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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FRAMING CHINESE NATIONAL CULTURE IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN DIGITAL MEDIA

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Abstract

With the rapid expansion of short-video platforms, national culture is increasingly communicated, reinterpreted, and localized through algorithm-driven digital media environments. Platforms such as TikTok have transformed cultural communication from institutionally curated narratives into fragmented, visually mediated, and everyday encounters embedded in users' routine media consumption. In this context, national culture is no longer primarily conveyed through authoritative explanation or comprehensive historical narration, but through repeated exposure to short, platform-adapted cultural moments that privilege immediacy, recognizability, and affective engagement. This study examines how Chinese national culture is framed in Southeast Asian digital media, with a particular focus on TikTok based short video narratives circulating in the Malaysian context. Drawing on qualitative content analysis and framing analysis, the study analyzes a corpus of TikTok videos produced by both Chinese and Southeast Asian content creators. Rather than treating cultural communication as a coordinated institutional project, the study adopts a national culture communication perspective that conceptualizes culture as a flexible and negotiated set of meanings shaped by platform affordances, creator practices, and cross-cultural interaction. The findings identify four dominant cultural frames through which Chinese national culture is represented: everyday cultural practices, symbolic heritage, experiential and tourism-oriented narratives, and simplified cultural identity. These frames demonstrate how national culture is localized through accessible practices such as food and lifestyle, condensed into visually recognizable symbols, mediated through creator-centered experiences, and stabilized through repetition and symbolic simplification.

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Cultural meaning emerges not through comprehensive representation, but through selective emphasis aligned with short-video storytelling conventions and algorithmic visibility. The study contributes to communication research by extending framing theory into cross-cultural, platform-mediated contexts and highlighting the role of short-video infrastructures in shaping contemporary national culture narratives. By focusing on Southeast Asian digital media,

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the findings offer insights into how national culture is recontextualized beyond institutional diplomacy and adapted to everyday digital environments, contributing to a deeper understanding of platformized cultural communication.

Introduction:-

In recent years, short-video platforms have evolved from entertainment-oriented applications into everyday cultural infrastructures that shape how people encounter, interpret, and normalize cultural meanings. TikTok, in particular, occupies a central position in this transformation due to its algorithmic recommendation system, immersive audiovisual design, and emphasis on rapid content circulation. Unlike traditional media formats that rely on linear storytelling or institutional gatekeeping, TikTok facilitates fragmented, repetitive, and highly personalized encounters with cultural content. As a result, national culture is no longer primarily communicated through curated narratives or authoritative explanations, but through continuous exposure to short, visually engaging cultural moments embedded in users' everyday media routines.

This shift has important implications for cultural communication research. Short-video platforms do not merely host cultural content; they actively shape how culture becomes visible, memorable, and meaningful. Cultural elements that align with platform logics—such as immediacy, emotional resonance, and visual recognizability—are more likely to circulate widely, while complex or context-dependent meanings may remain marginal. Studying TikTok therefore allows researchers to examine how national culture is transformed into an ambient, taken-for-granted presence within digital life, rather than a formally articulated object of learning or persuasion.

Frames emphasize certain aspects of reality while downplaying others, thereby influencing how audiences interpret issues, attribute meaning, and form judgments (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). In this context, the communication of culture increasingly extends beyond official channels and state-led initiatives. National culture is increasingly mediated through platform-based content production, algorithmic recommendation systems, and localized audience practices (Couldry & Hepp, 2023; Van Dijck et al., 2024). Short-video platforms such as TikTok have further transformed cultural communication by privileging visual immediacy, narrative condensation, and creator-driven storytelling, reshaping how cultural meanings are selected, emphasized, and circulated (Abidin, 2023).

Against this backdrop, this study examines how Chinese national culture is framed and localized in Southeast Asian digital media, with a specific focus on TikTok-based short-video narratives circulating in the Malaysian context. The study adopts a broader national culture communication perspective, conceptualizing Chinese culture as a flexible and negotiated set of meanings shaped by cross-cultural interaction and platform affordances (Flew & Waisbord, 2023). This approach allows for the examination of both institutional and grassroots modes of cultural framing, as well as the role of digital infrastructures in structuring visibility and interpretation.

Within the analyzed content, symbolic references commonly associated with Xi'an—such as historical imagery, culinary practices, and culturally recognizable signifiers—appear in the dataset as recurring cultural symbols rather than as objects of place-based analysis. However, Xi'an is not approached as a bounded city-branding case in this study. Instead, it is treated as a cultural reference point through which broader narratives of Chinese national culture are articulated, adapted, and recontextualized in Southeast Asian digital environments. This analytical repositioning aligns with recent communication scholarship emphasizing how national culture circulates through dispersed, platform-mediated narratives rather than fixed institutional campaigns (Hepp et al., 2023).

Existing research has shown that social media platforms play a central role in shaping contemporary cultural communication, particularly through visual storytelling, participatory production, and algorithmic amplification (Bhandari & Bimo, 2023; Zeng et al., 2024). At the same time, scholars note challenges such as content homogenization, algorithm-driven visibility hierarchies, and the need for culturally sensitive localization in cross-cultural contexts (Jin & Yoon, 2024). In Southeast Asia, where cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity significantly shapes audience reception, cultural narratives often require contextual adaptation to achieve resonance. Malaysian audiences, for example, may engage more readily with everyday cultural practices such as food and lifestyle representations than with abstract national symbolism, underscoring the importance of localized framing strategies (Halim & Kaur, 2023).

These considerations motivate the present study. This research focuses on how cultural meanings circulate, stabilize, and transform within platform-mediated environments. Using qualitative content analysis and framing analysis, the

study investigates dominant framing patterns in TikTok-based representations of Chinese national culture, the influence of creator identity on framing strategies, and the role of platform affordances in shaping and simplifying cultural narratives.

The study contributes to communication research in two ways. Theoretically, it extends framing theory into cross-cultural, platform-mediated contexts, demonstrating how national culture is reframed through short-video infrastructures. Practically, it offers insights for cultural communicators and policymakers seeking to understand how national culture is represented and localized in Southeast Asian digital spaces, contributing to more nuanced approaches to digital cultural communication.

Research Objectives:-

This study aims to explore how Chinese national culture is framed and communicated in Southeast Asian digital media through TikTok-based short-video narratives. Specifically, it seeks to:

Identify dominant framing patterns used in the representation of Chinese national culture in TikTok content circulating in Southeast Asia;

Examine how creator identity influences cultural framing strategies in cross-cultural digital environments;

Analyze the role of platform affordances in shaping and simplifying cultural meanings.

Literature Review:-

Framing Theory and Cultural Meaning Construction:-

Framing theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how communicators shape audience perceptions by emphasizing certain aspects of reality while downplaying others. Frames function as interpretive structures that guide how audiences define issues, assign responsibility, and construct meaning within mediated discourse (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). Within communication research, framing has been widely applied to examine how symbolic elements—such as language, imagery, and narrative organization—influence audience interpretation and evaluation (Scheufele, 1999).

Beyond news media, framing theory has been extended to cultural and social contexts, where meaning construction is shaped through recurring symbolic patterns rather than explicit persuasion. Benford and Snow (2000) argue that frames operate by selectively highlighting culturally resonant elements, thereby shaping collective understandings of identity, values, and social reality. This perspective is particularly relevant for cultural communication in digital environments, where visual cues, repetition, and narrative condensation play a central role in making culture recognizable and accessible to audiences.

National Culture Communication and Symbolic Representation:-

National culture communication refers to the circulation of narratives and symbols that articulate a nation's identity, values, and cultural heritage through representational practices (Hall, 1997). Cultural meanings are not transmitted in a neutral or comprehensive manner but are selectively encoded through shared symbolic systems that enable audiences to recognize and interpret cultural significance. As Hall (1997) emphasizes, representation is inherently interpretive, relying on culturally embedded codes rather than objective transmission.

In mediated contexts, national culture often emerges through everyday symbolic references rather than formal political or diplomatic discourse. Elements such as food practices, lifestyle representations, historical imagery, and ritualized spaces function as accessible cultural signifiers that translate abstract national identity into tangible experiences.

From this perspective, urban cultural symbols do not operate solely within city branding frameworks but contribute to national culture communication by providing relatable points of reference. City-related imagery thus functions as part of a wider cultural narrative system, enabling audiences—especially those outside the national context—to engage with national culture through familiar and visually identifiable representations.

Platformization and Short-Video Cultural Communication:-

The increasing influence of digital platforms has fundamentally reshaped how cultural meanings are produced, circulated, and stabilized. Platformization refers to the process through which digital platforms structure cultural production and visibility through technical infrastructures, governance mechanisms, and economic logics (Van

Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2024; Poell, Nieborg, & Van Dijck, 2022). In such environments, cultural communication is shaped not only by content creators but also by algorithmic recommendation systems and engagement-driven metrics.

Short-video platforms exemplify these dynamics by privileging brevity, visual immediacy, and affective appeal. The format encourages the condensation of cultural narratives into easily recognizable visual and narrative elements, often prioritizing familiarity and symbolic clarity over contextual depth. As a result, cultural frames circulating on short-video platforms tend to emphasize repetition, visual symbolism, and everyday practices that can be quickly interpreted by diverse audiences.

Importantly, framing in platformized environments is not solely controlled by institutional actors. Individual creators actively participate in selecting, remixing, and recontextualizing cultural symbols, while platform algorithms influence which representations gain visibility. This interaction contributes to the normalization of certain cultural frames and the marginalization of others, reinforcing dominant patterns of representation over time.

Cross-Cultural Digital Communication in Southeast Asia:-

Southeast Asia provides a particularly significant context for examining cross-cultural digital communication due to its cultural diversity, historical connectivity, and high levels of social media engagement. At the same time, recent scholarship has highlighted the growing importance of platformized communication in the region and the role of short-video infrastructures in shaping visibility, circulation, and cultural interpretation. This makes TikTok an especially relevant site for examining how cultural meanings are localized and negotiated in Southeast Asian digital environments (Kaye et al., 2022; Lim, 2025; Van Dijck et al., 2024).

Conceptual Framework:-

To clarify the analytical logic of the study, Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework guiding the analysis of TikTok-based framing of Chinese national culture. The figure presents the study as a four-stage cycle linking TikTok's platform environment, platform affordances and creator agency, the framing of Chinese national culture, and its cross-cultural interpretation.

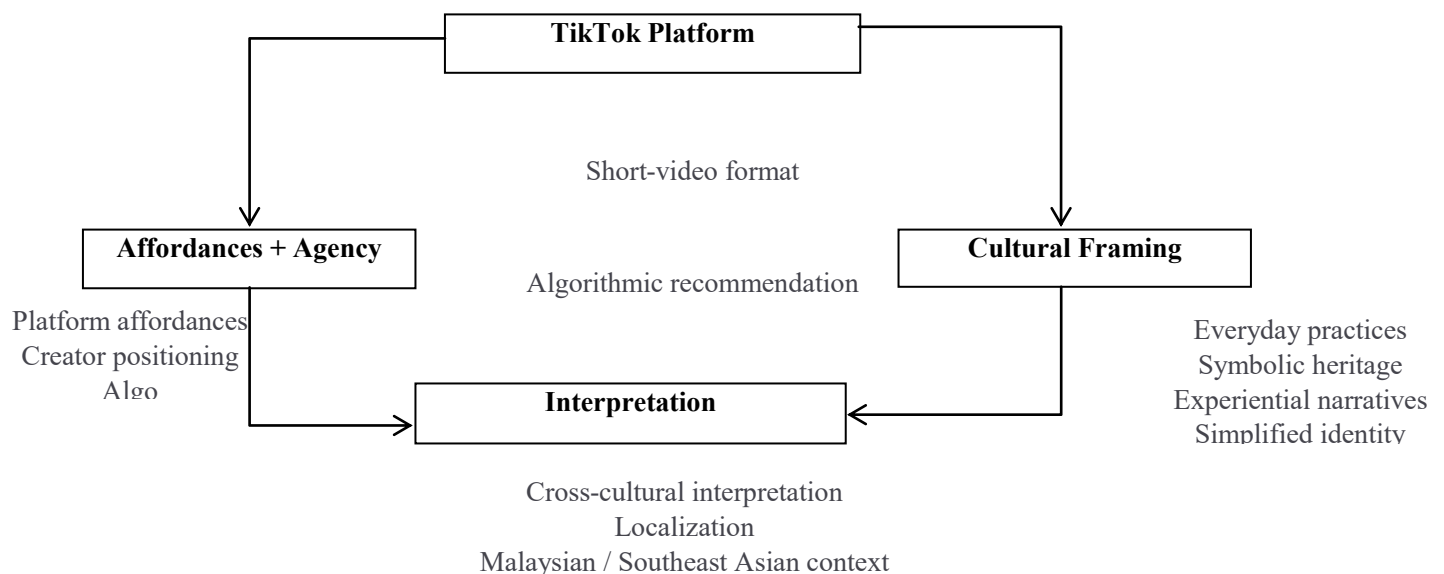


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of the Study

Research Gaps:-

Despite extensive scholarship on framing theory, national culture, and digital media, several gaps remain. First, existing studies often examine framing processes or platform communication in isolation, with limited integration of framing theory into analyses of short-video platforms as sites of cultural meaning construction. Second, while Chinese culture has gained increasing visibility through global digital platforms, empirical research examining how

Chinese national culture is framed and localized within Southeast Asian digital environments remains limited. Third, studies focusing specifically on TikTok-based cultural narratives in Malaysia are scarce, despite the platform's growing influence in shaping everyday cultural perception. Addressing these gaps, the present study applies qualitative content analysis and framing analysis to TikTok-based short-video narratives circulating in Malaysia. By examining how Chinese national culture is framed through platform affordances and creator practices, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural digital cultural communication in contemporary media environments.

Methodology:-

Research Design:-

This study adopts a qualitative research design combining content analysis and framing analysis to examine how Chinese national culture is represented and localized in Southeast Asian digital media. Qualitative content analysis is suitable for identifying patterns of meaning embedded in mediated texts, particularly when the research focus is on symbolic representation rather than the measurement of media effects (McQuail, 2010). Framing analysis is employed to identify recurring interpretive patterns through which cultural symbols and narratives are emphasized or marginalized in media content. Frames are understood as organizing principles that structure meaning and guide interpretation (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999). This analytical approach is particularly appropriate for short-video content, where meaning is often conveyed through visual symbolism, narrative condensation, and repetition rather than explicit explanation.

Data Source and Sampling Strategy:-

The empirical data for this study were collected from TikTok, a short-video platform characterized by algorithmic content recommendation and high levels of participatory media production. TikTok was selected because of its widespread use in Southeast Asia and its growing role in cross-cultural cultural communication. Data collection focused on videos circulating within the Malaysian digital media context that contained identifiable elements of Chinese national culture. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to identify information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives. Videos were selected based on the presence of culturally recognizable elements such as food practices, everyday lifestyle representations, symbolic imagery, and culturally meaningful spaces.

To ensure analytical relevance and transparency, additional criteria guided video selection. Only publicly accessible videos that clearly displayed elements of Chinese national culture were included. Videos with higher view counts, likes, or shares were prioritized to capture content with sufficient visibility and audience engagement, and videos tagged with relevant culture-related hashtags were considered. Creator characteristics were noted at a general level (e.g., local Southeast Asian creators versus culturally affiliated creators) to account for potential variations in framing strategies. This approach balanced representativeness within the Malaysian TikTok context with the study's qualitative focus on meaning-rich cultural content.

Data Collection Procedure:-

All videos analyzed in this study were publicly accessible at the time of data collection. Each selected video was reviewed manually, and descriptive information was recorded, including content description, visible cultural elements, creator positioning, and language use. Manual data collection enabled close attention to visual, narrative, and contextual features that are central to cultural meaning construction but are difficult to capture through automated methods. Creator identities were categorized at a general level (for example, local Southeast Asian creators or culturally affiliated creators) to support analysis of representational variation without focusing on individual attribution. In line with established practices in media research, all content was treated as cultural text rather than personal communication (McQuail, 2010).

Coding Process:-

The study employed manual, inductive coding, allowing analytical categories to emerge from repeated engagement with the data rather than being imposed entirely a priori. This approach is consistent with qualitative content analysis methods that emphasize systematic, transparent, and iterative movement from descriptive coding to higher-level interpretation (McQuail, 2010; Alyaqoub et al., 2024; Bingham, 2023). In the initial coding stage, each video was reviewed multiple times to identify salient cultural elements and representational features. Preliminary codes captured observable characteristics such as types of cultural symbols (e.g., food practices, lifestyle elements, symbolic imagery), representational mode (e.g., everyday-oriented, visually symbolic), creator positioning, and narrative and visual emphasis. This first-cycle coding focused on identifying recurring patterns at the descriptive

level while remaining open to meanings emerging from the data. In the subsequent stage, codes were refined through constant comparison across cases to enhance conceptual clarity and internal consistency. Related codes were grouped into broader analytical categories reflecting shared patterns of cultural meaning construction. Through this iterative process, the analysis moved from low-level descriptive features to more abstract interpretive groupings, thereby strengthening the analytical connection between recurring content patterns and the framing structures identified in the study (Bingham, 2023). To improve methodological transparency and analytic rigor, coding decisions were reviewed repeatedly during the analysis, and overlapping or weakly differentiated codes were revised or merged where necessary. This iterative refinement helped ensure that the final categories were conceptually distinct and sufficiently grounded in the dataset. In this way, the coding process supported a clear progression from recurring visual and narrative features to the higher-level cultural frames discussed in the findings (Alyaqoub et al., 2024; Bingham, 2023).

Framing Analysis:-

Following the coding process, a framing analysis was conducted to identify higher-level interpretive frames organizing cultural meaning across the dataset. Frames were identified based on recurring patterns of symbolic emphasis, narrative structure, and representational strategy rather than isolated content features (Entman, 1993). Rather than treating individual codes as analytical endpoints, the analysis focused on how combinations of cultural symbols, visual cues, and narrative elements collectively produced recognizable frames through which Chinese national culture was represented and localized in the Malaysian digital media context. This approach aligns with framing theory's emphasis on meaning organization and interpretive structure (Scheufele, 1999).

Ethical Considerations:-

All data analyzed in this study were obtained from publicly accessible TikTok content. No private data were accessed, and no interaction with content creators occurred during the research process. Creator usernames and identifiable personal information were not recorded or reported. The study adheres to established ethical principles for digital media research by treating platform content as contextualized cultural artifacts rather than personal communications.

Findings:-**Overview of Identified Cultural Frames:-**

Based on the qualitative content analysis of TikTok videos circulating in the Southeast Asian digital media environment, this study identified four dominant cultural frames through which Chinese national culture is represented. These frames emerged inductively from recurring patterns in symbolic emphasis, narrative structure, and visual presentation across the dataset. Rather than appearing as isolated cultural elements, representations of Chinese culture were consistently organized into recognizable meaning clusters that enabled rapid interpretation within the short-video format. The identification of frames was guided by attention to how cultural elements were selected, foregrounded, and repeated across videos.

These patterns reveal that cultural representation on TikTok is not random or purely individual, but structured through shared conventions that shape how meaning is produced and circulated. As such, frames function as interpretive devices that allow audiences to make sense of cultural content quickly, even in the absence of explicit explanation or contextualization. The identified frames reflect both creator-level representational choices and platform-level constraints, particularly the affordances of TikTok's short duration, visual orientation, and algorithmic visibility. Creators adapt their storytelling practices to platform norms, while the platform itself reinforces certain representational strategies through visibility and circulation mechanisms. Together, these frames demonstrate how Chinese national culture is selectively highlighted, simplified, and localized in Southeast Asian digital contexts.

To enhance analytical transparency, the four dominant frames and their key characteristics are summarized in Table 1. The table provides an overview of how each frame emphasizes different aspects of culture, relies on distinct symbolic resources, and employs specific representational features that align with short-video storytelling.

Table 1. Dominant Cultural Frames in TikTok-Based Representations of Chinese National Culture

Frame Name	Core Focus	Key Cultural Elements	Key Visual Motifs	Dominant Representational Features
Everyday Cultural Practices	Lived and consumable aspects of culture	Food preparation, dining scenes, daily routines	Cooking, dining, street life, casual lifestyle	Sensory appeal; casual narration; visual immediacy
Symbolic Heritage	Condensed representations of historical and cultural identity	Architecture, traditional imagery, iconic symbols	Temples, traditional attire, iconic architecture	Visual shorthand; high recognizability; limited contextual explanation
Experiential and Tourism-Oriented	Personal encounters with culture through mobility	Travel experiences, recommendations, first-person exploration	Travel scenes, scenic locations, first-person perspective	Subjective evaluation; narrative immediacy; movement-oriented framing
Simplified Cultural Identity	Reduction and repetition of cultural meaning	Recurrent symbols across multiple videos	Repeated food imagery, iconic objects, symbols	Symbolic condensation; platform-friendly repetition

Source: Author's qualitative content analysis of TikTok videos.

Dominant Cultural Frames in TikTok-Based Narratives:-

Everyday Cultural Practices Frame:-

The most prevalent frame across the dataset centers on everyday cultural practices, particularly food-related activities and lifestyle routines. Videos frequently depict the preparation, consumption, or exploration of Chinese cuisine, presenting food as an accessible and relatable entry point to Chinese culture. Rather than emphasizing formal heritage discourse or historical explanation, these narratives focus on sensory experience, visual appeal, and practical engagement.

Within this frame, Chinese national culture is constructed as familiar and experiential, allowing audiences to engage without requiring prior cultural knowledge. Cultural meaning is conveyed through visual cues such as cooking processes, dining environments, and casual commentary, reinforcing a sense of cultural proximity. The use of informal narration and first-person perspectives further situates culture within everyday life rather than institutional settings. A clear illustration of this aesthetic-traditional framing is seen in creators inspired by Li Ziqi. Her globally circulated videos highlight hands-on cultural practices—such as cooking, craft-making, and rural lifestyle—through visually rich, narrative-light formats. Many TikTok creators in Southeast Asia adopt a similar style, demonstrating how experiential and visually mediated cultural moments make Chinese culture accessible and engaging for diverse audiences.

The prominence of this frame suggests that everyday practices function as a key mechanism through which national culture is localized for Southeast Asian audiences. Food and lifestyle representations resonate with shared regional experiences, enabling cross-cultural interpretation through familiarity rather than abstraction. As a result, cultural difference is softened, and national culture is presented as approachable and consumable rather than distant or authoritative.

Importantly, this frame does not attempt to offer a comprehensive representation of Chinese culture. Instead, it selects culturally resonant moments that align with platform logics of immediacy and relatability. Through repetition across multiple videos, these moments contribute to the normalization of Chinese culture within everyday digital consumption.

Symbolic Heritage Frame:-

A second dominant frame emphasizes symbolic heritage, drawing on visually recognizable cultural markers such as architecture, traditional aesthetics, and iconic imagery. Unlike comprehensive historical narratives, this frame relies on brief visual references that signal cultural depth without extended explanation.

Heritage elements within this frame operate as symbolic shorthand, enabling rapid recognition within the temporal constraints of short-video content. Cultural symbols are detached from detailed historical context and instead function as markers of authenticity and continuity. Viewers are invited to recognize, rather than fully understand, the cultural significance of these elements.

This framing strategy reinforces the legitimacy of Chinese national culture while remaining compatible with platform-driven storytelling practices. By compressing complex historical meanings into visually distinctive symbols, the frame balances cultural authority with accessibility. However, this compression also narrows the scope of representation, privileging iconic imagery over less visible or everyday forms of heritage.

Experiential and Tourism-Oriented Frame:-

The experiential and tourism-oriented frame presents Chinese culture through personal encounters, movement, and discovery. Videos structured around visits, recommendations, or first-person exploration frame culture as something to be experienced rather than formally learned. Cultural meaning is constructed through personal reaction, spatial navigation, and subjective evaluation.

This frame emphasizes immediacy and affect, aligning closely with TikTok's emphasis on personal storytelling and visual engagement. The creator's perspective serves as the primary interpretive lens, shaping how cultural elements are introduced and evaluated. Rather than positioning culture as fixed or authoritative, experiential narratives frame it as dynamic and situational.

Although cultural elements may overlap with everyday practices or symbolic heritage, the defining feature of this frame is the foregrounding of individual experience. Culture is understood through what the creator sees, feels, and reacts to, highlighting the role of creators as mediators in platform-mediated cultural communication.

Simplified Cultural Identity Frame:-

Across the dataset, a simplified cultural identity frame operates by condensing complex cultural meanings into a limited set of recurring symbols. This frame does not function independently but intersects with other frames, shaping how culture is reduced to easily repeatable and visually distinctive elements.

The repetition of similar symbols across videos contributes to the stabilization of a narrow but recognizable representation of Chinese national culture. Over time, repeated exposure to familiar cultural cues produces a sense of coherence and continuity, even as representational diversity is reduced. Simplification thus functions as a cumulative process rather than a single representational act.

While this frame enhances accessibility and circulation, it also marginalizes less visible or less platform-compatible cultural dimensions. Cultural elements that require contextual explanation or extended narrative development are less likely to appear. This pattern highlights the role of platform affordances in shaping which cultural meanings gain prominence over time.

Creator Positioning and Framing Variations:-

Framing strategies vary according to creator positioning and cultural proximity. Local Southeast Asian creators tend to emphasize accessibility and relatability, frequently framing Chinese culture through everyday consumption or personal comparison with local practices. Their narratives prioritize familiarity and experiential engagement, reinforcing cultural proximity and interpretive ease.

Creators with closer cultural affiliation or deeper cultural knowledge are more likely to incorporate symbolic heritage elements. However, even within these narratives, heritage is presented in a visually condensed and platform-friendly manner. Extended explanation remains rare, suggesting that creators across positions adapt to shared platform norms.

Across creator types, explicit cultural instruction is limited. Instead, meaning is conveyed through demonstration, repetition, and visual emphasis, indicating a reliance on platform-compatible storytelling conventions rather than didactic communication.

Platform Affordances and Narrative Structuring:-

The TikTok platform plays a central role in shaping how cultural frames are constructed and circulated. The short-video format prioritizes brevity, visual immediacy, and narrative focus, limiting opportunities for contextual elaboration. As a result, cultural meaning is often communicated through symbolic condensation, repetition, and affective cues rather than detailed explanation.

Algorithmic visibility further reinforces dominant frames by favoring content that is visually engaging and easily interpretable. Over time, this contributes to the normalization of specific cultural representations while reducing representational diversity. These findings suggest that platform affordances are not merely a distribution mechanism but actively participate in structuring cultural meaning.

Summary of Findings:-

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Chinese national culture is framed on TikTok through a combination of everyday practices, symbolic heritage, experiential narratives, and simplified cultural identity. These frames collectively construct a version of national culture that is accessible, visually recognizable, and aligned with platform logics. Cultural meaning emerges through selective emphasis rather than comprehensive representation, underscoring the role of digital platforms in shaping cross-cultural cultural communication in Southeast Asian contexts.

Discussion:-

This study examined how Chinese national culture is framed and circulated in Southeast Asian digital media through TikTok-based short-video narratives. By identifying four dominant cultural frames—everyday cultural practices, symbolic heritage, experiential and tourism-oriented narratives, and simplified cultural identity—the findings reveal how national culture is recontextualized within platformized communication environments. Rather than functioning as a coherent or comprehensive representation of cultural tradition, Chinese national culture on TikTok emerges as a selectively assembled, visually mediated, and affect-driven construction, shaped by both creator practices and platform affordances.

Framing Chinese National Culture in Platformized Environments:-

The findings demonstrate that framing processes in short-video platforms differ fundamentally from those in traditional mass media or institutional cultural communication. In conventional framing contexts, such as news media or cultural diplomacy campaigns, frames are often designed to provide interpretive coherence, historical continuity, and ideological alignment. In contrast, TikTok-based framing operates under conditions of brevity, algorithmic visibility, and continuous content circulation, which prioritize immediacy, recognizability, and emotional resonance over narrative completeness. Within this environment, Chinese national culture is framed less as a historically layered system of meanings and more as a collection of accessible cultural moments. Everyday cultural practices—such as food preparation, street scenes, and casual lifestyle representations—function as low-threshold entry points for audiences unfamiliar with deeper cultural contexts. These frames align with TikTok's emphasis on sensory engagement and rapid comprehension, allowing cultural content to circulate widely without requiring prior knowledge.

At the same time, symbolic heritage frames rely on condensed visual cues—architecture, traditional attire, or iconic imagery—that signal “Chineseness” through instant recognition. This form of framing reflects what can be described as symbolic compression, where complex cultural histories are reduced to easily identifiable markers. While such compression enhances platform compatibility and transnational legibility, it also limits interpretive depth, reinforcing surface-level cultural understanding. Importantly, the observed framing results from a dynamic tension between algorithmic push and creator agency. TikTok's recommendation system favors content that elicits

high engagement—through visually striking, emotionally resonant, or easily recognizable elements—thus shaping which cultural representations gain visibility. Simultaneously, creators exercise conscious choices regarding which cultural elements to emphasize, how to sequence them, and what narratives to foreground. The resultant cultural framing emerges from the interaction of these forces: algorithmic amplification constrains and guides visibility, but creators retain substantial influence over the selection, arrangement, and presentation of content within those constraints. These findings extend framing theory by illustrating how frames are not only communicative choices but also structurally conditioned outcomes of platform environments. Framing on TikTok is shaped as much by algorithmic circulation logic as by creator intention, highlighting the need to understand framing as a dynamic process embedded within digital infrastructures.

National Culture Communication Beyond City Branding:-

One of the key theoretical contributions of this study lies in demonstrating how national culture communication on TikTok operates beyond the logic of city branding or institutional promotion. Although urban symbols associated with Xi'an appear frequently in the dataset, they do not function as strategic branding tools aimed at promoting a specific city identity. Instead, they operate as culturally recognizable resources within broader narratives of Chinese national culture. This finding challenges conventional assumptions in cultural communication research that associate cultural dissemination primarily with state-led initiatives or coordinated branding strategies. On TikTok, cultural meaning is produced through dispersed, creator-driven practices, where national culture is assembled through everyday experiences, personal encounters, and platform trends. As a result, national culture is not communicated as a unified narrative but as a fragmented and negotiable set of meanings, continuously reshaped through circulation and repetition. Importantly, this shift does not imply the absence of cultural significance. Rather, it suggests a transformation in how cultural authority is constructed. Instead of relying on institutional legitimacy, cultural meaning on TikTok gains visibility through affective engagement, algorithmic amplification, and audience interaction. National culture becomes meaningful not because it is officially endorsed, but because it is repeatedly encountered, shared, and reinterpreted within everyday digital practices. This perspective contributes to ongoing debates in national culture communication by highlighting how digital platforms enable alternative modes of cultural transmission that coexist with, but are not subordinate to, formal cultural diplomacy or branding efforts.

Cross-Cultural Interpretation in Southeast Asian Digital Contexts:-

The Southeast Asian context, particularly Malaysia, provides an important lens for understanding how platformized cultural frames are interpreted across cultural boundaries. The findings suggest that TikTok-based representations of Chinese national culture resonate most strongly when they emphasize experiential accessibility and cultural proximity, rather than abstract historical narratives.

Everyday cultural frames—such as food, street life, and informal social interactions—allow audiences to engage with Chinese culture through familiar sensory and emotional registers. This form of framing reduces cultural distance and facilitates cross-cultural interpretation without requiring extensive contextual explanation. In contrast, heritage-oriented frames that rely heavily on symbolic imagery may generate recognition but offer more limited interpretive engagement for audiences unfamiliar with the historical background.

These patterns are broadly consistent with existing studies on platformized cultural communication, which have shown that digital platforms tend to privilege visually immediate, emotionally engaging, and easily interpretable content. Similar to prior work on short-video media and cross-cultural communication, the present findings suggest that cultural narratives achieve broader circulation when they are organized around relatable experiences rather than dense historical or ideological explanation. However, the present study extends this line of research by showing more specifically how Chinese national culture is localized in the Malaysian TikTok context through frames of everyday familiarity, experiential accessibility, and symbolic simplification.

These patterns underscore the importance of localization in cross-cultural digital communication. Rather than translating national culture into region-specific messages, TikTok-based cultural narratives adapt by foregrounding universally relatable experiences. This strategy aligns with the platform's transnational circulation dynamics, where content must remain legible across diverse cultural contexts to achieve visibility.

The findings therefore suggest that effective national culture communication in Southeast Asian digital media does not depend on cultural completeness or historical accuracy, but on the ability to activate shared experiential

reference points that allow audiences to situate unfamiliar cultural elements within their own interpretive frameworks.

An additional consideration in cross-cultural framing is the navigation of political sensitivities. In the Southeast Asian context, creators appear to consciously avoid overtly political or contentious content, instead emphasizing everyday practices, lifestyle, and heritage elements that are widely recognizable and non-controversial. This “sanitization” strategy allows content to circulate across borders without provoking geopolitical tensions, ensuring broader engagement and platform visibility. By foregrounding culturally resonant yet politically neutral narratives, creators maintain appeal while minimizing potential friction, highlighting how national culture framing operates within both aesthetic and socio-political constraints.

Platform Affordances and the Simplification of Cultural Meaning:-

A recurring theme across the findings is the simplification of cultural meaning. While simplification is often viewed critically as a loss of cultural depth, this study suggests that simplification should instead be understood as a structural condition of platformized communication. TikTok’s affordances—short duration, algorithmic ranking, and emphasis on visual appeal—encourage cultural representations that are concise, repeatable, and emotionally engaging. Simplification, in this context, enables cultural content to circulate efficiently across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Repetition of symbolic elements, such as recurring food imagery or iconic visual motifs, contributes to cultural visibility and recognition. However, this visibility comes at the cost of narrative complexity, as nuanced historical or social contexts are often excluded.

Rather than framing simplification as a distortion of national culture, it is more productive to view it as a trade-off between reach and depth. Simplified cultural frames allow national culture to enter everyday digital environments, where it can be encountered casually and repeatedly. Over time, these encounters may serve as gateways to deeper cultural engagement, even if the initial framing remains surface-oriented. This insight highlights the importance of considering platform affordances as active participants in cultural communication processes. Cultural meaning on TikTok is not merely communicated through the platform—it is co-produced by the platform’s technical, algorithmic, and interactional structures.

Conclusion:-

This study examined how Chinese national culture is framed and localized in Southeast Asian digital media through TikTok-based short-video narratives circulating in Malaysia. By applying qualitative content analysis and framing analysis, the study identified four dominant cultural frames—everyday cultural practices, symbolic heritage, experiential and tourism-oriented narratives, and simplified cultural identity—through which cultural meanings are constructed, circulated, and stabilized in a platformized media environment. The findings demonstrate that Chinese national culture is communicated less through comprehensive historical or institutional narratives and more through selective, visually driven, and experiential representations. Everyday practices such as food and lifestyle function as primary entry points, while symbolic heritage operates as condensed visual shorthand. These framing patterns reflect both creator-level adaptation and platform-level constraints, highlighting how digital platforms actively shape cultural meaning rather than merely distributing it.

Theoretically, this study extends framing theory by illustrating how frames operate within short-video, algorithmically driven environments, where repetition, visual immediacy, and narrative brevity are central to meaning construction. It also contributes to research on national culture communication by demonstrating how national identity is recontextualized through everyday and localized narratives. From a regional perspective, the findings underscore the importance of localization and cultural proximity in cross-cultural digital communication. In the Southeast Asian context, particularly Malaysia, culturally accessible and experiential framing strategies facilitate engagement and interpretation, suggesting that effective national culture communication in digital spaces depends on alignment with everyday cultural sensibilities.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the analysis focuses on a single platform, TikTok, and a single national context, Malaysia, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other digital platforms or Southeast Asian settings. Second, the study is based on qualitative content analysis of publicly accessible videos and therefore examines representational patterns rather than audience reception, creator intention, or measurable engagement outcomes. Third, because the analysis emphasizes dominant framing patterns, less visible or less algorithmically amplified forms of cultural representation may not have been captured to the same extent. Future

research could address these limitations in several ways. Comparative studies across multiple Southeast Asian countries or across different platforms could provide a broader understanding of how Chinese national culture is localized in diverse digital environments. In addition, incorporating audience reception data, creator interviews, or engagement metrics would help clarify how framed cultural content is interpreted, negotiated, and circulated. Longitudinal research could also examine whether framing patterns change over time in response to platform dynamics, geopolitical context, or shifting creator practices.

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