effects of recent Chinese international propaganda by adopting a conditional process analysis of U.S. and South Korean audiences. Our study yields three major findings. First, perceived credibility plays a significant role as a mediator between new propaganda and its persuasive effect. Second, both the perceived credibility of a message and its persuasive effect are moderated by the nationality of the audience (American or Korean in our study). Third, the indirect persuasive effect of a piece of Chinese international propaganda, as mediated through its perceived credibility, is further moderated by the nationality of the audience (i.e., American or Korean). This paper thus stands to contribute to cross-national studies of the media effect of international propaganda by identifying factors associated with perceived credibility and the persuasive effect and assessing the influence of propaganda on public attitudes in other nations.

## KEYWORDS

international propaganda;  
public diplomacy; media  
effect; cross-national study;  
perceived credibility

The Internet provides new channels for the distribution of propaganda sponsored by foreign nations in societies characterized by a free flow of information. The Chinese Communist Party (hereafter the CCP) uses the Internet to control dissent and spread its ideology domestically and internationally. The CCP's international propaganda efforts take various forms, including the acquisition of media outlets, buying of space in foreign mainstream media, expansion of its own media networks, and use of the Internet to disseminate its political messages. In the latter context, the CCP has been creating videos that target international audiences since 2013 (Bandurski, 2016).

There is abundant literature on the systems responsible for the CCP's domestic propaganda products and their effects (Wasserman, 2016; Wu, 2016; Zhang & Mwangi, 2016). In 1978, the *Xinhua News Agency*, China's largest state media outlet, was reformed to adapt its mission to the government's goal of making the country a world superpower (Hong, 2011). A study of Chinese citizens living in urban areas has demonstrated the effectiveness of the CCP's propaganda in mobilizing political support (Shi et al., 2011); another has shown that the regular consumption of news fosters national pride and political trust in China generally (Shen & Guo, 2013). China's soft power campaign to persuade international audiences through traditional media has also received some



**Figure 1.** Our conceptual model in which the persuasive effect of a given piece of propaganda is moderated by nationality, and perceived credibility is the proposed mediator of the conditional effect of the propaganda on the persuasive effect.

scholarly attention (Zhang & Han, 2013). Although a few cross-national studies examined the influence of Chinese media on Africa (Bailard, 2016; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018), the effects of the CCP's international propaganda efforts, especially those delivered anonymously over the Internet, have not been extensively studied.

In this study, the CCP's international propaganda serves as a case study to demonstrate the effect of government propaganda directed at an international audience in the U.S. and South Korea (hereafter Korea) over the Internet. The aim is to contribute to the understanding of government propaganda in all of its current complexity by assessing its dissemination through this new distribution channel in the effort to exert influence over foreign nations. The media effect of international propaganda has been subjected to little quantitative, country-level, cross-national analysis. Our cross-national comparison of the audience in the United States and Korea documents the effectiveness of new forms of international propaganda and offers three primary theoretical contributions using two variables: perceived credibility and nationality (see Figure 1). First, this analysis demonstrates that perceived credibility mediates the relationship between a new CCP propaganda and its persuasive effect. Second, both the perceived credibility of a message and its persuasive effect are moderated by the nationality of the audience (American or Korean in our study). Third, we demonstrate that the indirect persuasive effect of a piece of Chinese international propaganda, as mediated through its perceived credibility, is further moderated by the nationality of the audience (i.e., American or Korean).

### Public Diplomacy, Soft Power, and International Propaganda

As the outset, it is imperative to clarify the relationships among public diplomacy, soft power, and intentional propaganda in China to operationalize the concept of international propaganda for our research. A survey of journal articles reveals a dramatic increase since the 1980s in the use of the term "public diplomacy," rather than "international propaganda," in studies of the Chinese government's overseas promotion of the state image and public policy (Chang & Lin, 2014). Many scholars and professionals understand the relationship between public diplomacy and propaganda in this way (Creemers, 2015;

Gilboa, 2008): they see public diplomacy as an outgrowth of propaganda, with which it shares historical roots and characteristics (Melissen, 2005).

The concept of public diplomacy began to receive increased attention in the context of “soft power” (Cull, 2013), a term coined by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s and further developed in his 2004 book that is now widely accepted in the international arena (Nye, 2004). Nye defines soft power as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment”, and he argues that culture, values, and policies are the major resources of a country’s soft power (Nye, 2008, p. 94). Nye (2011) also emphasizes public diplomacy as an effective way to promote soft power in the context of attempts to combat transnational terrorism through persuasion. He distinguishes soft power from propaganda, which lacks credibility (Nye, 2003).

On the government level, “public diplomacy” was used as a term of art in the United States in the 1960s to refer to government-sponsored propaganda overseas, while the term “propaganda” was reserved for deprecating foes on the left and right (Cull, 2008). In China, the concept of soft power quickly became popular among political leaders, scholars, and journalists in the context of debates regarding China’s rise (Li, 2008). The term was written into the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2007. With regard to “public diplomacy,” while the Chinese government has engaged in activities that could be described as such since the late 1990s, discussion regarding professionalizing and strategizing this effort did not begin until the mid-2000s (D’Hooghe, 2005). Open and frequent mentions by party-state officials of the importance of soft power and public diplomacy raise questions regarding how these concepts relate to the party-state’s existing propaganda system. Edney (2012) argues that the Chinese government uses its own interpretation of soft power as an approach to both overseas and domestic propaganda. By globalizing its use of propaganda under the umbrella of soft power, the Chinese government blurs the lines separating international power and domestic politics. The interaction between domestic and international propaganda thus illustrates how the party manipulates public opinion, the perception of crises, and the official truth (Edney, 2014).

In this study, the CCP’s international public diplomacy activities are defined as part of its international propaganda campaign. Previous studies show that China’s soft power campaign has had only limited success in persuading international audiences (Bailard, 2016; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018; Zhang & Han, 2013). For example, Bailard (2016) and Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2018) demonstrate the limited influence of Chinese media in Africa. Our study, however, demonstrates that the CCP has realized this problem and has begun to respond to it by hiring international experts (Wong, 2016). Particularly, we pay attention to message credibility as a key factor in increasing propaganda’s persuasive effect. In the next section, we discuss how the persuasive effect of propaganda relates to its message credibility.

### **Message Credibility, the Persuasive Effect, and Propaganda**

According to the elaboration likelihood model (hereafter ELM), there is a tradeoff between argument processing and the operation of peripheral cues. When individuals have relatively little motivation or capacity to examine an issue-related argument, peripheral cues become more important for persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Numerous variables affect the tendency of individuals to process an issue-related argument in relatively more

objective or more biased ways (Carpenter, 2015). Perception that a messenger is biased can send an ideological cue to the recipients of a message regarding its content (Turner, 2007). In the case of political messages, the persuasive power depends on whether the recipients share the messenger's values (Nelson & Garst, 2005). High-quality arguments are more persuasive and have the greatest impact on attitudes when they are part of messages associated with issues relating to either health or politics (Mun et al., 2013; Park et al., 2007).

Source credibility is one factor contributing to the perceived message quality of a piece of propaganda and its capacity to influence (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Unsurprisingly, some sources inspire greater trust than others (Dou et al., 2012), and empirical evidence for the influence of the credibility of the message source on persuasion indicates that high-credibility sources are more effective than low-credibility sources (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Thus, when individuals generate primary positive thoughts in response to a message that contains strong arguments and then learn the source, low-credibility sources foster less favorable attitudes (Jones et al., 2003).

Special propaganda techniques can be used to strengthen an argument, increase the perceived credibility of a message, and maximize its effect. Thus, for example, propagandists may reinforce audiences' willingness to adopt new attitudes or behaviors with the knowledge that messages that are in line with existing opinions and that beliefs appear to originate from within the in-group (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2014). Even in the online space, the perceived credibility plays an important role in increasing the persuasive effect (Hsieh et al., 2012).

The CCP has quickly adapted to the new media age and created a new form of propaganda (Zhao, 2016). Xi Jinping, who came to power in 2012, launched a new media management strategy in 2014. Domestically, the new Internet governance system under Xi's regime has been used for digital propaganda and social management work (Creemers, 2017; Repnikova & Fang, 2019). Internationally, the CCP's overseas propaganda activities through the new media became more ambitious with regard to promoting China's hard power in terms of a strong military and economic development and Xi's own ideology of the "Chinese Dream" (Brady, 2015). Compared to traditional propaganda, a new form of Chinese online propaganda has used a special strategy to increase its perceived credibility. According to Wong (2016), the CCP's new online propaganda outlet presents itself as a commercial production firm, so the audiences do not associate the content with Chinese government propaganda. This new strategy seems successful. A recent study measuring the source effect of the CCP's online propaganda has demonstrated that when an online video is credited to a non-CCP brand, its perceived credibility among U.S. audiences is significantly higher than that of the same video branded as a CCP product (Fang & Mutz, 2016).

A few studies have demonstrated that the persuasive effect of a message argument is mediated by its source credibility (DeBono & Harnish, 1988; Slater & Rouner, 1996). Following those studies, we assumed that perceived credibility is an important mediator of the persuasive effect after individuals have been exposed to a new CCP propaganda video. We accordingly proposed our first hypothesis:

**H1. The perceived credibility mediates the relationship between a new CCP propaganda and its persuasive effect.**

In our study, we adopted Meyer's (1988) measurements to operationalize the concept of perceived credibility. Following Webster's definition of credible as "reasonable grounds for being believed," Meyer proposed five levels to measure perceived credibility: fair, unbiased, tell the whole story, accurate, and can be trusted. He demonstrated these measurements' high validity through statistical results including strong correlations and Cronbach's alpha values among the five levels (Meyer, 1988). With respect to the definition of the persuasive effect, our study adopted Brady's (2015) argument. She argues that the CCP's international propaganda mainly targets non-Chinese foreigners in its effort to construct a positive image of the nation and the government (Brady, 2015). Following her argument, we operationalized the persuasive effect as an increasing positive image of the Chinese government.

### **The Persuasive Effect and Cross-National Variation**

Hypothesis 1 was designed to test *how* the CCP's new propaganda exerts a persuasive effect; it does not consider the question of *when* the given piece of propaganda is perceived and its persuasive effect is felt. To address this question, we took into account the role of nationality in the process of persuasion. Some scholars have claimed that messages can work in a broadly effective way regardless of variance among individuals. Thus, for example, Paul Kecskemeti (1956) documented the Soviet Union's success in international political communication using universalistic arguments, such as those directed against colonialism, to inspire active supporters in the West. Nevertheless, other studies have shown that persuasive messages are more effective when they incorporate persuasive interaction patterns and processes keyed to differences among individuals such as gender, language, education, and culture (Cacioppo et al., 1982; Giebels & Taylor, 2009; Kenton, 1989). Although new technology facilitates the targeting of an audience, it remains the case that differing emotional, cognitive, and attitudinal responses occur across countries (Aaker & Maheswaran, 1997; Orth et al., 2007).

Cross-cultural studies in the field of communications have made clear the influence of culture on the persuasive effect and other ways in which various cultures perceive and react to messages in distinct ways (Aladwani, 2013; Laroche et al., 2001; Yu & Shen, 2013). One of the first researchers to explore these issues, Hall (1976), categorized cultures as either high context or low context. He defined as high-context communications and messages those "in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit part of the message" and as low-context communications and messages those that are "vested in the explicit code" (p. 79). Okabe (1983) extended this approach by asserting that individuals living in high-context cultures – in East Asia, for example, – depend more on nonverbal and peripheral cues and, therefore, are particularly influenced by social context and pressure. By contrast, individuals in low-context cultures – in North America, for instance, – rely more on verbal cues and are thus more self-motivated. Building on these arguments, Laroche et al. (2001) explored the moderating influence of cultural differences between Chinese and Anglo-Canadians on the persuasive effect of fear appeal advertisement. Similarly, Yu and Shen (2013) used the cultural tendencies of individualism and collectivism – again contrasting North American and East Asian

countries, respectively – to explore the moderating effect of various cultural values on message framing and their combination within a message frame. The assumption underlying these two studies was that culture and nationality play significant roles in individuals' reactions to and perceptions of messages.

Although such cross-national studies have examined the effect of culture on the persuasive effect of a message in the contexts of health communication (Laroche et al., 2001; Yu & Shen, 2013) and information policy (Aladwani, 2013), relatively little research has been conducted on the effects of international propaganda. Recently, a few studies examined the influence of Chinese media abroad by focusing only on Africa (Bailard, 2016; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018). In an effort to help fill this gap, we investigated whether geographical and cultural proximity can serve as moderators of persuasion by analyzing audiences in the United States and Korea.

As the outset, we assumed that Koreans would be more susceptible than Americans to the perceived credibility and persuasive effect of the CCP's propaganda of both the new and old styles (compared with nonpropaganda). Our reasoning was that Koreans, as citizens of a neighboring country with close cultural and historical ties, understand China better than Americans and accordingly are more adept at processing information about the country. This assumption is consistent with the "cultural proximity" thesis, which describes an audience's "tending to prefer and select local or national cultural content that is more proximate and relevant to them" (Straubhaar, 1991, p. 43). Moreover, a recent study found that cultural proximity correlated significantly with a positive attitude toward regional media products (Yoo et al., 2014). To test this assumption, we combined new and old propaganda, operationalized the combination as "propaganda," and compared the result with nonpropaganda.

However, in regard to the CCP's new propaganda compared with its old propaganda, the perceived credibility and persuasive effect among Americans will be much stronger than among Koreans for two reasons. First, because the CCP's new propaganda concentrates on English-language propaganda and makes the United States one of its main targets; therefore, its presentation of content, including narration and style, is likely to be more relevant to and persuasive for Anglophone audiences. South Korea, as an advanced non-English speaking country, provides a useful comparandum in terms of language and rhetoric.

Second, following the argument made by Hall (1976), Okabe (1983), and Laroche et al. (2001), the audience in South Korea represents a high-context culture in our study, while the U.S. audience was chosen to represent a low-context culture. Individuals in low-context cultures depend more on verbal cues and are thus more self-motivated, while individuals in high-context cultures rely on social context and pressure. The CCP's new propaganda provides diverse verbal and visual cues through animation, music, and informal speech (Wong, 2016), while the old propaganda delivered fewer verbal and visual cues, relying instead on straight talk and behavioral modeling. According to those differences, we explored the further specific hypotheses:

**H2a: The relationship between the CCP's propaganda (compared with nonpropaganda) and its persuasive effect will be stronger for Korean audiences than for U.S. audiences.**



**H2b.** The relationship between the CCP's new propaganda (compared with the old propaganda) and its persuasive effect will be stronger for U.S. audiences than for Korean audiences.

**H3a:** The relationship between the CCP's propaganda (compared with nonpropaganda) and its perceived credibility will be stronger for Korean audiences than for U.S. audiences

**H3b.** The relationship between the CCP's new propaganda (compared with the old propaganda) and its perceived credibility will be stronger for U.S. audiences than for Korean audiences.

**H4a:** The indirect effect of the CCP's propaganda (compared with nonpropaganda) on its persuasive effect mediated through its perceived credibility will be stronger on Korean audiences than on U.S. audiences.

**H4b.** The indirect effect of the CCP's new propaganda (compared with the old propaganda) on its persuasive effect mediated through its perceived credibility will be stronger on U.S. audiences than on Korean audiences.

## Research Design

To test these four hypotheses, we conducted a  $2 \times 3$  factorial survey experiment. This method has the particular advantage of increasing both external validity – owing to the large random population samples involved – and internal validity – because it allows for the combination of experiments with surveys and avoids the drawbacks of unidimensional stimuli (Mutz, 2011).

## Participants

The participants were distinguished by nationality as either American or Korean and then randomly assigned to one of three groups (Table 1). American participants were recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk (hereafter MTurk), an online survey provider that is being employed in a growing number of communications studies because it provides access to diverse populations of participants at a low cost (Greenwood, 2013; LaMarre, 2013; Taylor, 2015). The survey for this study was conducted January 2–6, 2017; Americans were coded as 0 and Koreans as 1.

For the Korean participants, two different approaches were taken. First, recruitment was performed using DOOIT Survey, a Korean online survey provider, for a survey

**Table 1.** Experimental design.

Propaganda type	New propaganda	Old propaganda	Control stimuli
Video (Source)	"How Leaders Were Tempered" (CCP)	"Who Am I" (CCP TV ad)	"Walk Through Shanghai" ( <i>National Geographic</i> )
U.S. Participants	N =63	N =63	N =48
South Korean Participants	N =64	N =61	N =58



conducted March 13–24, 2017, in which a total of 125 respondents took part. Second, we distributed an online experimental survey to the public group pages on Facebook over a period extending from January 10 to March 24, 2017, thereby recruiting an additional 58 participants with the specific attributes of South Korean citizenship and eligibility to vote. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 65 years. A total of 357 individuals (American = 174; Korean = 183) participated in this experimental survey.

### ***Type of Propaganda***

The first video, “How Leaders Were Tempered”, is an approximately five-and-a-half-minute propaganda film targeting international social media users made by the CCP. We classified this propaganda film as new propaganda for our study. This video has three distinctive characteristics compared to the conventional propaganda. First, although anti-US rhetoric has been a constant theme in Chinese propaganda to demonize the U.S. society since 1989 (Brady, 2006), this video provides a new approach to criticize the Western democratic system by comparing the Western and Chinese political systems and leadership. For example, the video describes how the U.S. president, who at the time was Obama, was elected, and indirectly criticizes the expense and duration of U.S. presidential elections. To make the content more relevant to Western audiences, the video also disparages the improbability that an average citizen of the U.K. would be elected prime minister as a chance “way narrower than Susan Boyle had at winning ‘Britain’s Got Talent’”. Conversely, the video advocates for the Chinese political system by describing the elevation of President Xi as a consequence of “meritocratic screening that requires years of hard work, like the making of a kung fu master.” In addition to new rhetoric strategies, this video uses the form of a humorous cartoon to increase its persuasive effects. The study shows that visual images, including animation, are more successful at attracting and engaging the foreign public in the perspectives of public diplomacy (Park & Lim, 2014). Last, compared to the traditional propaganda, this video conceals its source by pretending it was made by an independent production company. This video was produced by Fuxing Road, a CCP propaganda outlet that presents itself as a commercial production firm, so the audiences do not associate the content with Chinese government propaganda (Wong, 2016). Because of those rationales, we defined this video as a new form of propaganda and accordingly coded it as 1.

The second video was made by CCTV, China’s state television network, and it was classified as traditional propaganda for this research. This approximately 90-second long video promotes the CCP by showing diligent workers, including a teacher, doctor, and police official. The voice over is in Chinese. The caption of the video is “Who am I, The China Communist Party is always with you” and the accompanying soundtrack is slow, lyrical music. Although this video was made for domestic audiences, it also has a YouTube version with English subtitles targeting non-Chinese foreigners. The rhetoric strategy of this video includes straight talk and behavioral modeling, which are widely used by the CCP to facilitate the economic/social transition and justify continued party rule, with domestic audiences as the target (Lu & Simons, 2006). In contrast to our first video, this video was not tailor-made for social media, and participants who know CCTV can easily associate the video with the Chinese government. We defined this video as an old form of propaganda and accordingly coded it as 2.

The last video, which served as a control, is a three-minute documentary made by *National Geographic* that shows various views of Shanghai, China's largest city, without comment. There is no political message in this video. As the control stimulus, this last video was coded as 0.

Each stimulus video originally included English subtitles. For the Korean participants, one of the researchers, who is fluent both Korean and English, created Korean subtitles for the stimulus videos and distributed them on YouTube. After watching the stimulus videos, the participants completed a survey questionnaire that asked their opinions regarding two variables, the perceived credibility of the videos and their persuasive effects with regard to the participants' attitudes toward the Chinese government.

### **Perceived Credibility**

Adopting Meyer's (1988) single-item measures, including fairness, accuracy, trustworthiness, bias, and completeness, we adjusted our questions to ask the participants to comment on the credibility of the video. To assess the character of the video, participants were asked to rate, on a 1–5 Likert scale, the following five statements: "This video is fair"; "This video is unbiased"; "This video tells the whole story"; "This video is exact"; and "This video is trustworthy." On the scale, a relatively high rating indicated that a participant found a video to be fair and unbiased, while a relatively low rating indicated the perception that the video was biased and unfair. The reliability of this variable was determined to be relatively high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ).

### **Persuasive Effect**

To assess the persuasive effect of the videos based on Brady's (2015) argument, participants were asked to rate, again on a 1–5 Likert scale, the following four statements: "This video is positive about the Chinese government"; "This video makes the Chinese government look better"; "This video makes me more favorable toward Chinese government"; and "This video helps me to understand the Chinese government better." In this case, higher ratings indicated a persuasive effect with regard to attitudes favorable toward the Chinese government and lower ratings a less favorable persuasive effect. The reliability of this variable proved to be relatively low (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .66$ ).

### **Manipulation Check**

The survey also included two multiple-choice questions designed to determine whether the participants had paid attention to the information presented in the videos. Thus, immediately after watching each video, they were asked about its format, specifically whether it featured animation, a voice-over in Chinese or another language, or content concerning Japan, France, or China. The average correct answer rate for these manipulation questions was 95.5%, indicating that an overwhelming majority of the participants perceived the information on the videos accurately. The responses of those who failed the attention check were excluded from the analysis, leaving a total of 341 remaining samples.

## Results

The conditional process analysis model was conducted using path modeling evaluated with the tool PROCESS for the SPSS statistical computing environment. PROCESS provides a convenient method for testing conditional process analysis; it measures direct and indirect effects in mediation models, conditional effects in moderation models, and conditional indirect effects in conditional process models with one or more mediators (Hayes, 2018).

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and Pearson product correlations for all of the variables. These correlations indicate significant relationships between the type of propaganda and its perceived credibility ( $r = -.20, p < .01$ ), between nationality and the persuasive effect ( $r = .18, p < .01$ ), and between perceived credibility and the persuasive effect ( $r = .26, p < .01$ ). These correlations verify that our model does not violate exclusion restrictions. Bullock and Ha (2011) argue that “an experimental intervention is useful for mediation analysis if it affects one mediator without affecting others. If the intervention instead affects more than one mediator, it violates the exclusion restriction” (p. 514). The type of propaganda as an intervention for our research is only correlated with perceived credibility. This verifies that our model does not violate the exclusion restriction and is a valid instrument to measure mediation.

Because our independent variable was multicategorical, consisting of three groups (0 = nonpropaganda, 1 = new propaganda, and 2 = old propaganda), a one-way ANOVA with LSD post hoc comparisons was conducted for additional sample analysis (see Table 3). This analysis showed that participants who had watched nonpropaganda ( $M = 3.06, SD = .70$ ) or new propaganda ( $M = 3.14, SD = .85$ ) reported the perceived credibility to be significantly higher than those who had watched old propaganda ( $M = 2.67, SD = .83, F(2, 338) = 12.04, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .07$ ). Regarding the persuasive effect, those who watched either new ( $M = 3.07, SD = 1.03$ ) or old propaganda ( $M = 3.03, SD = .79$ ) reported it to be significantly more persuasive than those who watched nonpropaganda ( $M = 2.79, SD = .77, F(2, 338) = 3.10, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .02$ ). The participants thus appeared to distinguish among types of propaganda in terms of perceived credibility and persuasive effect.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Type of propaganda	1.06	.80	–			
2. Nationality	.49	.50	–.03	–		
3. Perceived credibility	2.95	.83	–.20**	–.03	–	
4. Persuasive effect	2.97	.88	.10	.18**	.26**	–

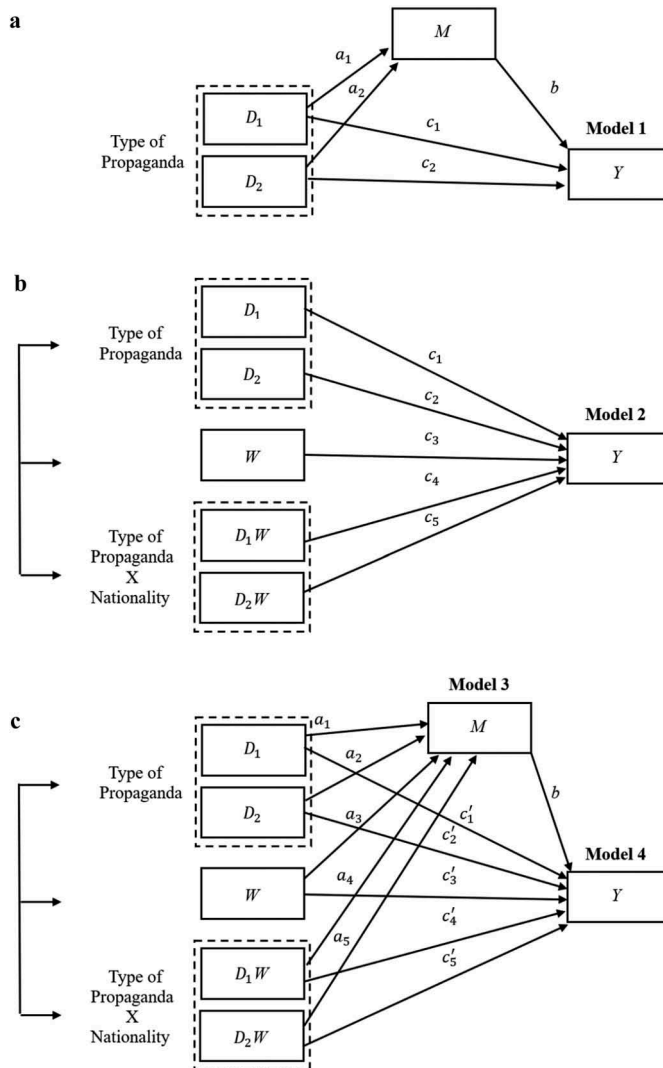
\*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 3.** One-way ANOVA analysis.

		Non-propaganda	New propaganda	Old propaganda
Perceived credibility	Mean	3.06 <sub>a</sub>	3.14 <sub>a</sub>	2.67 <sub>b</sub>
	SD	.70	.85	.83
Persuasive effect	Mean	2.79 <sub>a</sub>	3.07 <sub>b</sub>	3.03 <sub>b</sub>
	SD	.77	1.03	.79

Under such circumstances, according to Hayes (2018), the three variables must be represented in the regression equation with two variables,  $D_1$  and  $D_2$ , coding a type of membership in one of the three groups using “Helmert” codes. Following this approach, the coding system used in this study produced two variables,  $D_1$ , which captured propaganda (including both new and old forms of propaganda) as opposed to nonpropaganda (new propaganda = .333, old propaganda = .333, nonpropaganda =  $-.667$ ), and  $D_2$ , which captured new propaganda as opposed to old propaganda (new propaganda =  $-.500$ , old propaganda = .500).

Our proposed model, as shown in Figure 2, consists of four distinctive submodels. The first of these, in panel A, was used to test whether perceived credibility mediated the



**Figure 2.** The conceptual model represented in the form of a path model and a visual depicting the estimates of the four ordinary squared regressions.

$D_1$  = Propaganda/Non-propaganda,  $D_2$  = New propaganda/Old propaganda,  $W$  = Nationality,  $M$  = Perceived credibility, and  $Y$  = Persuasive effect.

relationship between the CCP's new propaganda and its persuasiveness (Hypothesis 1). The second submodel, in panel B, tested whether nationality (American or Korean) moderated the relationship between the type of propaganda and the persuasive effect. We assumed that the relationship between the CCP's propaganda and its persuasive effect will be stronger among the audience in Korea (Hypothesis 2a) and that the relationship between the CCP's new propaganda and its persuasive effect will be stronger among the audience in the U.S. (Hypothesis 2b). The third and fourth submodels, in panel C, tested whether nationality (American or Korean) moderated the relationship between the type of propaganda and the perceived credibility. Specifically, we tested whether the relationship between the CCP's propaganda and its perceived credibility was stronger among the Korean audience (Hypothesis 3a) and whether the relationship between the CCP's new propaganda and its perceived credibility was stronger among the American audience (Hypothesis 3b). Finally, we analyzed the conditional indirect effect of the type of propaganda on the persuasive effect mediated through the perceived credibility, contingent on nationality (American and Korean). Specifically, we tested whether the indirect effect of propaganda on its persuasive effect mediated through its perceived credibility was stronger among the Korean audience (Hypothesis 4a) and whether the indirect effect of the new propaganda on its persuasive effect mediated through its perceived credibility was stronger among the American audience (Hypothesis 4b). The models in panel C tested the mediated moderation, that is, situations in which a moderated effect is transmitted through a mediator.

Table 4 summarizes the coefficients of the ordinary least squares regression model (Model 1). With regard to Hypothesis 1, regression analysis was used to investigate whether the perceived credibility mediated the association between the CCP's new propaganda and its persuasive effect. The results indicated that  $D_2$  (new propaganda =  $-.500$ , old propaganda =  $.500$ ) was indeed a significant predictor of perceived credibility ( $a_2$ :  $B = -.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and that perceived credibility was a significant predictor of persuasive effect ( $b$ :  $B = .30$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, there was not a direct effect between  $D_2$  and the persuasive effect ( $c_2$ :  $B = .10$ ,  $p = .38$ ). The indirect effect was tested using a percentile bootstrap estimation approach with 5,000 samples, again implemented with the Process in SPSS (Hayes, 2018). The indirect effect of new propaganda was compared with that of old propaganda, and the bootstrap confidence intervals of  $-.267$  to  $-.083$  were entirely below zero, indicating that this relative indirect effect was significant. This analysis indicates that the perceived credibility mediated the persuasive effect of the CCP's new propaganda on the research participants. Thus, we found new propaganda to have higher credibility than

**Table 4.** Ordinary least squares regression model coefficient for model 1.

Model 1						
Outcome	→	Perceived credibility		Persuasive effect		
Predictor		Coeff.	<i>p</i>		Coeff.	<i>p</i>
$D_1$	$a_1 \rightarrow$	-.16	.11	$c_1 \rightarrow$	.31	<b>&lt;.01</b>
$D_2$	$a_2 \rightarrow$	-.48	<b>&lt;.001</b>	$c_2 \rightarrow$	.10	.38
Perceived credibility				$b \rightarrow$	.30	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Model $R^2$		.07	<b>&lt;.001</b>		.09	<b>&lt;.001</b>

**Table 5.** Ordinary least squares regression model coefficient for models 2, 3, and 4.

Outcome Predictor	→	Model 2		Model 3		Model 4			
		Persuasive effect		Perceived credibility		Persuasive effect			
		Coeff.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	<i>p</i>		
$D_1$	$c_1 \rightarrow$	-.15	.29	$a^1 \rightarrow$	-.61	<.001	$c'_1 \rightarrow$	.02	.87
$D_2$	$c_2 \rightarrow$	.13	.38	$a^2 \rightarrow$	-.73	<.001	$c'_2 \rightarrow$	.34	<.05
Nation	$c_3 \rightarrow$	.29	<.01	$a^3 \rightarrow$	-.09	.28	$c'_3 \rightarrow$	.32	<.001
$D_1 \times \text{Nation}$	$c_4 \rightarrow$	.83	<.001	$a^4 \rightarrow$	.91	<.001	$c'_4 \rightarrow$	.57	<.001
$D_2 \times \text{Nation}$	$c_5 \rightarrow$	-.35	.11	$a^5 \rightarrow$	.54	<.01	$c'_5 \rightarrow$	-.50	<.05
Perceived credibility							$b \rightarrow$	.28	<.001
Model $R^2$		.11	<.001	.15	<.001		.17	<.001	
Interaction $\Delta R^2$		.05	<.001	.08	<.001		.04	<.001	

the old propaganda, and this perception was associated with a greater persuasive effect. These results support Hypothesis 1.

Table 5 summarizes the coefficients of the ordinary least squares regression model (Models 2 to 4). With regard to Model 2, the data indicate that nationality (American and Korean) significantly moderated the relationship between the type of propaganda and its persuasive effect,  $R^2 = .11$ ,  $F(5, 335) = 7.92$ ,  $p < .001$ . In addition to these main effects, there was a significant relationship between the interaction term ( $D_1 \times \text{nationality}$ ) and the persuasive effect ( $c_4$ :  $B = .83$ ,  $p < .001$ ). That is, for the Korean participants, the persuasive effect of propaganda relative to nonpropaganda increased. These results support Hypothesis 2a. However, in terms of the moderating effect of nationality, there was no significant difference between new and old propaganda ( $c_5$ :  $B = -.35$ ,  $p = .11$ ). These results do not support Hypothesis 2b.

Hypothesis 3 (Model 3) predicted a similar effect of the type of propaganda on its perceived credibility, with nationality (American and Korean) serving as the moderator. The results demonstrated that the main effects are significant,  $R^2 = .15$ ,  $F(5, 335) = 11.60$ ,  $p < .001$ . With respect to Hypothesis 3a, there was a significant relationship between the interaction term ( $D_1 \times \text{nationality}$ ) and the perceived credibility ( $a_4$ :  $B = .91$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that the perceived credibility of propaganda relative to nonpropaganda increased for those who are Koreans. These results support Hypothesis 3a. In terms of Hypothesis 3b, there was a significant relationship between the interaction term ( $D_2 \times \text{nationality}$ ) and its perceived credibility ( $a_5$ :  $B = .54$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that the effect of new propaganda relative to old propaganda on the participants' perception of its credibility increased among the American audience. These results support Hypothesis 3b.

Model 4 predicted that the effect of the type of propaganda on its persuasiveness would be mediated in part indirectly through its perceived credibility, with this process being likewise moderated by nationality. The prior analysis verifies that the path from the type of propaganda to its perceived credibility depends on nationality. If one of these paths is moderated, then so too is the indirect effect (Pollack et al., 2012). It is noteworthy that, holding the type of propaganda and nationality constant, participants reporting greater perceived credibility effects also reported greater persuasive effects ( $b$ :  $B = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The model assumes multicategorical independent variables, which means that there were two relatively indirect effects, each of which was a function of the moderator  $W$ . Hayes (2018) argues that "as relative conditional indirect effects are products of regression

**Table 6.** The bootstrap confidence intervals of moderated mediation.

	Index	SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
$D_1$	.26	.07	.12	.41
$D_2$	.15	.07	.03	.30

coefficients, a bootstrap confidence interval for each relative conditional indirect effect is a sensible inferential strategy” (p. 493). Following this reasoning, we used a percentile bootstrap estimation approach as before with 5,000 samples to test each relative conditional indirect effect (Table 6). In terms of these effects for propaganda versus nonpropaganda, the bootstrap confidence interval was entirely above 0 (0.12–0.41). These results indicate a moderation of the indirect effect of propaganda relative to nonpropaganda on the persuasiveness of propaganda through perceived credibility that is further moderated by nationality. Based on this analysis, we conclude that the persuasiveness of the propaganda, when compared with the nonpropaganda, was greater for the research participants because of the perception that it was of high credibility and that this result was particularly strong for the Korean participants. These results support Hypothesis 4a.

In terms of the relative conditional indirect effects of new compared with old propaganda, the bootstrap confidence intervals were entirely above 0 (0.03–0.30). These results indicated the moderation of the indirect effect of new relative to old propaganda on the persuasive effect by perceived credibility and nationality. Based on this analysis, we conclude that new propaganda seems to have enhanced the persuasive effect owing to the perception that it was of high credibility and that this enhancement was particularly pronounced for the U.S. participants. These results support Hypothesis 4b.

## Discussion

With the advent of the Internet, almost anyone can distribute literature, images, videos, and software to an international audience easily and inexpensively. The messages contained therein, political and otherwise, can be manipulated by the distributors and can bypass national laws (Aly et al., 2017; Crilley, 2001). In China, the CCP is accordingly concentrating its international propaganda efforts online. While the party’s domestic propaganda products and their effects have been well documented (e.g., Wasserman, 2016; Wu, 2016; Zhang & Mwangi, 2016), its international propaganda efforts, especially those delivered anonymously over the Internet, have not been extensively studied. To help fill this gap, the present study compared cross-national persuasive effects by analyzing the effects of different types of propaganda created by the CCP on audiences in the U.S. and Korea. Our research yielded three significant findings. First, the persuasive effect of the CCP’s new propaganda was mediated by its perceived credibility. Second, the nationality of the audience (i.e., American or Korean) moderated both the perceived credibility of Chinese international propaganda and its persuasive effect. Third, the indirect effect of various propaganda products (operationalized as new propaganda, old propaganda, and nonpropaganda) on their persuasiveness as mediated through their perceived credibility was contingent on the nationality of the audience (again, American or Korean).



With respect to perceived credibility as a mediator, our results demonstrated that perceived credibility is a significant mediator between the CCP's new propaganda and its persuasive effect. In particular, the participants perceived new propaganda to be of higher credibility than old propaganda and therefore more persuasive. Prior studies have concentrated on perceived credibility as a key factor in the persuasiveness of messages (Jones et al., 2003; Mun et al., 2013; Pornpitakpan, 2004), and the significant role of perceived credibility on its persuasive effect was demonstrated even in the online space (Hsieh et al., 2012). Interestingly, a recent study has demonstrated that when an online video is credited to a non-CCP brand, its perceived credibility among U.S. audiences is significantly higher than that of the same video branded as a CCP product (Fang & Mutz, 2016). In addition to existing studies, our finding provides considerable insight into how the CCP's new propaganda increases its persuasive effect through its perceived credibility. According to Wong (2016), the CCP has used private entities to create and disseminate propaganda to disguise its source and increase its credibility. By doing so, the CCP may increase the perceived credibility of the material in the eyes of international audiences, removing their hostility toward its propaganda. This was the case with the 2013 video titled "How Leaders Were Tempered" that compared Chinese and Western leadership produced by a supposedly independent Chinese production company called Studio on Fuxin Road, which was considered the new propaganda stimulus in our study. This video was posted on YouTube and then promoted on state media Twitter accounts, and it received coverage by many foreign media outlets, which gave it a mixed reception. The Chinese government and state media, however, labeled it a success. Wong (2016) indicates that the studio was in fact established by the CCP's International Department, while a British public relations consulting company and several other outside contractors helped produce the video. Fuxin Road has also created another similar online propaganda, such as the 2015 animated video titled "13 What" explaining China's thirteenth five-year economic plan.

Geographical and cultural differences play important roles in the persuasive effect of messages (Aladwani, 2013; Laroche et al., 2001; Yu & Shen, 2013). Thus, nationality has been found to moderate the persuasive effect of fear appeal advertisement (Laroche et al., 2001) and the message framing effect (Yu & Shen, 2013). In our study, nationality (American and Korean) moderated the persuasive effect of propaganda relative to non-propaganda and that of new relative to old propaganda with regard to the participants' perception of its credibility. Interestingly, we were able to demonstrate moderation of the indirect effect of propaganda relative to nonpropaganda and of new propaganda relative to old propaganda on persuasiveness through perceived credibility and nationality (American versus Korean).

Our study demonstrates that the persuasiveness of the propaganda, when compared with the nonpropaganda, was greater for the research participants because of the perception that it was of high credibility and that this result was particularly strong for the Korean participants. The cultural proximity thesis gives a plausible explanation for why the audience in Korea is more persuaded by propaganda, including both old and new forms, based on its perceived credibility. As Straubhaar (1991) argued, the audience tends to consume regionally produced media due to cultural relevance or proximity. A recent study found that cultural proximity is significantly related to a positive attitude toward regional media products (Yoo et al., 2014). Because cultural proximity is a constructed process related to the interpretation of content

(Chen, 2017), culturally proximate content is better comprehended by the audience. In the same context, Koreans could have a better understanding of the CCP's propaganda compared with nonpropaganda because of close cultural and historical relations with China. Better comprehension is significantly related to higher perceived degree of credibility (Sparks & Rapp, 2011), and this could increase the persuasive effect by increasing the positive image of China among the Koreans. These causal relationships among cultural proximity, perceived credibility, and the persuasive effect should be analyzed in future studies to provide convincing explanations of this phenomenon.

By narrowing the persuasive effect to a comparison between new and old propaganda, the present study showed that American respondents seem to find the new propaganda more persuasive than the old propaganda when they perceived its credibility to be high. To analyze the effects of the new propaganda product, it is necessary to identify its target audience, media utilization techniques, and any special methods designed to enhance its power. First, we should pay attention to the metaphorical nature of the messages conveyed by the new propaganda, the processing of which can facilitate persuasion by disrupting counter argumentation (Guthrie, 1972; Sopory & Dillard, 2002). A critique of the efficiency of Western elections may resonate with the prevailing perceptions of certain audiences regarding the political systems in the United States or United Kingdom. Thus, earlier research has shown that, although the core ideology of the CCP's propaganda is Marxist-Leninist, the organization has been able to function in the West through the coordinated use of sophisticated argumentation and disinformation (Kampf, 1987). When discussing the truth and the actual course of events can serve its aims, states have no reason to turn to disinformation (Martin, 1982), and the CCP's narrative propaganda strategy emphasizes indisputable weaknesses in Western political systems. This rhetoric strategy may increase perceived credibility among Americans, and as a result, it has highly persuasive effects.

Second, the CCP's latest propaganda uses sophisticated techniques to communicate with its intended audience in a targeted way. Thus, as mentioned, "How Leaders Were Tempered" incorporates animation, music, and informal speech in an obvious effort to appeal to Western and young audiences accustomed to Internet videos. This approach seems more effective in a low-context society (the U.S. in our study) than in a high-context society (Korea in our study) because the CCP's new propaganda provides more verbal cues and less social pressure compared with the old propaganda. Moreover, the representation of value in animation in this manner can be an effective form of propaganda (Merkt & Sochatzy, 2015), and music can be likewise frequently used to stir emotion, while lyrics reinforce the underlying ideology (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2014). The symbolic use of language can also create a sense of power and contribute to opinion formation (Edelman, 1988; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987), and content and format framing influence an individual's political perception (Terkildsen et al., 1998). To develop a better understanding of the effect of new propaganda, future studies are needed to explain which factors increase the CCP's new propaganda source credibility, thereby increasing its persuasive effects.

## Conclusion

The findings presented here, then, offer insights into how a fairly new form of propaganda differentially affects cross-national audiences in the U.S. and Korea. There are, however,

certain limitations to this study. First, the effect of propaganda on viewers was measured in the short term, with the respondents answering the survey questions immediately after watching the stimulus videos. The long-term or cultivation effects of propaganda disseminated via the Internet are thus an obvious subject for future research. Second, our study tested one example of each type of propaganda. However, alternating additional versions of each type of video under each treatment condition would demonstrate more deep and comparable propaganda effects. Therefore, future studies should be performed in this line of research. Last, although MTurk has the advantage of reaching diverse participants at relatively low cost, this online survey system also has potential limitations in that previous studies have demonstrated the tendency of MTurk samples to skew toward a younger, more female (Berinsky et al., 2012), and more educated (Paolacci et al., 2010) population than the general U.S. population. In this case, the demographic composition of the MTurk samples, like that of most samples, likely does not mirror the larger population exactly.

Despite these limitations, however, this study has demonstrated both the power of new propaganda and its distinct effects on audiences in the U. S. and Korea by adopting moderated mediation models. It is intended as a contribution to the growing body of literature on cross-national and international propaganda, media effects, perceived credibility, and persuasive effects. Our work here is particularly timely because governments today are investing ever more resources in diverse media in efforts to influence foreign and domestic audiences, to export their ideologies and to improve their public images.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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