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## REPRESENTATION OF TIKTOK IN U.S. NEWS AFTER *THE NO TIKTOK ON GOVERNMENT DEVICES ACT*

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**Abstract:** TikTok, the most downloaded application in the world for three consecutive years since 2020, has been the target of various bans from governments and organisations. Despite widespread media coverage of such events, the representation of TikTok therein remains underexplored by linguists. This study therefore attempts to examine how TikTok is linguistically represented in U.S. television news after President Joe Biden signed *the No TikTok on Government Devices Act* into law. The Systemic Functional Linguistics, elaborated in Halliday and Matthiesen (2014), was employed as the analytical framework. The findings revealed that news coverage predominantly uses Material processes, followed by Relational processes. Mental and Verbal processes rank third and fourth, while Existential and Behavioural processes have rather low frequency. Regarding their subtypes, Identifying Relational and Cognitive Mental processes are more prevalent in negative representations, while Attributive Relational and Emotive Mental processes occur more often in positive representations. These transitivity patterns contribute to five main portrayals of TikTok, including “TikTok is a scrutiny and ban target”, “TikTok is a cybersecurity threat”, “TikTok is the Trojan horse of the Chinese Communist Party”, “TikTok is a must-have for many”, and “TikTok is a sales driving force”.

**Keywords:** Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), transitivity system, news, representation, TikTok

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# SỰ THỂ HIỆN CỦA TIKTOK TRÊN TIN TỨC HOA KỲ SAU ĐẠO LUẬT *KHÔNG TIKTOK TRÊN CÁC THIẾT BỊ CỦA CHÍNH PHỦ*

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**Tóm tắt:** TikTok, ứng dụng được tải xuống nhiều nhất trên thế giới trong ba năm liên tiếp kể từ năm 2020, đã trở thành mục tiêu của nhiều lệnh cấm từ các chính phủ và tổ chức. Mặc dù những sự kiện này được các phương tiện truyền thông đưa tin rộng rãi, sự thể hiện của TikTok ở đó vẫn chưa được nhiều nhà ngôn ngữ học nghiên cứu. Do đó, nghiên cứu này cố gắng tìm hiểu cách TikTok được thể hiện về mặt ngôn ngữ trong tin tức truyền hình Hoa Kỳ sau khi Tổng thống Joe Biden ký Đạo luật *Không TikTok trên thiết bị Chính phủ* thành luật. Khung phân tích được sử dụng là Ngôn ngữ học chức năng hệ thống, được mô tả trong Halliday và Matthiessen (2014). Nghiên cứu cho thấy rằng tin tức chủ yếu sử dụng các quá trình Vật chất, sau đó là các quá trình Quan hệ. Các quá trình Tinh thần và Phát ngôn xếp thứ ba và thứ tư, trong khi các quá trình Hiện hữu và Hành vi có tần suất khá thấp. Về các phân nhóm của chúng, quá trình Quan hệ Xác định và quá trình Tinh thần Nhận thức phổ biến hơn trong các mô tả mang tính tiêu cực, trong khi các quá trình Quan hệ Thuộc tính và Tinh thần Cảm xúc được sử dụng thường xuyên hơn trong các mô tả mang tính tích cực. Những đặc điểm của hệ thống chuyên tác này góp phần tạo nên 5 cách thể hiện về TikTok, bao gồm: “TikTok là mục tiêu bị giám sát và cấm”, “TikTok là mối đe dọa an ninh mạng”, “TikTok là con ngựa thành Troy của Đảng Cộng sản Trung Quốc”, “TikTok là thứ không thể thiếu đối với nhiều người” và “TikTok là động lực thúc đẩy doanh số bán hàng”.

*Từ khóa:* ngôn ngữ học chức năng hệ thống, hệ thống chuyên tác, tin tức, sự thể hiện, TikTok

## 1. Introduction

TikTok is a video-sharing social media application developed by the Beijing-based ByteDance Ltd. This platform has constantly gained prominence and remained the most downloaded application for three consecutive years since 2020, according to Forbes' reports (Koetsier, 2021a; Koetsier, 2021b; Koetsier, 2022). In the United States only, TikTok amasses a significant number of over 94 million monthly active users (Aleksandric, 2023). Despite such popularity, TikTok has been the target of multiple bans from governments and organisations. In addition to a complete prohibition in India, the Chinese viral video app has been disallowed on official devices in the UK, Australia, Canada, the European Union, France, and New Zealand's Parliament. Furthermore, TikTok has faced various restrictions from states and colleges in its current most significant market, the United States. Among the most dramatic moves against the social media platform was the nationwide “No TikTok on Government Devices Act”, signed by President Joe Biden on 29 December 2022. This marked one of the first national-level bans on TikTok in the U.S., barring approximately 4 million federal employees from accessing TikTok (Ingram, 2022). Given its scale and implications, this event

has attracted widespread news coverage.

However, the representation of TikTok in such coverage has been understudied by linguists. While previous studies have delved into various aspects of TikTok, including user behaviour and experiences (e.g. Heyang & Martin, 2022; McLean et al., 2023; Schellewald, 2023) and the analysis of video content and user responses on the platform (e.g. Avdeeff, 2021; Eriksson Krutrök & Åkerlund, 2023; Lewis & Melendez-Torres, 2024; Zeng & Abidin, 2021), there remains a gap in the representation of TikTok in U.S. news during recent events. While critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA) studies have made some attempts to address the topic, these have primarily focused on Indian media, such as those of Kumar (2023) and Kumar and Thussu (2023), or were conducted more than two years ago, including those of Miao et al. (2021) and Zhu (2020). Furthermore, a recent CDA study by Lin (2023) incorporated transitivity analysis and corpus-assisted methods but limited its investigation to just CNN news. Therefore, there is a clear research gap in our understanding of how TikTok is represented through specific linguistic patterns across different news sources in the United States.

To bridge this gap, the present study aims at exploring the linguistic representation of TikTok after the No TikTok on Government Devices Act in U.S. news, using the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework (hereafter SFL). It seeks to answer the research question: “How is TikTok linguistically represented through the transitivity system in U.S. news, following the signing of the No TikTok on Government Devices Act?”

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Systemic Functional Linguistics***

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), first introduced in M.A.K Halliday’s article ‘Categories of the theory of grammar’, is a linguistic approach that views language as “social semiotic”. This theory centres on the relationship between linguistic selection and the functions it has to serve in specific social and cultural contexts. Language functions in SFL are often referred to as “metafunctions”.

SFL identifies three primary metafunctions of language: textual, interpersonal, and ideational. The textual metafunction refers to “clause as a message” and concerns how text coheres and relates to its context. The interpersonal metafunction refers to “clause as an exchange” and deals with interactions between speakers and listeners, such as expressing attitudes and building relationships (Statham, 2022, p. 37). The ideational metafunction, particularly relevant to this study, refers to “clause as a representation” and involves construing human experience of both external events and internal consciousness. This metafunction is realised through the transitivity system (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

The transitivity system in SFL is considered the “foundation of representation” (Fowler, 2013, p. 71) or in other words, a fundamental instrument for analysing representation in discourse. It is worth noting that Halliday’s concept of transitivity extends beyond the traditional grammatical distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs to encompass “the entire system of representational resources” (Haig, 2012). This allows for the systematic investigation of speakers’ language and the ideologies underlying their discourse (Statham, 2022, p. 38).

The transitivity system includes processes, participants, and circumstances within a clause. The process is the key component, and the type of process decides the participants involved (see Table 1). These two elements together constitute the experiential centre of the

clause, whereas circumstantial elements are optional in general (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 221).

**Table 1**

*Process Types and Their Participants. Adapted From Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, p. 311)*

Process type	Participants, directly involved	Participants, obliquely involved	Example
Material (doing and happening)	Actor, Goal	Recipient, Client; Scope; Initiator; Attribute	ByteDance and TikTok [Actor] may be <b>obtaining</b> U.S. user data [Goal].
Behavioural (behaving)	Behaver	Behaviour	My 16-year-old daughter [Behaver] will <b>be in total uproar</b> .
Mental (sensing)	Senser, Phenomenon	Inducer	We [Senser] can't <b>trust</b> TikTok [Phenomenon].
Verbal (saying)	Sayer, Target	Receiver, Verbiage	TikTok [Sayer] has not <b>commented</b> on Congress' latest actions [Target].
Relational (being)	Carrier, Attribute Identified, Identified; Token, Value	Attributor; Beneficiary; Assigner	ByteDance [Identified] <b>is</b> the parent company of TikTok [Identifier].
Existential (existing)	Existent		There <b>are</b> three concerns about TikTok [Existent].

Process refers to the type of state or event being described in a clause and is typically expressed by the verbal group of the clause. In English, process can be categorised into six types according to whether they construe actions, feelings, speech, states of mind or states of being. The six types are Material (creative and transformative), Mental (perceptive, cognitive, desiderative, and emotive), Behavioural, Verbal, Relational (intensive, possessive, and circumstantial), and Existential, respectively (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Furthermore, the Relational sub-types come in two different modes: attributive and identifying.

Participant is the individuals or things involved in the process and is realised in the nominal groups of the clause. As Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, p. 221) have it, participants are “close to the centre” of the configuration and inherent in the process. In other words, every experiential type of clause has at least one participant, with the exception of some meteorological processes like “It’s raining”.

The last but optional component that makes up a clause is circumstances, which add information, such as casual, spatial, and temporal information, to the process. Circumstances is generally expressed through adverbial groups or prepositional phrases. Depending on the kind of information that they provide, they can be classified into 9 types: Extent, Location, Manner, Cause, Contingency, Accompaniment, Role, Matter, and Angle (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, pp. 313-314).

## 2.2. News as a Genre

News, according to van Dijk (2013, p. 4), is “a news item or report” in various mediums

such as print, online, television, or radio, through which new information about recent political, social, and cultural events is provided. With this definition, news can involve several subgenres, namely bulletin, editorial comment, report, and interview. Editorial comments and interviews are usually analytical, evaluative, persuasive and hence could include personal opinions of the anchor(s) or the interviewee(s). By contrast, bulletins and reports are expected to be informative and objective, with the use of neutral language (Lavid et al., 2012; Piskorski et al., 2023). However, it should be noted that there is not a clear-cut separation between these subgenres, as a news report, for example, could also include one or more interviews.

News serves two primary functions of keeping the public informed about political events and issues, and fostering effective democratic citizenship (Overholser & Jamieson, 2005, p. 49; Porto, 2007). However, news does not merely reflect reality; it often presents specific ideological agendas through content and linguistic choices (Fowler, 2013; Statham, 2022). In this respect, news can highlight issues, campaign, criticise, celebrate, promote forthcoming events, or divert attention from other events (Durant & Lambrou, 2009). Exposure to only some ideologies may hinder the public from accessing a diversity of worldviews, which conflicts with the core functions of news (Fowler, 2013, p. 66; Porto, 2007).

Concerning the linguistic patterns, Durant and Lambrou (2009, p. 218) suggest that news discourse tends to represent events in a more material and less mental way than in reality, in order to dramatise events to engage the target audience. News discourse is also found to perpetuate some common ideologies, such as nationalism, racism, and sexism, often presenting a polarised 'Us vs. Them' narrative to maintain societal power structures (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009).

### ***2.3. Representation of Social Media Platforms in News***

Recent studies have delved into the depiction of social media platforms in news, through an analysis of the transitivity system or recurring themes.

Lin's (2023) transitivity analysis of news about TikTok-related events revealed the overall distribution of processes. Notably, Material processes dominated, which was implied to potentially influencing audience perceptions by emphasising the consequences of events over objective descriptions.

Pertaining to recurring themes, earlier research highlighted a tendency to problematise social media in news discourse. Shiryayeva et al. (2018) identified 12 anti-values in news discourse about social media, including harmful content, data misuse, censorship, and addiction, etc. Data misuse emerged as the most recognised theme, appearing in multiple studies (Kumar & Thussu, 2023; Lin, 2023; Miao et al., 2020; Sako, 2021; Scatton, 2023; Aqsa et al., 2022). Concerns about national security threats linked to TikTok's Chinese parent company were also prevalent, despite lacking concrete evidence, in the studies of Kumar and Thussu (2023), Lin (2023), and Scatton (2023). Meanwhile, Hine (2020) highlighted how news narratives on Twitter perpetuate inequalities, portraying it primarily as a platform for celebrities rather than for the public to express their opinions. These negative representations of social media platforms, particularly in the case of TikTok, were concluded by Kumar (2023) as a way to justify governmental restrictions or bans, rather than to inform.

However, there were exceptions where social media platforms were neutrally or even positively portrayed. Miao et al. (2023) found a de-politicised depiction of TikTok as a business success in news prior to 2020, with positive attitudes toward its market strategy, entry motivation, products, and services. Sako (2021) also noted instances where the solution to data

privacy issues were framed as up to individual choices, without mention of political policies. The narratives analysed in this research also depicted Facebook as a victim of Cambridge Analytica in the scandal, shifting the criticism away from the media platform.

The review of extant literature implies that while a number of studies have examined the portrayal of social media platforms in news discourse, the lexico-grammar choices through the transitivity system have not received enough attention. Thus, the present study is being conducted to bridge that gap to some extent.

### 3. Research Methodology

The data for this study consisted of television news items about TikTok in the U.S. between 29 December 2022 (the signing date of the No TikTok on Government Devices Act) and 28 January 2023. The selection of news sources followed Howe's (2023) findings on the most-watched news networks, including Fox News, ABC News, CNN, CBS, PBS, NBC, and MSNBC. Given their extensive viewership, they were likely to represent mainstream media's perspectives on TikTok. A total of 10 videos were gathered from these channels, except for ABC News and PBS, where no relevant videos could be obtained. They were labelled V1 to V10 (see Appendix). Seven of them were in the form of news reports while the remaining three were interviews by Fox News and MSNBC. They revolved around various bans on TikTok, politicians' viewpoints, and the app's impacts.

The procedure of data collection involved three steps. First, a search was conducted on Google and YouTube using the search terms "TikTok or Tik Tok" and "Fox News or CNN or CBS or PBS or NBC or MSNBC", within the specified time frame (29 December 2022 to 28 January 2023). The retrieved search results were then filtered based on the following inclusion criteria:

- (1) The videos must be posted on the news networks' official websites or official YouTube channels;
- (2) They must feature the word "TikTok" in both the title and the headline;
- (3) They must centre on TikTok and its implications, measures, or regulations in the U.S., thereby excluding cases where TikTok is merely a platform for a story and not the main focus (e.g. news about an actor coming out in a TikTok video);
- (4) They must have a duration of at least 1 minute to provide more insights and perspectives.

To ensure a manageable dataset, two videos from each source were shortlisted. If there were more than two videos, those published earlier were prioritised. Finally, a transcription was made for each of the chosen videos for the analysis process, which meant that other elements such as sounds and images would not be considered.

A qualitative approach and a quantitative step were adopted in this study. The qualitative approach involved using Halliday's SFL framework, elaborated in Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) and discussed in 2.1, to analyse the process types, participants, and circumstances. This method provided an in-depth understanding of "goings-on" in the world (TikTok in this case) and offered critical interpretations (Statham 2022). The quantitative aspect involved calculating the distribution of processes, participants, and circumstances to identify overall trends in the data. As Loewen and Godfroid (2019) note, although there has been a considerable increase in the use of qualitative data analysis in applied linguistics research, it cannot be overlooked that quantitative methods offer researchers the means to describe their data systematically.

There were 7 main stages in the data analysis procedure. First, the obtained videos were transcribed into texts. Second, all clauses and clause complexes in the text were identified. The third stage required the separation of clause complexes into clause simplexes, in which minor clauses and clauses for greeting and for transition between parts of the news were removed as they did not contribute to the core analysis of representation. The remaining clauses were labelled according to their source video and their order within that video for easy reference and organisation. For example, a clause from the video “V9”, in the twenty-fifth position, was coded as “V9.25”. These clauses were then analysed with regard to processes, participants, and circumstances. Following this, the distribution of each type of these elements was calculated. The final stage involved using the findings from the two previous stages to generate the themes expressed from the contents of the news and discuss the representation of TikTok, drawing on earlier research for further explanations. This stage would provide answers to the research question.

#### 4. Findings

Data analysis revealed five relevant themes related to the representation of TikTok, namely “TikTok is the target of scrutiny and prohibition” (135 clauses), “TikTok is a cybersecurity risk” (224 clauses), “TikTok is the Trojan horse of the Chinese Communist Party” (109 clauses), “TikTok is a must-have for many” (61 clauses), and “TikTok is a driving force for sales” (43 clauses).

##### 4.1. Transitivity Analysis of the Theme “Tiktok is the target of scrutiny and prohibition”

The frequency of process types within the theme “TikTok is the target of scrutiny and prohibition” is summarised in Table 2 below.

**Table 2**

*The Distribution of Process Types in Each News Source in the Theme “Tiktok is the target of scrutiny and prohibition”*

	NBC	Fox News	CNN	MSNBC	CBS	Total	
<b>Material</b>	25	10	8	1	25	<b>69</b>	<b>51.1%</b>
- creative	1	1	2	-	3		
- transformative	24	9	6	1	22		
<b>Mental</b>	1	3	-	1	7	<b>12</b>	<b>8.9%</b>
- perceptive	1	1	-	-	-		
- cognitive	-	2	-	-	3		
- desiderative	-	-	-	1	3		
- emotive	-	-	-	-	1		
<b>Relational</b>	12	5	4	1	9	<b>31</b>	<b>23.0%</b>
- attributive	5	2	1	1	4		

- identifying	7	3	3	-	5		
<b>Behavioural</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Verbal</b>	4	-	1	2	7	<b>14</b>	<b>10.4%</b>
<b>Existential</b>	4	2	-	1	2	<b>9</b>	<b>6.7%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>135</b>	

Material processes were the most frequently used, constituting over 50% of all identified processes. U.S. authorities emerged here as the most common Actor. Their attempts primarily targeted at the video app, whether by scrutinising and barring it or bringing forward legislations on it, like in this example:

*(V9.25) [...] Governor Abbott banned TikTok on all Government-issued devices back in December.*

Governor Abbott	banned	TikTok	on all government-issued devices	back in December.
Actor	Process: material, transformative	Goal	Circumstance: location, place	Circumstance: location, time

On various occasions, such restrictions were expressed through passive voice where the Actor was hidden:

*(V3.1) TikTok now banned from all house-managed devices [...]*

TikTok	now	(is) banned	from all house-managed devices
Goal	Circumstance: location, time	Process: material, transformative	Circumstance: location, place

As shown in the extracts above, TikTok, the most prevalent Goal, was usually subjected to the U.S. authorities’ actions, regardless of whether they made an official appearance in the clauses.

Relational processes ranked second in terms of frequency with 23%. A fairly even distribution of 17 Identifying clauses and 14 Attributive clauses was witnessed. In Identifying clauses, the legislation on TikTok was often defined based on the contextual background (like in V9.9) and the scope of influence. Meanwhile, in Attributive ones, it was associated with certain characteristics, such as “doesn’t seem hard to reinforce” (V1.27) or even quite evaluative “ridiculous” (V2.33) in a TikTok user’s opinion.

*(V9.9) The move (= the ban) is in response to Governor Greg Abbott's Recent Directive about the popular video-sharing app.*

The move	is in response to	Governor Greg Abbott's recent directive	about the popular video-sharing app.
Identified	Process: relational, circumstantial, identifying	Identifier	Circumstance: matter



The depiction of TikTok as a scrutiny and ban target was further supported by Verbal processes (10.4% of all the clauses). These processes predominantly represented the authoritative voice since the participant role of Sayer was performed by U.S. authorities eight times, compared to only twice by TikTok. These authoritative statements focused on declaring bans, proposing laws, and responding to media queries. Nevertheless, in a CNN video, they were referred to as “vow” rather than simply “announce” or “say”, implying a greater sense of determination:

(V6.42) [... State Leaders] who have vowed to rid their systems of the app.

who	have vowed	to rid their systems of the app.
Sayer	Process: verbal	Verbiage

Without explicitly stating that TikTok is a risk, the verb of saying here denoted state leaders’ assertiveness in blocking the app, which might trigger a negative feeling about the app, albeit in a tacit manner.

**4.2. Transitivity Analysis of the Theme “TikTok is a cybersecurity risk”**

**Table 3**

*The Distribution of Process Types in Each News Source in the Theme “TikTok is a cybersecurity risk”*

	NBC	Fox News	CNN	MSNBC	CBS	Total	
<b>Material</b>	15	22	7	26	14	<b>84</b>	<b>37.5%</b>
- creative	1	-	-	4	1		
- transformative	14	22	7	22	13		
<b>Mental</b>	3	8	2	10	2	<b>25</b>	<b>11.2%</b>
- perceptive	-	-	-	-	-		
- cognitive	-	5	1	6	1		
- desiderative	1	-	-	2	1		
- emotive	2	3	1	2	-		
<b>Relational</b>	7	16	8	21	10	<b>62</b>	<b>27.7%</b>
- attributive	2	7	3	10	5		
- identifying	5	9	5	11	5		
<b>Behavioural</b>	-	-	-	-	1	<b>1</b>	<b>0.4%</b>
<b>Verbal</b>	6	10	1	5	7	<b>29</b>	<b>12.9%</b>
<b>Existential</b>	7	4	2	10	-	<b>23</b>	<b>10.3%</b>

<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>224</b>
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As can be seen in Table 3, the distribution of process type in this part displayed a similar trajectory compared to the previous theme in the sense that Material processes still took the leading position with 38% of all the clauses. However, unlike in the preceding theme, the leading Actor here was TikTok, making the focus very much on their actions. TikTok was typically associated with action verbs such as “access”, “obtain”, “store”, “share”, “collect”, “track”, and even inherently negative verbs in this context such as “poses” and “harvest”, all of which were deliberate rather than involuntary.

*(V1.10) TikTok, [...], has credibly accessed American journalists’ data.*

TikTok, [...]	has credibly accessed	American journalists’ data.
Actor	Process: material, transformative	Goal

*(V9.20) the app “harvests vast amounts of data from its users’ devices [...]”*

the app	“harvests	vast amounts of data	from its users’ devices
Actor	Process: material, transformative	Goal	Circumstance: angle, source

Interestingly, the most recurring Goal in this topic was neither TikTok nor U.S. authorities but “data” (e.g. journalists’ data, U.S. user data, information, American data) as exemplified above. They were all used in transformative clauses, which usually construed a fundamental change to the participant (Halliday & Matthiesen, 2014, p. 233). Furthermore, the fact that only 3 clauses with these Goals were passivised indicated an emphasis on the Actors that performed the activity, which were TikTok in most cases. Putting it all together, this depiction might give the audience an impression of TikTok as an active entity that collected and shared user data, with that data serving as the primary and ultimate target.

Besides Material, Relational processes (around 28%) played a key role in constructing TikTok’s identity. The app was consistently labelled “a concern for national security”, “a high risk to users”, “an enormous threat”, “a global issue” and “a clear and present danger”. Consequently, continuing to allow the use of this app on state devices was deemed “a criminal offence” (V6.49). A video of Fox News even went further by identifying the optimal solution, which was nothing but a total ban:

*(V4.13) So the only thing that’s in my mind, the solution to this problem is banning TikTok from operating in the United States outright.*

So	the only thing that’s in my mind, the solution to this problem	is	banning TikTok from operating in the United States outright.
	Identified	Process: relational, intensive, identifying	Identifier

Mental processes, at over 11%, added perspectives to this narrative of TikTok. Cognitive mental, the most common subtype, was often used to talk about how the speakers “understood”, whether they “trusted” and “believed” TikTok. Following this was emotive mental (8 clauses), which was linked to the feeling of “concern” in most cases. This was

resonated by Existential processes, which highlighted the existence of TikTok-related “concerns”, “issues”, “problems”, and “a potential threat”.

### 4.3. Transitivity Analysis of the Theme “TikTok is the Trojan horse of the Chinese Communist Party”

**Table 4**

*The Distribution of Process Types in Each News Source in the Theme “TikTok Is the Trojan Horse of the Chinese Communist Party”*

	NBC	Fox News	CNN	MSNBC	CBS	Total	
<b>Material</b>	-	9	10	21	9	<b>48</b>	<b>44.0%</b>
- creative	-	-	1	2	-		
- transformative	-	9	8	19	9		
<b>Mental</b>	-	5	1	7	3	<b>16</b>	<b>14.7%</b>
- perceptive	-	1	-	4	-		
- cognitive	-	2	-	3	1		
- desiderative	-	-	1	-	2		
- emotive	-	2	-	-	-		
<b>Relational</b>	-	11	5	10	5	<b>31</b>	<b>28.4%</b>
- attributive	-	4	2	2	2		
- identifying	-	7	3	8	3		
<b>Behavioural</b>	-	-	-	-	1	<b>1</b>	<b>0.9%</b>
<b>Verbal</b>	-	2	4	-	4	<b>10</b>	<b>9.2%</b>
<b>Existential</b>	-	-	-	2	1	<b>3</b>	<b>2.8%</b>
<b>Total</b>	-	<b>27</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>109</b>	

This way of portraying TikTok was mostly supported by Material processes (44%). Their most recurring participant was none other than the Chinese government (also referred to as the Chinese Communist Party). As the main Actor, they typically carried out intentional processes such as “control”, “influence”, “manipulate”, “track”, “run”, and “collect”. They also engaged in seeming military actions like “protect”, “targeting”, “weaponise”, and “espionage”. This suggested the framing of the Chinese government as an “aggressive” and cunning party in a war, using TikTok as its weapon for espionage. Furthermore, this militaristic government was believed to have the power to “require” TikTok and any other companies there to “hand over the data” at its disposal.

On the other hand, Goal was predominantly played by TikTok and its components such

as user data, content, and algorithm. Accordingly, these were implied to be prone to the Chinese Communist Party’s influence. This institution also served as the primary Recipient. Specifically, it was portrayed as the one who enormously benefited from the valuable data of U.S. TikTok users:

*(V9.23) The app “[...] offers this trove of potentially sensitive information to the Chinese government.”*

The app	“[...] offers	this trove of potentially sensitive information	to the Chinese government.”
Actor	Process: material, transformative	Goal	Recipient

TikTok, in this depiction, was more or less a loyalist who devoted its treasure “trove” to the Chinese authorities.

The Relational type further amplified this by devoting over two-thirds of its processes to the Identifying mode. According to Halliday and Matthiesen (2014, p. 284), the dominance of Identifying mode is typical in highly valued registers such as scientific, commercial, political, and bureaucratic discourse, where meanings are essentially symbolic. However, TikTok and its operations were arguably more tangible, which might point at a tendency to convey meanings through symbolising and labelling. Specifically, the apprehension “concern” was continually defined. This apprehension was however not scientifically defined but instead, was established with identities rooted in TikTok’s suspicious ties to the Chinese government. These included the potential impacts these ties could have on U.S. elections, the gathering of personal information (see excerpt V8.30), the misinformation and algorithmic control, and the influences of such control on public perception. In this way, TikTok was implied to be a tool for the Chinese government’s surveillance and perception shaping, thus garnering “increasingly bipartisan concern”.

*(V8.30) The second piece [of concern] is the collection of personally identifiable information.*

The second piece [of concern]	is	the collection of personally identifiable information.
Identified	Process: relational, intensive, identifying	Identifier

Another common Identified was TikTok, whose identity was consistently associated with its Chinese origin. This was repeatedly emphasised in statements such as “TikTok is a Chinese company” (V8.13) or “because it’s a Chinese-based company” (V10.20).

In the Attributive mode, the Chinese Communist Party and TikTok were the prevalent Carrier. The former was exclusively deployed in possessive clauses with the verb “has”. This indicated its ownership of control over Chinese-based companies, including TikTok, as well as their personal data of Americans. Meanwhile, the latter and its relationships with the former were characterised by descriptors such as “really disturbing”, “deeply disturbing”, and “genuinely troubling”, which made the negative bias towards them harder to ignore.

The next popular process type was Mental, making up nearly 15% of the clauses. Cognitive Mental clauses allowed the speakers to verbalise what they “thought” about China’s

influence on the app and possible remedies. Meanwhile, Perceptive Mental concentrated on one's awareness of China's control over the company but it was generally just what they "saw" or "all heard" about, with no evidence. Desiderative and Emotive, having fewer occurrences, highlighted the speakers' "hope" for future actions and their concerns about connections between the company and the Chinese Communist Party, respectively.

#### 4.4. Transitivity Analysis of the Theme "TikTok is a must-have for many"

**Table 5**

*The Distribution of Process Types in Each News Source in the Theme "TikTok is a must-have for many"*

	NBC	Fox News	CNN	MSNBC	CBS	Total	
<b>Material</b>	11	-	1	5	5	<b>22</b>	<b>36.7%</b>
- creative	1	-	-	-	-		
- transformative	10	-	1	5	5		
<b>Mental</b>	5	-	-	2	1	<b>8</b>	<b>13.3%</b>
- perceptive	2	-	-	-	-		
- cognitive	1	-	-	1	-		
- desiderative	-	-	-	-	-		
- emotive	2	-	-	1	1		
<b>Relational</b>	8	-	1	8	2	<b>19</b>	<b>31.7%</b>
- attributive	5	-	1	8	2		
- identifying	3	-	-	-	-		
<b>Behavioural</b>	-	-	-	1	-	<b>1</b>	<b>1.7%</b>
<b>Verbal</b>	4	-	-	1	3	<b>8</b>	<b>13.3%</b>
<b>Existential</b>	1	-	-	1	-	<b>2</b>	<b>3.3%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>60</b>	

Table 5 illustrates that Material remained the most commonly used type with about 37% of the clauses. TikTok users were the most active Actors within this narrative. They often engaged in activities like "using", "access", "scrolling on", and "switch", which reflected their interactions with the app and its elements without posing a single risk to other entities. In addition, TikTokers were also frequently described in an attempt to "find" all available methods to continue using the app despite bans, which hinted at their strong liking for it. By contrast, as another common Actor, the U.S. authorities' actions were "prevent", "not help", "affect", "enforcing", "get rid", "stop", and "bans", which were much more influential. These actions directly impacted the Goal of TikTok itself and its users:

(V2.34) *For a lot of us, this (= the bill) is going to affect our business and even some really cool friendships [...]*

For a lot of us,	this	is going to affect	our business and even some really cool friendships
Circumstance: angle, viewpoint	Actor	Process: material, transformative	Goal

Relational processes, whose proportion was only 5% lower than that of Material, served to attribute characteristics (16 processes) more than to identify (3 processes). As a common Carrier, TikTok was characterised as an “addictive”, “incredibly popular”, or “extremely popular” social media platform that “boasted more than a billion users”. Therefore, “the love for TikTok” was acknowledged with the attribute “real”:

(V1.51) *The love for TikTok is real for students and so many.*

The love for TikTok	is	real	for students and so many.
Carrier	Process: relational, intensive, attributive	Attribute	Circumstance: angle, viewpoint

However, the Angle circumstance “for students and so many” could be indicative of the speaker’s distancing from the proposition. This distancing strategy was more obvious in another video by MSNBC. In this discourse, there were at least four occasions the speakers employed possessive clauses to deny the state of having TikTok on their phone. Take V7.6 as an example:

(V7.6) *disclaimer, I currently do not have TikTok.*

disclaimer	I	currently	do not have	TikTok
	Carrier	Circumstance: location, time	Process: relational, possessive, attributive	Attribute

Although this theme was a very affection-related one, the proportion of Mental processes (13.3%) largely fell behind those of Material and Relational. However, it is unsurprising that the Emotive subtype was deployed the most in 4 instances to highlight the strong sentiments towards the app. To illustrate, aside from the repeatedly mentioned “love”, some would also feel “upset at any possible ban” on it.

Comprising a similar percentage of the clauses were Verbal processes. Sayer appeared in all of them and was typically played by young individuals. Their statements, in general, featured a Verbiage to convey their dissenting opinions over TikTok bans, such as V1.37 “[who said] this will not prevent them from accessing TikTok”. However, in all cases, these were not direct quotations, which may somehow alter the strength of speakers’ assertions or leave out their elaborations.

**4.5. Transitivity Analysis of the Theme “TikTok is a driving force for sales”**

**Table 6**

*The Distribution of Process Types in Each News Source in the Theme “TikTok is a driving force for sales”*

	NBC	Fox News	CNN	MSNBC	CBS	Total	
<b>Material</b>	-	-	28	-	-	<b>28</b>	<b>65.1%</b>
- creative	-	-	2	-	-		
- transformative	-	-	26	-	-		
<b>Mental</b>	-	-	3	-	-	<b>3</b>	<b>7.0%</b>
- perceptive	-	-	1	-	-		
- cognitive	-	-	-	-	-		
- desiderative	-	-	-	-	-		
- emotive	-	-	2	-	-		
<b>Relational</b>	-	-	10	-	-	<b>10</b>	<b>23.3%</b>
- attributive	-	-	7	-	-		
- identifying	-	-	3	-	-		
<b>Behavioural</b>	-	-	1	-	-	<b>1</b>	<b>2.3%</b>
<b>Verbal</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Existential</b>	-	-	1	-	-	<b>1</b>	<b>2.3%</b>
<b>Total</b>	-	-	<b>43</b>	-	-	<b>43</b>	

In this narrative, material processes dominated other types with around two-thirds of the total number. It was also clear that CNN favoured transformative doings (26 clauses) over the creative ones (2 clauses). Despite its low frequency, creative actions such as “creating” and “building” did play a role in depicting the innovative contributions of the app to the business field:

(V5.3) *The BookTok hashtag is not just creating new social media influence ...*

The BookTok hashtag	is not just creating	new social media influence
Actor	Process: material, creative	Goal

Notably, those who interacted with TikTok as a social media platform, including individual users, book reviewers, and book publishers, were the most prominent Actor. Their activities revolved around “journal”, “look for (what to read)”, “discover”, “reading”,

“following”, “reviewing”, “finding”, “growing”, “building”, “reach (a much wider audience)” on BookTok, a sub-community within TikTok. This helped to construct the video app as a conducive platform for people to actively engage in a book community and for publishers to get to know new potential authors. TikTok, when performing as the Actor, was portrayed to bring about positive outcomes, like sales increases, “attention”, “recognition”, and “grow”. These were beneficial for various stakeholders.

Relational processes were another commonly used type, accounting for nearly a quarter of the total processes. The Attributive modes outnumbered its counterpart subtypes (What are they? Be specific.). It associated TikTok and the hashtag BookTok with positive assessments such as “nice”, “phenomenal”, “very high”, and “boasts”. This added to the praising narrative of TikTok in terms of sales driving, as opposed to the negative portrayal in some other sections.

A much less prevalent process type, comprising just 7% of the total, was Mental. The majority of these centred on the positive emotions of Sensors (i.e. book publishers and TikTok users) regarding BookTok and books recommended there. For example:

*(V5.49) I think a lot of publishers have been surprised by the trajectory of what BookTok has done the last two years.*

I think	a lot of publishers	have been surprised	by the trajectory of what BookTok has done	the last two years.
	Senser	Process: mental, emotive	Phenomenon	Circumstance: location, time

The feeling of being “surprised” could be interpreted as either positive or negative, depending on the context. In this discussion, it was considered positive because the speaker was praising the incredible growth in book sales, which was “entirely driven” by people on BookTok.

### 5. Discussion

The findings revealed the transitivity patterns of news representing TikTok. Overall, Material, the process that construes “a quantum of change in the flow of events” (Halliday & Matthiesen, 2014, p. 244), was by far the most favoured among all the themes. This could be attributed to the first function of news: informing the public about recent events (Overholser & Jamieson, 2005, p. 49; Porto, 2007). It also supports the finding of Durant and Lambrou (2009, p. 218) about the dominance of Material processes in news. Coming next in terms of frequency was Relational processes. Interestingly, the primary aim of this process type was to identify in the two negative themes (“TikTok is a cybersecurity risk” and “TikTok is the Trojan horse of the Chinese Communist Party”) but to attribute characteristics in the two more positive themes (“TikTok is a must-have for many” and “TikTok is a driving force for sales”). The remaining one, which appeared to be somewhat more impartial, displayed a balance between both aims. These two main process types were aided by the use of Mental and Verbal processes to construe concerns, liking, announcements and perspectives of various subjects. Further analysis showed that adverse portrayals of TikTok were more likely to be pinpointed through the process of thinking, while the two favourable approaches tended to be linked to feelings. Existential and Behavioural processes, however, were the least preferred and hence had a less crucial role in the representation of TikTok.



These results differ from those reported by Lin (2023) in a number of important aspects. Although the prevalence of Material processes and the infrequency of Existential processes are still consistent, the share of Relational processes (14.29%) is significantly lower than that in the present study. Furthermore, Lin's research uncovered a huge discrepancy between the distribution of Verbal and Mental processes, with the former being twice as high as the latter, contrasting with their equivalence in this data set. The final major distinction is the complete absence of Behavioural processes there, as compared to its 6 appearances in my study.

These transitivity patterns unveiled a multifaceted portrayal of TikTok. First, it was regarded as a target of restrictions and probes by lawmakers. Specifically, the social media platform was highly susceptible to actions and decisions of the U.S. government, having little capacity for resistance. The seriousness on the American part was slightly reduced with the use of passive voice from time to time. However, in general, this representation still offered useful information about the current restrictions on TikTok as well as further moves in the future. This might help with keeping the citizens informed of political and social events - a primary function of news (Overholser & Jamieson, 2005, p. 49; Porto, 2007).

To set the grounds for these restrictions, the labelling of TikTok as a cybersecurity threat on both national and global scales was employed. This was also the most prevalent representation found across the corpus. In this representation, TikTok had evolved from the conventional role of an application into a treacherous entity that intentionally misappropriated American data. As a result, widespread concerns, distrust, and problems surrounding its use arose according to the news coverage. Despite certain commitments to address them, the company was emphasised as acting against their own promises. This finding resonates with previous observations of Miao et al. (2023), which suggested that the measures taken by TikTok were generally regarded as failing to eradicate doubts and worries about its data security. Furthermore, this representation bore a similarity to the enemification strategy, or "the portrayal of certain things or people as enemies on the basis of the danger and threat that they pose", possibly to evoke a strong sense of nationalism (Yu, 2022). With this strategy, TikTok was put in opposition to the U.S. national interests.

The U.S. news coverage heavily linked these data security issues to TikTok's Chinese origin. The video app was depicted to be the Trojan horse of the Chinese Communist Party for espionage. In other words, TikTok was indicated as nothing but a weapon used by the party to gather data and shape public opinions. By the same token, the media tended to criticise the Chinese party as an authoritative commander that exercised "disturbing" power and forced companies to hand over data, including those of American users, for its own interests. This meant that China was an enemy to the United States and Americans at large. The narrative of concern thereby unsurprisingly prevailed, with "concerns" about TikTok being consistently defined in relation to its intricate ties to the Chinese Communist Party. These concerns were amplified by accusations from bipartisan politicians. What set the representation by U.S. media apart from those in previous studies by Kumar (2023) and Kumar and Thussu (2023) was the absence of an alliance narrative with other countries. Unlike Indian media, American media appeared to stand independent in their opposition to TikTok and China.

However, this way of representing TikTok had more to do with framing than just informing and thus reflected ideological agendas. These ideologies invariably correspond with governmental interests according to Kumar (2023). In this case, such interests might lie in the decision to ban TikTok nationwide. For these reasons, this portrayal fell short of fulfilling core news functions. Instead of providing a balanced view, it tended to present rather one-sided

assumptions that could potentially manipulate public perception of TikTok's and the Chinese government's operations. This result aligns with the work of other studies in the field (e.g. Fowler, 2013; Statham, 2022) linking news with ideologies rather than just neutral facts.

By contrast, TikTok was also acknowledged as a must-have for many here and there, mostly in NBC videos. In this respect, TikTok represented a highly sought-after platform that was worth every effort to access, even in the face of bans. The fondness for the app was profound and the utilisation of it in this context was implied to be devoid of any inherent risks to others. However, the impediment to this process from the U.S. authorities remained continual and was believed to do more harm than good to the users. A similar favourable representation of TikTok was recognised in Miao et al. (2023), with evidence surrounding the app's innovations and users' enthusiasm towards it. However, the study pointed out that this discussion was virtually ignored since the relationships between China and the United States began to deteriorate in 2020. This did not appear to be the case in this study, whose data was collected between late 2022 and early 2023. In spite of having lower frequency than three above-mentioned ones, this narrative still accounted for about 10% of the total number of clauses.

Finally, TikTok was appreciated as a driving force for sales by CNN. Not only was it an innovative platform for sharing about books and discovering new authors, but it was also a driving force behind the recent exponential uptick in book sales. This was positively evaluated as "phenomenal" and surprising. TikTok, in this discourse, was portrayed to bring about amazing transformations and benefits for a wide range of stakeholders. Such a depiction offered a unique perspective on TikTok's impacts. While it helped us understand the overall picture of the app, including both its pros and cons, the other four news outlets seemed indifferent to it. This disregarding trend could explain why the depiction of TikTok in this positive manner has yet to be reported in earlier studies.

A comparison between television news items of the five channels reveal significant divisions in the way they represented TikTok. NBC and CBS dedicated the largest proportion of their videos to inform the audience of the scrutiny and prohibition of TikTok. Fox News and MSNBC, however, placed a higher priority on the relationships between TikTok and the Chinese government. This one-sided portrayal might be because these were the only outlets to use interviews, which is characterised by personal analysis and opinions. In contrast, CNN showed the greatest interest in TikTok's beneficial impacts on sales growth. On the whole, these differences could be attributed to the institutions' political stances. For example, Fox News is known to be a right-wing media outlet concerned with conservative political values. On the other side of the spectrum, CNN is more of a liberal left-wing media source, possibly with more open-minded opinions towards foreign countries and companies, like China and TikTok.

All in all, regarding the purposes of news, news reports appear to be more impartial and informative than interviews, since they involve a wider range of angles towards TikTok. Nevertheless, the majority of these angles are still negative, with only one advantage of the application to sales increase being recognised. This tendency could hinder a holistic understanding of the audience about the matter. It therefore might prevent U.S. news from serving the two core functions of providing useful information and thus strengthening democracy and citizenship.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study investigates the representation of TikTok in U.S. news coverage after the No TikTok on Government Devices Act was signed. It has been revealed that news items predominantly employ Material processes in their depictions of TikTok. Another preferred type is Relational processes, whose purposes are to identify in negative narratives but to characterise in praising discourses. Following that, Mental and Verbal processes occur with comparable frequency. What is surprising is that criticism of the application is mostly tied to thinking, while acclaim is more about feeling. Lastly, Existential is less popular, and Behavioural is scarcely encountered throughout the data corpus.

These transitivity patterns offer insights into how TikTok is portrayed in American news outlets, revealing five main narratives: (1) TikTok is a target of scrutiny and prohibition by the lawmakers, having little capacity for resistance; (2) TikTok is an active entity that misuses America data and thus a dangerous national and global security threat; (3) TikTok is a clandestine weapon of the Chinese Communist Party to attack the United States and attain its goal as the number one superpower; (4) TikTok is a must-have for a great number of people and worth every attempt to access, regardless of U.S. authorities' efforts to restrict it; (5) TikTok is a driver of sales with innovative contributions. Some of these representations, particularly those devoted to symbolic labelling and enemification, have the potential to distort public opinions about the app and relevant subjects. This may contradict the fundamental goals of news discourse, which aim to keep the public well-informed about current events and consequently empower them to exercise their democratic rights, as noted by Overholser & Jamieson (2005, p. 49) and Porto (2007).

These findings contribute to our understanding of how the transitivity system can be utilised to diversely portray TikTok, particularly during critical events such as a nationwide ban. This study could serve as a reference source for future researchers who attempt to study SFL in general or explore the media coverage of various social media platforms within the lexicogrammar stratum of language. Further, it is hoped that the potential ideological agendas found here can encourage audiences and readers to take more caution in consuming news about social platforms and news producers to attain a more objective portrayal of news content.

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## APPENDIX: Data corpus

