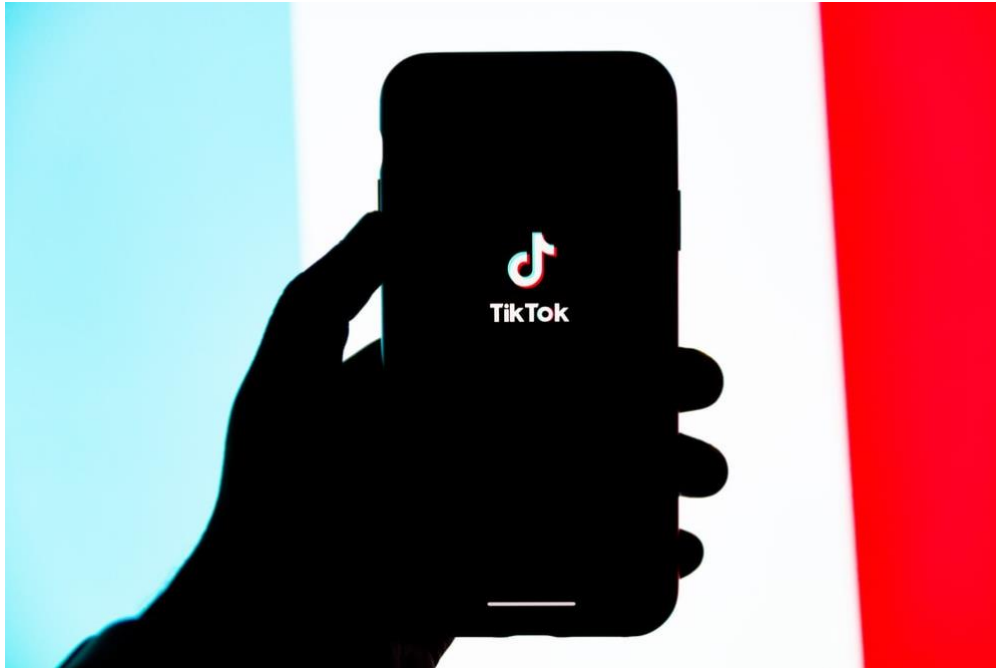


# Is TikTok a Threat? Examining Whether Using Chinese Tech Products Can Alter American Attitudes about China

*Interaction with Chinese social media technology appears to influence Americans to feel more warmly about China.*

By Joshua H.S. Berry  
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*An image of a person holding a phone with TikTok installed / [Unsplash Photos](#)*

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There is a lot of talk about limiting American access to Chinese apps in Washington. Most famously, on August 6, 2020, former President Donald Trump issued [Executive Order 13942](#), "Addressing the Threat Posed by TikTok," and [Executive Order 13943](#), "Addressing the Threat Posed by WeChat," effectively banning these apps from the American market. Although the Biden White House [dropped](#) these executive orders this past June, President Biden still decided in favor of replacing Trump's tough-on-TikTok orders with his [own](#), calling for the Commerce Department to launch national security reviews of apps with ties to foreign adversaries.

These American actions taken against TikTok and WeChat are not unprecedented: Since the 2007-08 financial crisis, policymakers in Washington D.C. have made increased use of economic and legal instruments to limit Chinese companies from gaining access to the global market, including trade tariffs and restrictions on Chinese foreign investment. They have also [targeted Chinese firms](#) that sell and develop technological products such as Huawei, ZTE, and as of last year, ByteDance's TikTok and Tencent's WeChat.

Although [politicians](#), [pundits](#), and government officials in the United States continue to express concern about how Chinese apps might threaten American national security, a consensus strategy on addressing Chinese technology in the American market has yet to develop. Some politicians [argue](#) that the United States and other countries should completely ban high-risk Chinese technology firms from their domestic markets. Other experts [argue](#) that, for many of these Chinese tech firms, there has been little conclusive evidence to suggest they threaten national security and that the economic costs of action against these companies—and subsequent escalation of U.S.-China hostilities—outweigh the benefits.

While the debate rages on inside Washington D.C., Americans *en masse* [continue to download and use apps](#) like TikTok. Each year a growing number of China-based technology firms seek to enter the American market. And despite all this news—including conversation that TikTok and WeChat serve as a type of public diplomacy for China—there has been little systematic research about how exposure to Chinese apps and products might indirectly influence American public opinion. Against that backdrop, this essay shares new survey findings that help shed light on how the use of Chinese social media technology by American consumers might be influencing American attitudes toward China.

Specifically, my survey results reveal that after exposure to a Chinese app, Americans express significantly warmer feelings about China. Additionally, Americans reported a greater preference for deepening versus limiting U.S.-China economic interaction. Overall, these survey results suggest that greater individual interaction with Chinese apps might translate to a shift in American public opinion about China, and a larger demand among Americans for economic interaction between the two countries.

## **Testing the Effect of Chinese Apps on American Attitudes about China**

During the 2020-21 academic year, I conducted two surveys in December 2020 and February 2021 on a random sample of the American population using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) service. To obtain behavioral measures of how exposure to Chinese apps mediate American public opinion toward China, I exposed 348 random survey participants to [vignettes](#) describing a social media app produced by a hypothetical firm from either the United States, China, or a third-party country (N = 348; female = 121; mean age = 40.24).

In each vignette, the survey participants were [told](#) to imagine that they had used a hypothetical social app from a certain country. Because country-of-origin was my main independent variable, I randomly varied which country's app participants were told about in their assigned vignette. Additionally, for Chinese app treatment groups, I also varied the degree to which I told participants they enjoyed using their hypothetical app. Specifically, participants were instructed

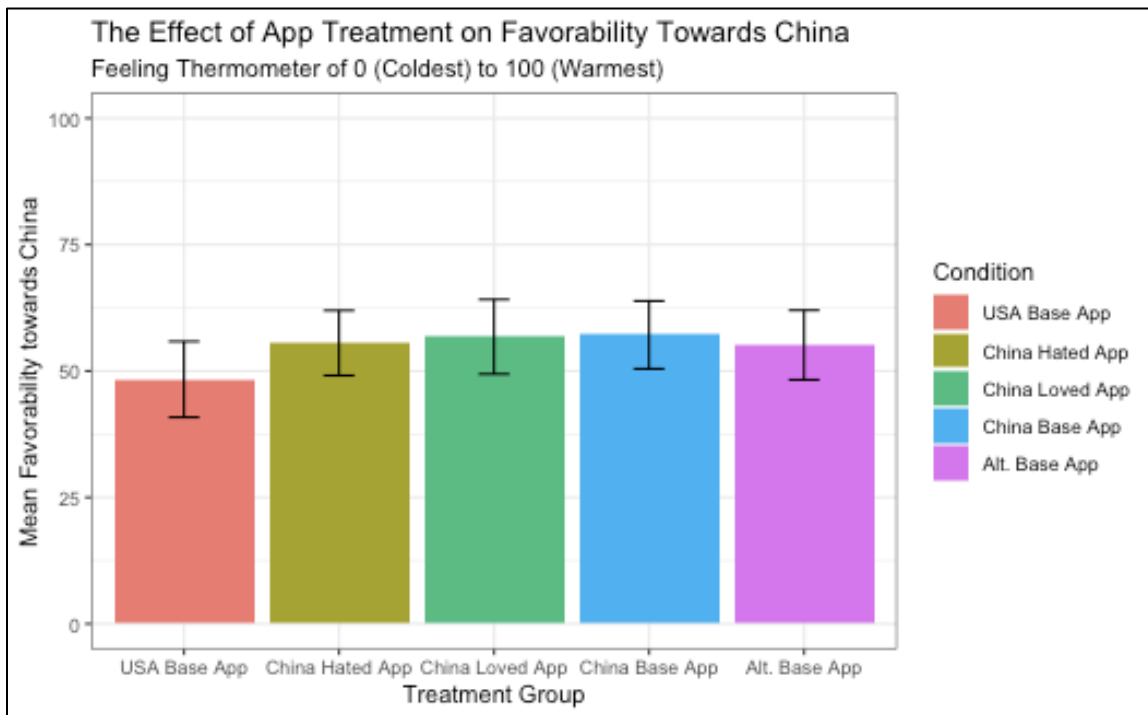
to imagine that they either “hated,” “loved,” or had a neutral (“base”) experience using the app. After experimental treatment, participants completed a questionnaire about their prior exposure to Chinese-owned tech products, their reactions to their assigned app in the vignette, their foreign policy views, and their overall attitudes about China. I completed statistical analysis using regression design and controlled for standard demographic data such as participants’ age, gender, and political identification.

## Findings

As Figure 1 shows, exposure to Chinese apps led to large positive shifts in Americans’ attitudes about China. Measured on a 0-100 feeling thermometer, where 0 indicates very cold feelings about China and 100 very warm feelings, participants who had been told they frequently enjoyed using a Chinese app expressed significantly more positive views of China than participants who were not exposed to a Chinese app (usabaseapp (control): Mean=48.35, SD=29.54; chinahatedapp: M=55.54, SD=27.34; chinalovedapp: M=56.77, SD=30.69; chinabaseapp: M=57.15; SD=28.96; estoniabaseapp: M=55.14.34; SD=29.03), chinalovedapp :  $p < .05$ . Interestingly, my surveys found that all versions of a non-American app led participants to indicate warmer feelings about China, even the “hated” version of a Chinese app. This finding suggests that any interaction with a Chinese app will likely result in Americans feeling more warmly about China, no matter the degree to which consumers enjoyed using the app itself.

After controlling for treatment, I also found that the education level ( $p < .01$ ) and political identification ( $p < .01$ ) both had a significant effect on participants’ attitudes about China.

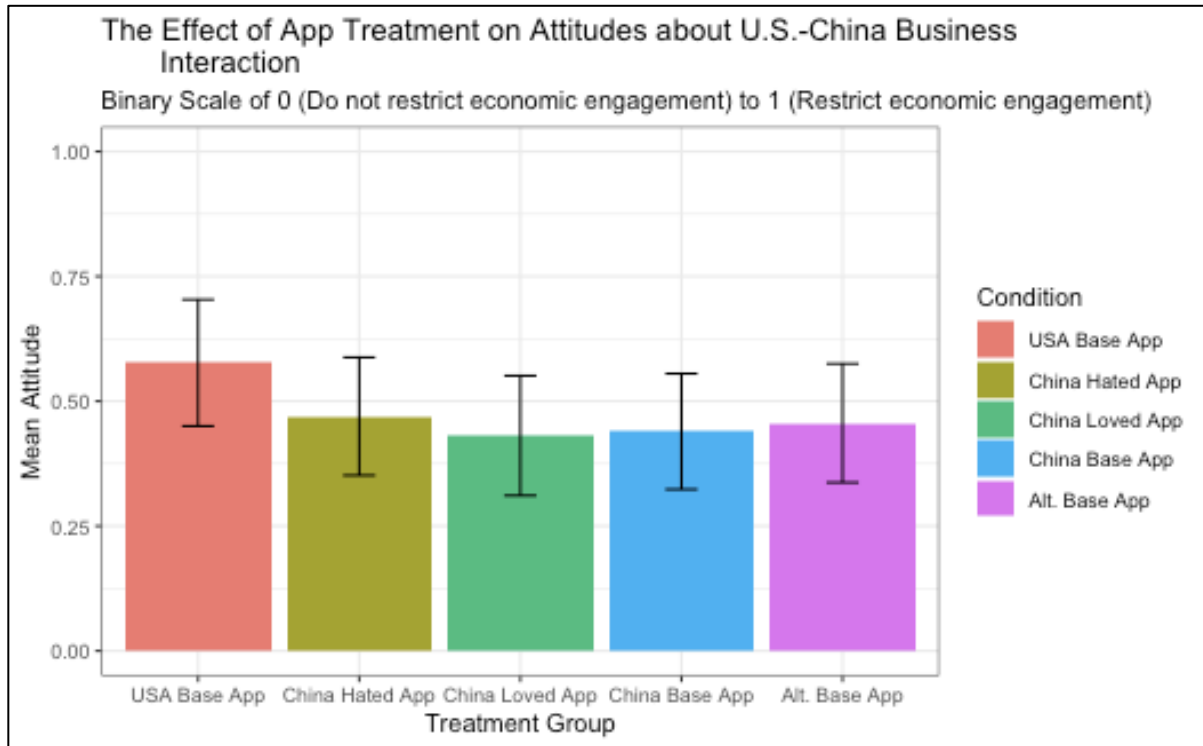
Figure 1: Favorability Towards China after Exposure to a Social Media App



My second main finding is that exposure to Chinese apps, and even exposure to an app from an unrelated third-party country, Estonia, prompted participants to indicate support for more Sino-American economic cooperation (Figure 2). While no treatment was strictly significant, every group exposed to a Chinese or third-party app indicated less average support for protectionist economic policies that restricted access to Chinese tech products (usabaseapp: Mean=0.58; chinahatedapp: M=0.47; chinalovedapp: M=0.43; chinabaseapp: M=0.44; estoniabaseapp: M=0.46). As with my first experiment, whether participants enjoyed or did not enjoy their experience using a Chinese app did not seem to matter much in altering their attitudes about economic policy. Rather, simply telling Americans to imagine they had interacted with a Chinese app seemed to bring about less of a willingness among my survey participants to support protectionism.

Of note, after controlling for treatment, the only demographic variables that had a significant effect on participants' policy preferences of restricting Chinese business entry into the United States was political identification ( $p < .01$ ) and gender ( $p < .05$ ). Not surprisingly, participants self-identifying as Republicans tended to endorse more hawkish economic policy.

Figure 2: Attitudes about U.S.-China Economic Engagement



These results suggest that the continued entrance of Chinese tech firms into the American market may positively shift American attitudes in favor of China. Granted, the change in individual attitudes is likely to be small. Aggregated though, these changes in individual opinion may have a larger impact. In this regard, actions taken to limit Chinese apps from international markets may also alter international attitudes about China by removing a potential mechanism for

Chinese engagement with the broader global community. On the other hand, allowing Chinese apps to enter international markets without restriction might also have some unforeseen consequences. Because American politics are limited and guided by domestic public opinion at the polls, it is possible that policymakers will become bound by increasingly favorable public opinion toward China as Chinese companies enter and gain popularity within the American market. Moreover, because convergent results across experiments showed that exposure to Chinese apps reduced Americans' desire for protectionist economic policy, unilateral actions taken to limit American consumer access to Chinese apps may also increase American support for economic decoupling with China.

## **Conclusion**

Much has been written about how economic interdependence at the macrolevel has either harmed or benefited Sino-American relations. My survey experiments suggest that simply informing American consumers that they had a positive experience using a Chinese app is enough to bring about warmer attitudes toward China. In other words, continued interaction with Chinese products might meaningfully prompt a greater number of individuals to view China more favorably.

What's the upshot of these survey results for policymakers? Perhaps it's simply that they cannot ignore the connection between commerce and public opinion.