

Original Research Article

Interpretation deviation of Chinese image in German documentaries: Analysis based on overseas audience comments on the documentary the new silk road

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Abstract: With the deepening of globalization, documentaries have become an irreplaceable medium for cross-cultural communication, playing a crucial role in shaping national images and conveying cultural values. The German documentary *The New Silk Road*, presented from an “outsider’s” perspective, serves as a key window for the international community to understand China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its impact. This study focuses on YouTube comments on the documentary, analyzing changes in viewers’ cognition, emotions, and behaviors. Findings reveal that viewers focus not only on the DW channel and its content but also on interactions between countries and regions. Negative feedback reached 44.13% , highlighting misunderstandings or biased interpretations of China and the BRI, sparking defensive emotions. Some viewers expressed a desire to visit BRI sites to verify and reshape their perceptions. Although the documentary’s perspective may be biased, it reveals a global eagerness to explore the real China, urging authenticity, diversity, and comprehensiveness in international communication.

Keywords: Documentary; Image of China; International Communication; He sculpted; Communication effect

1. Introduction

In 2013, an international leader proposed the “community with a shared future for mankind” and introduced the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” initiatives. Effectively narrating the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is essential for shaping China’s global image. Documentaries play a key role in recording China’s modernization and conveying its story to the world^[1].

As China’s influence grows, countries like the UK, US, and Japan have produced documentaries reflecting their perspectives on its development. While China actively shapes its own image, it faces portrayals by Western media that often present a biased view.

This study focuses on *The New Silk Road*, a German documentary series by Deutsche Welle (DW) in 2019. The two-episode series, each lasting 42 minutes, showcases China’s efforts in the BRI. With 6.58 million views and nearly 10,000 comments on YouTube, it sparked significant discussion worldwide.

National image is shaped by both internal narratives and external perceptions^[2]. Documentaries are crucial in this process but face challenges in global dissemination^[3-4]. Research should not only analyze Chinese self-representation but also explore how foreign narratives influence perceptions^[5].

Existing research often targets documentaries from the UK, with little focus on German productions^[6]. Including diverse cultural perspectives is vital for a comprehensive understanding of China’s image.

This study analyzes YouTube comments on *The New Silk Road*, focusing on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. Using Python, 2,439 comments were extracted, and text analysis tools DiVoMiner and GooSeeker were applied. Variables and categories were defined as follows:

Table 1. Comment encoding status table.

Primary Coding Category	Secondary Coding Category	Reference Count
Comments on Subjects	China	1,532
	DW Channel and the Documentary Itself	802
	Other Countries	723
	Others	458
Emotional Attitudes Toward China's Image in the Documentary	Negative	680
	Neutral	491
	Positive	370
Recognition of China's Image as Presented by DW Channel	No Comment	932
	Not Objective	655
	Objective	126

Random manual coding of 100 comments yielded a Holsti coefficient of 0.82, ensuring reliability. Combined manual and machine coding provided precise and objective results for analysis.

2. Cognitive level: Reinforcing cognitive bias through an outsider perspective

Documentary creators use text, language, and symbols purposefully, influenced by production and dissemination factors. The New Silk Road portrays China's BRI development while reflecting DW's specific stance. Through editing and selective presentation, it shapes an image of China aligned with its narrative goals.

Cognition, as a core psychological process, helps assess how international audiences perceive Chinese-themed documentaries. This study focuses on audience cognition, key points of attention, and biases regarding The New Silk Road.

The documentary, produced in English with multilingual subtitles, eliminates basic language barriers for global audiences. Audience comments reflect two primary cognitive focuses:

2.1. Countries and regions, including China

The term "China" appeared 1,302 times, alongside keywords like "West," "Europe," "India," "Pakistan," and "USA." Semantic analysis shows that "USA" was most frequently associated with "China," highlighting the lens of Sino-American relations. Some comments criticized DW's portrayal, accusing it of bias against China's BRI efforts. For example, one highly-liked comment (514 likes) remarked: "When China builds roads, it's called 'invasion.' When the USA drops bombs, it's called 'liberation.'" Another comment (110 likes) added: "China builds, unlike the US and EU, which bomb." These reactions reveal entrenched cognitive biases, shaped by selective framing and Western narratives.

2.2. Dw channel and documentary content

Comments frequently discussed DW and the documentary's focus on China's BRI-related investments and infrastructure. Criticism often targeted DW's perceived bias. A popular comment (419 likes) questioned: "China offers infrastructure. What does the West offer? Colonization and bombs?" Another comment noted DW's selective reporting, stating: "DW amplifies negative voices while suppressing positive ones." These

critiques underscore dissatisfaction with DW's perceived lack of balance, reinforcing stereotypes and hindering a comprehensive understanding of China's role in the BRI.

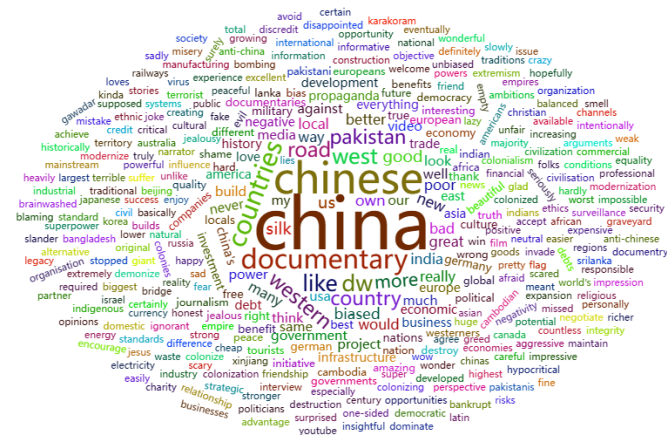


Figure 1. High-frequency words in comments on the new silk road.

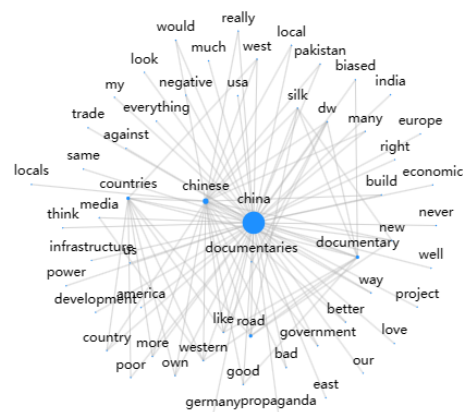


Figure 2. Semantic network analysis of comments on the new silk road

3. Emotional level: Counteractive interpretations based on cognitive bias

The emotional responses of international audiences toward China's image in *The New Silk Road* indicate their acceptance or rejection of this portrayal. Using DiVoMiner, this study analyzed YouTube comments and categorized sentiments into positive, neutral, and negative.

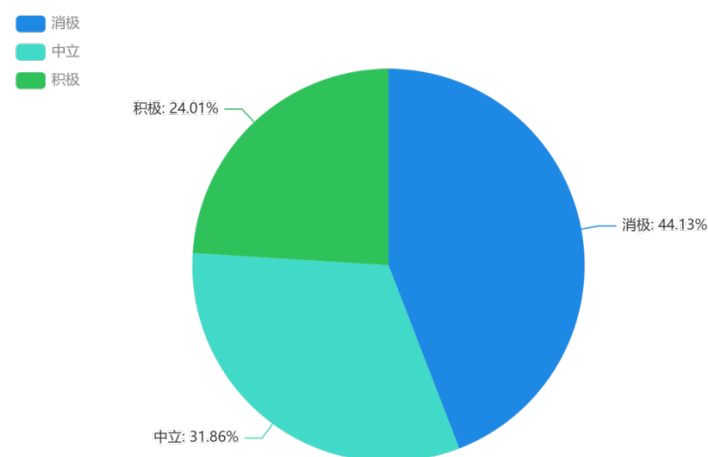


Figure 3. Sentiment analysis of the new silk road.

Negative comments accounted for 44.13% , while positive ones were only 24.01% . The high proportion of negative sentiments can be attributed to three main factors:

Anti-China Prejudice: A subset of audiences held inherent “anti-China” or “anti-communist” biases. Comments like “China is a totalitarian state, and the New Silk Road project is a political scheme for domination” and “China is forcing debt-ridden countries to repay with assets” reflect long-standing media-driven narratives portraying China as a threat. However, these extreme views had limited resonance, as they garnered minimal support^[7].

Confrontational Reactions from Neutral or Friendly Viewers: Many negative emotions came from initially neutral or friendly viewers frustrated by the documentary’s perceived bias. Comments such as “This is the most biased video about the Silk Road, omitting potential benefits” (170 likes) and “DW only interviewed critics, ignoring positive voices” (180 likes) highlight dissatisfaction with the lack of balance and objectivity in DW’s narrative.

Disappointment with DW’s Standards: Some viewers expressed disappointment in DW’s failure to maintain neutrality. Comments like “Why does this documentary seem so sarcastic? I expected objectivity” and “DW used to be objective, but this series was disappointing” reflect rising public expectations for responsible and balanced reporting on global issues.

4. Behavioral level: A call for objectivity and cognitive reshaping

Audience behavior demonstrates the documentary’s tangible impact and long-term influence. The perceived lack of objectivity in *The New Silk Road* sparked widespread criticism, with many viewers urging Western media to present more balanced narratives.

For example, one viewer contrasted DW’s documentary with CNA’s more objective portrayal of the Silk Road, calling out its “Sinophobia agenda.” Another Malaysian viewer remarked: “The journalism is too biased. It’s not as one-sided as portrayed.” Some commenters predicted continued bias in future DW productions, while others expressed a desire to personally visit Silk Road sites to verify the documentary’s claims.

These reactions reflect two key behavioral trends: disengagement from biased content and proactive efforts to seek firsthand information, driven by a quest for truth.

5. Research conclusions and implications

Documentaries about China produced by Western media act as bridges for East-West cultural exchange, presenting China’s multifaceted image^[8]. While authenticity is essential, these productions are often shaped by cultural and political biases, resulting in subjective portrayals that influence global perceptions.

Cognitive Level: Documentaries are strategic presentations rather than purely factual narratives. In *The New Silk Road*, audience attention focused on China’s role in the BRI, often framed against Western perspectives, and DW’s selective emphasis on negative topics, reinforcing stereotypes.

Emotional Level: Audience reactions were polarized, with negative emotions dominating. These stemmed from anti-China bias, misunderstandings of the BRI, and dissatisfaction with DW’s perceived lack of neutrality. Viewers expected more balanced reporting.

Behavioral Level: Viewer behavior reflected two trends: diminished trust in DW and a desire to explore BRI regions firsthand to gain an accurate understanding.

To overcome these challenges, Chinese documentaries must emphasize authenticity, adopt diverse

perspectives, and present a balanced image highlighting both hard and soft power. By ensuring “authenticity, diversity, and comprehensiveness,” China can better engage global audiences and foster cultural exchange.

About the author

YuanYuan Jiang, born in September 2000, female, Han ethnicity, from Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province. Currently a second-year postgraduate student majoring in Discourse and Communication Studies. Her primary research areas include discourse studies, international communication, and media image research.

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