

A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE YOUTUBE COMMENTS ON THE CHINA-US ANCHORAGE SUMMIT

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Abstract. This paper explores the China-US relationship through a thematic analysis of 781 YouTube comments on the China-US Anchorage Summit. Guided by the six conditions of Dahlberg's model of an ideal online public sphere, this study has found: first, the emerged themes from the selected comments fit in with Dahlberg's six conditions in terms of gratitude, opposition, reflection, respect, accuracy, and inclusion. Second, the YouTube platform presents the online commentators an ideal public sphere for active and meaningful interactions with one another, thus showcasing that an online public sphere is feasible, practical, and ideal. As implications, the research findings herein reinforce the validity of Dahlberg's model by showcasing YouTube as one of the most important social media outlets which materializes the existence and facilitates the operation of an ideal online public sphere. Meanwhile, the research findings also shed light onto further explorations of the online social media and genuine understanding of the developmental trajectory of the China-US relationship.

Keywords: YouTube, commentators, online public sphere, China-US relationship, China-US Anchorage Summit

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1. Introduction

As of October 2022, the number of global Internet users had already reached 5.07 billion, accounting for approximately 63.5% of the world's total population. The number of global social media users has reached 4.74 billion, covering as much as 59.3% of the world's total population. Global mobile users have reached 5.48 billion, with smartphones accounting for almost 4 in 5 of the mobile handsets in use today (Kemp 2022). With the rapid development of information technology and the popularity of the Internet, the means of a conduit of the public sphere has been increasingly updated. Modern social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have broken the space-time boundaries of interpersonal communication and provided people with more extensive freedom of speech. Thus, more and more scholars (e.g. Batorski and Grzywińska 2018, Bouvier and Rosenbaum 2020, Huber, Wetzstein, and Aichberger 2019, Iosifidis 2011, Rauchfleisch and Schäfer 2015) focus their research on the online public sphere. The number of discussions on whether the online public sphere will become the mainstream, new, or better type of public sphere in the future is also growing (e.g. Dokhanchi et al. 2019, Dursun and Yildiz 2022, Gerhards and Schäfer 2010, Papacharissi 2002). To those who hold positive views, the Internet or social media helps to forge and support the public sphere and can be taken as a new form of the public sphere to some extent, though facing some challenges to function as an ideal online public sphere.

China, the world's second-largest economy, is playing an increasingly important role internationally, thanks to the assertive foreign policy of President Xi Jinping and the strategic moves by the United States under the Trump Administration to treat China as a geopolitical rival (Kroeber 2020). Meanwhile, the Trump administration announced a trade war against China on March 22, 2018, which had negative effects on global trade and economic growth. The conflict worsened when Zhongxing Telecommunication Equipment (ZTE), the second-largest Chinese IT equipment company, had a suspended denial order implemented against it by the US Commerce Department on April 16, 2018 (Lu 2018). "In terms of the scope and scale, the current China-US trade conflict has evolved into an all-round trade war" (Liang and Ding 2020: 13). The trade war has influenced the areas of the economy, finance, tariffs, carbon emission, international market, and so on (e.g.: Chou et al. 2021, Dixon et al. 2021, Tsutsumi 2019). Due to differences in trade, cyber espionage, and human rights issues, the China-US relationships tend to be tenser. When President Biden came to power on January 20, 2021, the new administration declared without any hesitation that the U.S. "will continue its confrontational policy towards Beijing... and mobilize the U.S. network of alliances to contain China" (Jakóbowski 2021, para. 1). For good or bad, quite a number of Western countries led by the U.S. have made it their common mission to prevent China by all means from surpassing the U.S. and establish new rules of the game in international institutions to reflect Chinese preferences.

Against this background, the China-US talks in Alaska took place in three rounds over two days between March 18 and 19 2021. The American officials who attended

the talks included Antony Blinken who is the Secretary of State and Jake Sullivan who is the National Security Advisor. The Chinese officials included Yang Jiechi, a member of the Politburo, and Wang Yi, the foreign minister (Glaser and Price 2021). Most of the talks were held behind closed doors to discuss a range of issues affecting China-US relations. The selected video transcript of the summit in this paper are records of the opening remarks of the first round of talks and the comments on the videos from viewers all over the world.

It is significant to carry out the study for the following reasons. First, the China-US Anchorage summit is an epoch-making event in the history of the China-US bilateral relations. It is the first time that the highest-ranking Chinese diplomats challenge their US counterparts face to face on equal footing. Second, the YouTube comments of the viewers who witness this live event represent genuine voices and attitudes of the global audience regarding the changing nature of the China-US bilateral relationship and its subsequent impact on the rest of the world as well. Finally, this study may further extend the research on the online public sphere and enlarge the scope of exploring the China-US relationship. To this end, the following research questions are raised:

RQ1: What are the main themes that emerged from the video comments concerning the China-US Alaska Summit?

RQ2: How do the emerged themes of the video comments illustrate the functions of an ideal online sphere?

2. Literature review

In this section, existing scholarships regarding the China-US conflict, features and functions of social media like YouTube, and the contributions of YouTube-like online platforms to the construction of an ideal online public sphere are reviewed.

2.1. The China-US conflict

The conflicts between China and the US include territorial disputes, the arms race, dissatisfaction with prevailing international norms led by the US, and ideological disputes (Tammen and Kugler 2006). Studies have been done specifically on the China-US trade war that began in 2018. First, regarding the causes of the trade conflict, Chong and Li (2019) held that trade imbalances, the US midterm elections, and rivalry for global economic dominance are three causes of the China-US trade war.

Second, the impacts of the China-US conflict on various fields were also widely discussed. For example, the China-US trade conflicts harmed the economy and energy sector, and neither China nor the US could gain from the dispute (Xia et al. 2019). The trade war affected import tariffs, investment, and productivity. It reduced the gross domestic product in China and the US and reduced nearly all sectoral imports and outputs in both countries (Itakura 2020). As the world's two largest economies, the China-US conflict also had influences on other countries and regions

like South Asian economies (Iqbal 2022), Indonesia (Wangke 2020, Taufikurahman and Firdaus 2019), Europe (Bahensky 2021), the EU (Michael and Axel 2020) and so on.

Third, quite a number of discussions focused on the future of the China-US conflict. On the one hand, some scholars held a pessimistic attitude and posited that the fundamental conflicts between China and the US could not be easily resolved (Chong and Li 2019). On the other hand, some believed that “the United States and China can still choose between conflict and cooperation – even integration, if decision makers so choose” (Tammen and Kugler 2006: 51). Above all, the studies on the China-US trade conflict related to causes, impacts, and prospects are adequate and specific.

Because of the escalating China-US conflict and the straining China-US relationship, the China-US talks in Alaska aimed at easing bilateral relations have attracted the attention of many scholars. For example, Glaser and Price (2021) summarized the important content of the talks and concluded that the struggle between the two countries is prolonged and it is unclear how the relationship will develop. Furthermore, Ye (2022) held that the first head-to-head meeting between the two governments established the tone for China-US relations for the rest of 2021. “What grabbed the world’s attention was their opening remarks” (Ye 2022: 21). Finally, the most discussed part was what Yang Jiechi said in the opening remarks (e.g.: Chong 2022, Fang, Li, and Liu 2022, Lai 2023, Sarty 2021). Sarty (2021) thought that Yang Jiechi’s words in the talks embodied a strong new outlook of Chinese foreign policy. In short, the research on the China-US talks in Alaska mainly focused on the perspectives of discourse analysis, public opinion, interpreting teaching, and so on, which rarely touched upon the roles of social media comments. Influenced by the different political systems and ideological stances, some Western mainstream media were biased, misleading, negative, and even false in their reporting of China (Deaville and Lemire 2021, Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2018, Su 2021). But the appearance of videos about the opening remarks on social media made the public learn about China and the China-US relationship in a more objective and realistic way. Below, the public sphere and the features and functions of social media like YouTube are reviewed.

2.2. The public sphere and social media

Research into the public sphere has a long history. Hannah Arendt put forward the concept ‘public realm’ in 1958. Jürgen Habermas, under her influence, systematically developed the theory of the public sphere. By analyzing the bourgeoisie in the 18th and 19th centuries in Great Britain, France, and Germany, he displayed the ways in which citizens talked about political issues in coffeehouses, bars, and other public places. Gradually, his opinions about the ‘bourgeois public sphere’ were formulated (Habermas 1991: 14). For him, the public sphere was ‘a specific domain’ of social life like ‘public places or public houses’ where public opinions can be formed (Habermas 1991: 1-2). The public sphere he defined here was just an ideal model existing in certain historical periods with certain forms. Later, Habermas (1996)

defined the public sphere as: “a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions” (p. 164). The online public sphere of the YouTube platform mentioned in this paper also conforms to the above definition.

Although the definition is still applicable in today’s digital era, the public sphere “is currently undergoing significant transformations under the influence of the Internet and social media” (Alexey 2018: 88). That means the online public sphere has its characteristics in different media ages. The emergence of the first social medium was BBS or Bulletin Board System in 1979 developed for uploading and downloading software and exchanging messages with others (Taprial and Kanwar 2012). Later in the early 21st century, social media became popular and widespread with the emergence of various social platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. For example, as of July 2022, Facebook claimed 2.93 billion monthly active users (Shacknews 2022) and ranked third worldwide among the most visited websites (Similarweb 2022). As the second most visited website and the second most popular social network worldwide, the YouTube platform has more than 2.5 billion monthly users (Statista 2022). In this way, social media are becoming increasingly important communication platforms for individuals from different countries and backgrounds and with various nationalities, and occupations to participate in deliberations freely and openly. Therefore, the importance of social media in the formation of the online public sphere cannot be ignored.

Having discussed the scholarships on the importance of social media above, below is the review of the contributions of YouTube-like online platforms to the construction of an ideal online public sphere. Due to the openness and convenience of social media, the public sphere transforms into a more diverse and broader form compared to the era of the dominance of print mass media (Alexey 2018). To date, there has been little agreement on whether the online public sphere is the development of the public sphere or not. On the one hand, some scholars have argued that the virtual public sphere is fragmented and different from the Habermasian public sphere. For example, the data from in-depth interviews with Millennials and Generation Xers were used to refute the claim that social media has promoted the return of Habermas’s public sphere (Kruse, Norris, and Flinchum 2018).

Similarly, some scholars held that the virtual public sphere “has its own features and functionalities and completely borrowing or mapping the traditional public sphere to virtual spaces has its own implications” (Dokhanchi, et al. 2019: 90). They considered the virtual public sphere as an independent or innovative conception, not as a part of the public sphere. Although individuals have more access to online media, “information access inequalities and new media literacy compromise the representativeness of the virtual sphere” (Papacharissi 2002: 9). Thus, the virtual public sphere “has little in common with the Habermasian public sphere but more in common with contemporary public impulses and desires” (Papacharissi 2008: 236). Although these scholars do not agree with the viewpoint that the virtual public sphere

is the development of the Habermasian public sphere, they cannot deny that changes in media and the emergence of new modes of communication have a considerable and enduring impact on the public sphere.

On the other hand, other scholars don't think so and they have assumed that online forums constituted a public sphere (e.g.: Dahlberg 2001a, Staab and Thiel 2022, Tian and Chao 2017, Wodak and Wright 2006). In the context of public sphere theory, Nuernbergk (2022) put forward the conception of 'digital publics' (p. 12) and stressed the importance of public communication through the Internet and its potential for participation. In addition, some scholars believed that the virtual public sphere made contributions to promote electronic democracy, freedom of expression, political participation, and global justice (e.g.: Benrazek 2022, Langman 2005, Malina 2005). Unlike the traditional public sphere, the digital public sphere is a complex set of spaces, which challenges the regulation of policymakers. Thus, to promote democracy in the digital, both digital design and user behavior are ideal practices (Dommett and Verovšek 2021). Dahlgren (2005) "conceptualized the public sphere as three dimensions of structures, representation, and interaction" (p. 148) and used them to study the destabilization of political communication systems under the background of the Internet.

Following Dahlgren's three dimensions of the public sphere, Batorski and Grzywińska (2018) provided an empirical analysis of the public sphere on Facebook to "characterize how the public sphere manifests itself" in social networking sites (p. 357). The research on the online public sphere in social media not merely focused on Facebook, and the importance of Twitter was not ignored either. Rauchfleisch, Vogler, and Eisenegger (2021) illustrated that "the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown of public life clearly had an effect on the Swiss Twitter-sphere" (p. 140) by using extensive digital trace data from 1,762,262 tweets mentioning COVID-19 that were sent between 1 January and 30 April 2020 by 56,418 authenticated Swiss users. All these studies showed that the Internet and social media are playing an increasingly important roles in the construction and development of an online public sphere.

In short, extensive research has shown that the rise of the Internet and the emergence of social media do change the public sphere and boost a more differentiated public sphere. Research on the quality of the public sphere should "consider the Internet as a functional complement to the mass media and face-to-face interactions" (Rasmussen 2016: 72). Van Dijck (2012) took Facebook as an example to investigate that social media platforms has formed a new public sphere and has produced new norms of sociality and connectivity. So far, existing scholarships on the China-US relationships are both extensive and fruitful, with some touching upon social media, but few are from the perspective of the online public sphere. Therefore, an analysis of YouTube comments concerning the China-US talks in Alaska under the theory of the online public sphere may enrich the present discussion and provide insight into the profound understanding of the increasingly sophisticated China-US relationships. In the next part, the model of an ideal online public sphere is discussed.

3. Theoretical framework

Slowly but surely, academic research into what way the Internet may facilitate the public sphere is growing. Dahlberg is one of the researchers who has made contributions to extend the public sphere by offering a broad examination of the prospects of online discourse. In his research, online deliberative practices are compared with a normative model of the public sphere developed from the work of Jürgen Habermas. Then the model of an ideal online public sphere is put forward by Dahlberg (2001a, 2001b). Stemming from Habermas' public sphere theory, Dahlberg's (2001a, 2001b) model contains six conditions which are autonomy from state and economic power, exchange and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role-taking, sincerity, and discursive inclusion and equality.

The first condition is autonomy from state and economic power, which requires that "discourse must be driven by the concerns of publicly oriented citizens rather than by money or administrative power" (Dahlberg 2001a: 623). The second condition is the "exchange and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims" (Dahlberg 2001a: 623). It means critique is open and acceptable in discourse, but should be reasonable rather than dogmatic. The third condition demands that "participants must critically examine their cultural values, assumptions, and interests, as well as the larger social context", which can be summarized as reflexivity" (Dahlberg 2001a, 2001b).

To meet the fourth condition of ideal role-taking, participants must attempt to put themselves in the position of the other so as to understand the argument from the other's perspective (Dahlberg 2001b). It requires that interlocutors should listen to one another and keep the dialogue ongoing despite their different social and cultural backgrounds. As for the fifth condition of sincerity, "each participant must make a sincere effort to provide all information relevant to the particular problem under consideration, including information regarding intentions, interests, needs, and desires" (Dahlberg 2001a: 623). The last one is discursive inclusion and equality. Dahlberg (2001b) thinks the Internet can at best support an elite public sphere because much of the world's adult population still does not have access to the Internet and cannot get their voices heard. So, this condition requires that "every participant affected by the validity claims under consideration is equally entitled to introduce and question any assertion whatsoever" (Dahlberg 2001a: 623).

The six conditions listed above have been applied by Dahlberg to analyze the case of deliberations of Mn-Politics Discuss (MPD), the forum at the center of Minnesota's E-Democracy. Tian and Chao (2017) also applied the model to study the online forum posts of two books on Zheng He's voyages and to evaluate whether participants' forum posts satisfy the six conditions. Since Dahlberg's model has been extensively applied in the field of media and the Internet by the theory founder himself and other researchers, the six conditions of this model are to be applied as the theoretical framework in the present study to explore the emerging themes from the selected video comments and to examine whether YouTube is an ideal online public sphere here.

4. Research method

After introducing the above theoretical frameworks, the research methods of online field observation and thematic analysis are described as follows. This paper selected two YouTube videos about the opening remarks of the China-US summit in Alaska and analyzed their respective comments. The two videos were uploaded by people with the username of Frank on YouTube. The title of one video was “China-US Meeting: Alaska Summit” (Full Version Video with the missed last 7 minutes added) and was uploaded on March 24, 2021, with 24550 views and 266 comments by December 12, 2022. The title of the other video was “China-US Meeting: Alaska Summit” (Full Version Video) and was uploaded on March 21, 2021, with 64734 views and 633 comments by December 12, 2022. There are mainly three reasons for selecting the two videos and analyzing their comments. First, the China-US talks in Alaska are of great significance in the history of China and the US. It is the first face-to-face high-level meeting between China and the US since President Joe Biden took office. Diplomats from China and the US were attempting to restore ties that have become increasingly strained in recent years (Williams and Clark 2021). Second, after a detailed search on YouTube about the China-US talks in Alaska uploaded by users like DW news, NBC news, CNN, WION, CGTN, *South China Morning Post*, and so on, we finally selected the two full-length videos as well as considering the number of views and comments. Third, the user who uploaded the two videos was an individual user which may attract comments from neutral and objective positions.

Before the data analysis, we made a thorough search of the information about the China-US talks in Alaska on YouTube. Then we collected 266 comments for the first video from March 24, 2021, to December 12, 2022, and 633 comments for the second video from March 21, 2021, to December 12, 2022. After that, we took them as a whole and put all 899 comments together to conduct the data analysis. After close reading and cautious filtering, 27 comments on the first video and 91 comments on the second video, which were repetitive, meaningless, and unrelated were deleted, and 781 effective comments were selected in total for conducting the thematic analysis. “Thematic analysis (TA) is an accessible, flexible, and increasingly popular method of qualitative data analysis” (Braun and Clarke 2012: 57).

When doing TA, six phases can be adopted, namely familiarizing with the data, generating codes, constructing themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Terry, et al 2017). The first phase of familiarization is the foundation for doing good TA (Terry, et al 2017). Following Terry’s (2017) six-phase analytic process for TA, we finished the first phase during the process of data collection by searching different media websites, watching various videos, collecting related comments, and asking questions about the data. The purpose of coding is to find the ‘evidence’ for the themes and coding reliability is one of the key issues that need to be considered when conducting TA. “What is key in ‘coding reliability’ versions of TA is that the coding process is designed to allow the researcher to test and report on coding reliability – indeed, it is seen as essential for quality” (Terry, et al. 2017: 19). To achieve this quality, in the second phase of

generating codes, we coded the 781 effective comments in a deductive approach and took the corpus software of AntConc (Version 4.1.4) developed by Anthony (2020) as an assisting tool. Then we compared and examined the comments at the semantic level from the viewpoints of the message writers. As Terry (2017) pointed out that the six-phase is not a completely linear procedure. “Instead, it is iterative and recursive: the researcher often moves back and forth between the different phases” (p. 12). So during the phases of data familiarization and coding, Phase 3 of theme development was ongoing at the same time. In Phases 4 and 5, by reviewing and defining themes, we critically analyzed and objectively categorized the comments under the theoretical framework of Dahlberg’s model. Finally, in the sixth phase of producing the report, by putting together data, codes, and themes, and connecting them with the literature review, we achieved our final analysis.

5. Research findings and analysis

Taking Dahlberg’s (2001a, 2001b) model of an ideal online public sphere as the theoretical framework and using thematic analysis as the research method, the selected 781 comments have been analyzed and the following six themes have emerged.

5.1. Gratitude and freedom

Dahlberg (2001a) believed that an ideal online public sphere is not affiliated with any political party, interest group, or private concern and does not accept any commercial advertising. After analyzing all the effective comments, we have found almost no signs of political engagement or state intervention there. Based on existing information such as the name of users and their comments, we find that most commentators are common citizens. They viewed and commented on the video because they were attracted by the content of talks between China and the US without accepting any commercial or financial support. The commentators freely and independently talked about their views and impressions on the performances of the two delegations, which are very essential for the online public sphere. Besides, many commentators showed their appreciation to the person who uploaded the full video because it is very hard to find a full-length one on YouTube or other social media platforms. The following representative comments show the ways in which the commentators independently communicated with each other and freely expressed their feelings and impressions after watching the videos.

Comment 1:

Thank [you] for your bravery and fairness to show the video without censoring or modifying the original conversation (Commentator 1).

Comment 2:

Thanks for putting up the video of the whole summit (Commentator 2).

diplomats already understood what was said by Blinkin and Sullivan. The English-Chinese translation is just a formality (Commentator 7).

Comment 8:

@Dean Liu The American interpreter was terrible. Her articulation was not good, and she mistranslated a few things. The Chinese interpreter did not convey what Yang and Wang were actually saying. She watered down their comments (I think this was ordered by Yang/Wang). Blinken and Sullivan’s aides received a more accurate translation, which is why they called the reporters back into the room. Blinken is in over his head. Not the best choice for secretary of state. (Commentator 8).

The above three comments are debating whether the interpreters of both parties are good or not. Commentator 6 speaks highly of the Chinese interpreter for her amazing accent and impressive performance, while the American interpreter does not do so well. On the contrary, Commentator 7 claims that “the American interpreter doesn’t need to be good” and “the English-Chinese translation is just a formality” because the Chinese diplomats can understand what the American diplomats say. Commentator 8 disagrees with Commentator 6 and argues by directly pointing out that the American interpreter is terrible since “her articulation was not good and she mistranslated a few things”. From the perspective of Commentator 8, the reason why the Chinese interpreter does not convey what Chinese diplomats were saying is that she is ordered by them. There are many other oppositions and criticisms concerning other issues, most of which are reasonable and conform to Dahlberg’s (2001b) second condition of an ideal online public sphere. For example, we use the positive word ‘support’ and the negative word ‘against’ in the KWIC (keyword in

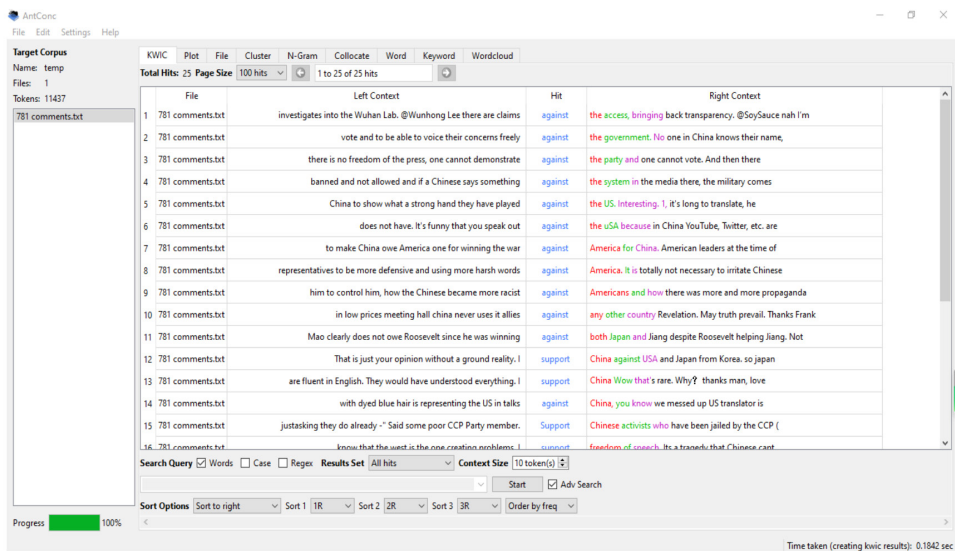


Figure 3. Example Output from AntConc for the Theme of Criticism.

context) module of AntConc software to see in what the commentators' attitudes are toward the videos. As shown in Figure 3, the comments containing the words 'support' or 'against' appear 25 times in total, which plainly shows commentators' different opinions and attitudes towards the videos.

5.3. Reflexivity and reflection

In the online public sphere, participants usually put forward and defend their claims, and most of them do not easily revise or change their stances. The reflexivity can be fostered by encouraging participants to change or compromise their positions when confronted with strong critiques in the online debate or argumentation (Dahlberg 2001a). In addition, moderate rethinking and reflection are also necessary for a better online public sphere. Here is a comment on the illustration.

Comment 9:

The way the USA regulates TikTok and Huawei is the same as China regulates YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Google. Foreign companies always have to follow local laws just the same way the USA demands the same from foreign companies. Would YouTube or Google agree to set up a different company in China, headquartered in China with Chinese directors? They failed to do that and thus were regulated. The USA demanded the same on TikTok. Both countries are spreading propaganda. The USA simply has a larger audience, and that's why most of the English-speaking world is on its side. We have been brainwashed to think they are of any value or actually exist. Tell me one benefit to society of freedom of speech. Freedom of speech does not actually exist anywhere in the world, and this is why social media companies are censoring people's posts and many are losing jobs over comments they made in private. The West is not saint (Commentator 9).

The degree of freedom of speech in China and the US is one of the most heated debates among commentators. For example, some commentators firmly believe that the US is democratic and enjoys a high degree of freedom. Instead, they think China almost has no freedom of speech because Western social media like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are regulated by the Chinese government, and one cannot demonstrate against the party and cannot vote. The fact that all Western news organizations buried and suppressed the video out of concern for the public's ability to hear and understand the truth, according to some commentators, indicates that Western freedom of expression may be a myth.

Within certain online debates, it is possible to observe the occurrence of reflexivity (Dahlberg 2001b). Comment 9 is a reply to the above debate, which shows obvious reflexivity and reflection. Commentator 9 does not arbitrarily and blindly take sides. On the contrary, Commentator 9 first states that though Western social media are regulated in China, China's Tiktok and Huawei are also regulated in the US. It has nothing to do with the freedom of speech but is related to the local laws. Second,

Commentator 9 thinks “both countries are spreading propaganda” and the freedom of speech we speak of may not be real freedom. Third, Commentator 9 adds “freedom of speech does not actually exist anywhere in the world”. Some of the replies may not be so conceived, but the process of critical thinking presents typical reflexivity and reflection.

5.4. Openness and respect

Ideal role-taking, the fourth condition of Dahlberg’s (2001a, 2001b) model, emphasizes the importance of putting themselves in the position of the other to understand the other’s perspective when participants encounter social and cultural differences. In this situation, an ongoing dialogue, open mind, and respectful listening for participants seem necessary. The below comments show the ways in which commentators present their understanding of the selected videos and express their openness and respect to others.

Comment 10:

It really makes me laugh that so many Americans are on China’s side here. Actually, it should be rather sad. I could say a thousand more things, and I just don’t want such a violent country to be supported in such a contradicting manner. I am not saying the US is perfect, however, countries like Norway, Sweden, and Finland in Europe, which are the most democratic in the world, should be what countries should look like (Commentator 10).

Comment 11:

[You’re] gullible to think that things such as freedom of the press, propaganda, and violent police raids are limited to China. But keep thinking all of that because some guys who lived in China for 10 years said so. China has historical claims, especially Tibet and, most of all, Taiwan. I don’t see people complaining about the US bombing innocent children in Syria. I recommend you look more into history and geopolitical reasoning. So that you can better understand what is really going on (Commentator 11).

Comment 12:

Please watch this channel to clear your mind. I know there are historical claims, but that doesn’t mean you have to use the military or even kill people. People in China don’t even know the truth. They don’t know what their government is doing outside of China, and people are brainwashed. And the thing with Syria is horrible, so you are currently criticizing what the government has done in the USA. You have freedom of expression and you are even allowed to demonstrate, but in China, you are not allowed to do that. I hope you notice the difference. You can have an opinion here and reveal it on social media, but in China, you would be imprisoned for it (Commentator 10).

Commentator 10 posts a long comment to express the opinions which are partly presented above. There are twelve replies to Commentator 10, and Comments 11 and 12 are selected from the ongoing discussion. The commentators can openly express their views in their comments no matter in support or opposition. A lot of commentators show their good impressions of Chinese diplomats and translators in their comments after watching the video. But Commentator 10 holds the opposite view by telling many historical events that took place in China and the commentator even feels sad that “so many Americans are on China’s side here”. Then Commentator 11 counters that Commentator 10 is “gullible to think that things such as freedom of press, propaganda and violent police raids are limited to China”. As for Commentator 10 that China is a violent country, Commentator 11 argues that “China has historical claims, especially Tibet and most of all Taiwan.” After that, Commentator 10 continues to reply and express disagreement in Comment 12. Commentator 10 admits that there are historical claims in China, but still asserts that people in China are not allowed to criticize the government and do not have freedom of expression. The debate is still ongoing, with other commentators joining in to give their replies.

In contemporary Western thought, ‘public’ is linked to ‘openness’ and ‘inclusion’ (Dahlberg 2013: 31). In the online public space, commentators function as the ‘public’ and most of them show their openness in the debate. Though the commentators have opposite opinions and heated arguments here, they still do not forget to show understanding and respect for others. For instance, from the sentences in the three comments like “I recommend you to...”, “I hope you notice...”, “Please watch this channel...” and so on, we can see their respect for others in the open discussion.

5.5. Sincerity and accuracy

To make the communication of the online public sphere open and rational, participants should provide relevant information regarding intentions, interests, needs, and desires (Dahlberg 2001a, 2001b). Though absolute sincerity does not exist, participants should try to minimize the level of deception of identity, interests, and information. It means the fifth condition of sincerity requires participants not only to share their actual needs, concerns, and interests but also to make sure their posts or comments are as accurate as possible and never provide false information on purpose. The following two comments reveal the sincerity and accuracy of the commentators.

Comment 13:

The USA told the media to stay after they finished the official protocol. They attacked China in front of the media but when it was China’s side to respond [the] US told the media to leave the room. That caused the Chinese official to get furious and say some really tough things directly to [the] US face. The official said things like: Why are you afraid of the media? Why do you not let them stay? Are you not a democracy? Do you not have freedom of the press? After that, China persuaded the media to stay to

document their response. This part was completely cut off in most of the videos. That's why in the last part of the video you can see the Chinese official say that China thought too well of the US (Commentator 12).

Comment 14:

The interpreter has altered the original ideas from Sullivan when she replaced deep concern with deep resentment. Is the American interpreter trying to enrage Chinese representatives? (Commentator 13)

The above two commentators both clearly illustrate the impressive clips in videos and express their true feelings sincerely and accurately. In Comment 13, Commentator 12 first narrates generally that the USA told the media to stay while they were making a speech but asked them to go away when it was China's turn to speak. Then the direct feeling of Commentator 12 is that the Chinese official is getting furious, asking a series of sharp questions and forcing the media to stay. Next, Commentator 12 points out that "this part was completely cut off in most of the videos" to help more participants who watch the video or read the comments know the truth. This accurate elaboration also helps commentators reveal puzzles in the last part of the video.

Similarly, Comment 14 presents the sincere feeling of the reviewer after watching the performance of the American interpreter. While watching the video, Commentator 13 notices that "the interpreter has altered the original ideas from Sullivan" which she translated 'deep concern' into 'deep resent'. The audience may not pay attention to it if they do not carefully watch it. Commentator 13 shows the concern that it may enrage Chinese representatives through a question. Furthermore, we choose three words of 'truth', 'fact', and 'evidence' which are all related to the themes of

File	Left Context	Hit	Right Context
1 781 comments.txt	world situation for me, I think I am approaching the	truth	after reading your words. The rock and harsh time
2 781 comments.txt	a look at her hair. Man U just told the	truth...	as a Chinese I wanted to tear my head
3 781 comments.txt	such people here! @Charter they dont want to know the	truth,	but I like telling them the truth. Hope that
4 781 comments.txt	t. lol 1 year ago @Yifan Liu Michelle S. said the	truth.	Go to see different media and then you will
5 781 comments.txt	there is a whole world out there who know the	truth.	Hence, Amerca failed to rescue Jiang from Mao after
6 781 comments.txt	to know the truth, but I like telling them the	truth.	Hope that they aware that everyone treats them as
7 781 comments.txt	know many people think that's not true, but the	evidence	is clear. China does not accept any criticism from
8 781 comments.txt	yourself up if you're not ready to know the	truth.	It could shock you. @peace "not hard to check
9 781 comments.txt	ignorance, since most people in America are blocked from the	truth	of orange agent in Vietnam, wedding bombing in the
10 781 comments.txt	never uses it allies against any other country Revelation. May	truth	prevail. Thanks Frank This one is full lol both
11 781 comments.txt	in your argument. Arrogance or ignorance it's all ideology.	Fact	Show less @SoySauce projection is a defense mechanism used
12 781 comments.txt	well and their audience is going to laugh at the	fact	that America cannot carry a complexed conversation. The world
13 781 comments.txt	do to America, given that opportunity. As a matter of	fact,	the Soviet Union is without any doubt the #1 contributor
14 781 comments.txt	kill people. People in China don't even know the	truth	they don't know what their government is doing
15 781 comments.txt	News Agencies buried and silenced the video in fear the	truth	to be heard and to be known. Thank you
16 781 comments.txt	and eyes/Warnanoant:www.editedfrom.thankinjoison. There is the	truth	which evenbuddies know, and then there is the short

Figure 4. Example output from AntConc for the Theme of Sincerity

sincerity and accuracy, and put them in the KWIC module of AntConc software to examine whether the comments conform to the themes. As presented in Figure 4, the comments containing the words of ‘truth’, ‘fact’, or ‘evidence’ appear 17 times, which illustrates that commentators tend to express their views more objectively by setting forth facts. Thus, we can see sincere and accurate narrations in the comments, making the formation of an ideal online public sphere more convincing.

5.6. Inclusion and harmony

The last condition of Dahlberg’s (2001a, 2001b) modal is discursive equality and inclusion. It is almost impossible to achieve discursive equality and inclusion inhibited by social inequalities, cultural differences, and demographic discrepancies (gender, ethnicity, occupation, income, education) offline. However, with the expansion of Internet users and more people getting involved in the online public sphere, we can see more discursive equality and inclusion. Below are two representative comments showing inclusion and harmony.

Comment 15:

Having an authoritarian state is one thing, but being rude in international relations is another. America is a democracy, [and] China an authoritarian state. One is freer, while the other is more orderly. But being polite in international relation[s] goes for everyone. Such rude diplomacy hurts US interests and I think [it] embarrassed US people (Commentator 14).

Comment 16:

You’re welcome, but I disagree with you about the idea of war. I think people should live in Harmony, with human rights in peaceful societies with political participation (Commentator 15).

The commentators of the above two comments both avoid fierce words. Commentator 14 holds that the US should be inclusive to China and avoid ‘rude diplomacy’ and ‘being polite in international relation[s] goes for everyone’. The presence of social inequalities and cultural differences outside the online world acts as a barrier to inclusion in digital discussions (Dahlberg 2001b). Thus, Comment 16 is a reply to disagreeing with another commentator’s idea of war. Commentator 15 thinks people should live in a harmonious society with equal human rights and political participation. Except for the two comments, there are also many other discourses indicating inclusion and harmony in the selected 781 comments. For instance, we take ‘war’ as the keyword in the KWIC module of AntConc software to probe into other commentators’ attitudes toward war. As presented in Figure 5, the keyword appears 17 times in the whole comments and concerns the topics of the war between China and the US, the Korean War, the nuclear war, WWII, the 1962 India-China border war, and so on. From their comments, most commentators hold inclusive and tolerant attitudes toward conflicts. They think the war is ‘scary’ and ‘the best war fought is on with no battles’, which vividly explains the theme of harmony.

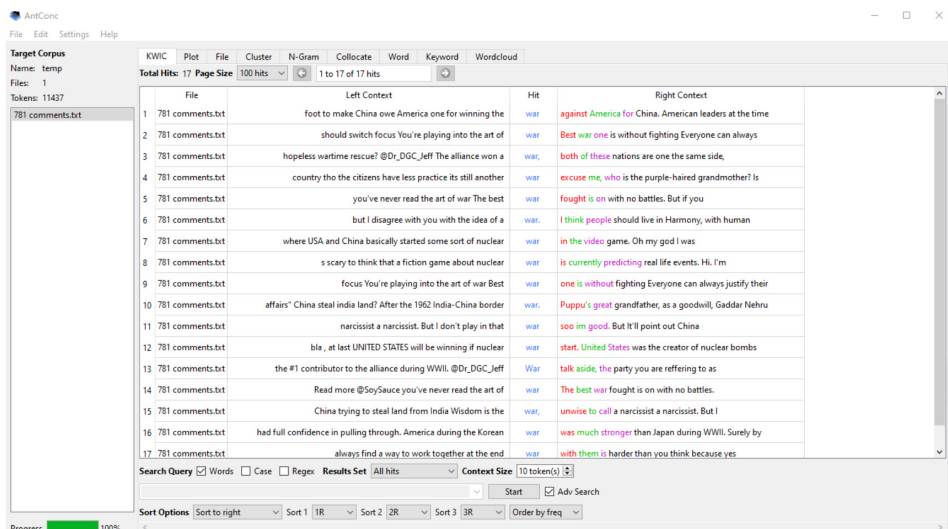


Figure 5. Example output from AntConc for the Theme of Harmony.

6. Conclusion

There are three purposes for this study: (1) to explore the themes from the comments of selected videos about the China-US summit in Alaska; (2) to probe the functions of the YouTube platform in the online public sphere. Taking Dahlberg's model of an ideal online public sphere as the theoretical framework and thematic analysis as the research method, this study has got the following answers to the two research questions.

RQ1: What are the main themes that emerged from the video comments concerning the China-US Alaska Summit? The exploration of the six themes summarized from selected video comments can help better know the China-US relationship from a new perspective. The first theme is gratitude and freedom, which shows the commentators' attitudes toward China are diverse. The second theme of opposition and criticism indicates the viewpoints in video comments are opposite and critical. Among the 781 comments, nearly half of them express a friendly voice to China, while the rest do not. For the third and fourth themes of reflection and respect, some participants are willing to listen to others and change their minds about China or the US. The fifth theme of accuracy means that most commentators can accurately narrate some video clips impressing them and sincerely show their feelings, express their views, and discuss with other commentators. The sixth theme of inclusion and harmony demonstrates that part of the commentators wants China and the US to stay in peace and harmony. They do not excoriate China or the US no matter whether the performance of diplomats and interpreters is good or not. Instead, they show understanding and inclusion to them.

RQ2: How do the emerged themes of the video comments illustrate the functions of an ideal online sphere? The six conditions of Dahlberg's model are put forward under a prerequisite of an ideal online public sphere. The YouTube platform and other social media are playing the role of providing participants with virtual spaces in the online public sphere. The YouTube platform has complementary relationships with its participants. In this study, we have selected two videos from YouTube and 781 relevant video comments, most of which apply to the six conditions. That means YouTube can be an online public sphere as a whole, and most participants there meet the six conditions, making YouTube a more ideal one.

After answering the above questions, two implications are drawn from the research findings. The selected videos on social media of YouTube attract thousands of viewers from all around the world, making the video comments diverse and enlightening. By analyzing these comments we know how much they facilitate a better understanding of the roles of the Internet as an ideal public sphere, and also know what China looks like to common people from other countries and the ways they look upon the China-US relationship. On the one hand, we can see that more and more commentators are rational about the China-US relationship as videos showing real China's images are uploaded to YouTube. But, on the other hand, a few comments also show that some commentators are still biased against China for lack of true understanding of China.

Inevitably, the study has its limitations: first, the number of video comments is not enough, which may reduce the accuracy of research results. Second, although we attempted to minimize the influence of researcher subjectivity to achieve more precise results, the subjectivity of the researchers is unavoidable in the process of thematic analysis. Finally, because the YouTube platform protects the privacy of users, we cannot identify the exact information of all commentators like their educational background, career, country, gender, and so on, which can also affect the results. For future research, the number of samples can be enlarged to help reduce the subjectivity of research to a great extent.

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