

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### Persuasive effects of cuteness-coated political propaganda in China: an experimental design

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*Date of Award:*  
2020

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## Abstract

Ever-developing media and innovative propaganda strategies continually change the ways that political authorities exercise their manipulation of the public, which always causes great concern among scholars in the field of political communication. To respond to the lively debate on the roles new modes of communication can play in the processes of politics in modern society based on the experience of China and also to help scholars adapt to the changing context of China today, we chose one representative trend in the latest political propaganda of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on social media—“cuteness-coated propaganda”—of which we study the impacts on political support among Chinese youth and the mechanisms involved. After conceptualizing and theorizing the cuteness-coated propaganda of the CPC, we design and conduct two studies. In Study One, we firstly recruit 199 participants offline for a pair of between-subjects 2 (selling cuteness or not)  $\times$  2 (soft content or hard content) factorial design experiments. In Experiment 1, the cuteness is presented in the form of video, and in Experiment 2, it is presented in the form of pictures. In Study Two, we recruit 386 participants online to join in the online survey-embedded experiments, in which the cuteness is presented in the form of text in Experiment 3 and the form of pictures in Experiment 4.

We find that in our research context when the CPC propagandizes with soft-oriented content using the selling-cuteness strategy in video form on Weibo, it improves the specific political support of Chinese youth by increasing their positive emotions or closing the psychological distance between themselves and the propagandist. This finding suggests that the “Double-Soft Model” of political propaganda (utilizing a soft propaganda strategy to publicize soft content) proposed in our thesis can be a very persuasive way of influencing young people’s specific political support. However, when the selling-cuteness with soft content is presented in picture form or textual form, it is unable to influence the specific support because it cannot evoke significantly increased positive emotions or psychological closeness. Meanwhile, neither general political support nor national pride is influenced by the selling-cuteness strategy no matter in which form it is presented, which is consistent with the findings of previous scholars. Our research represents a pioneering study of cuteness-coated political propaganda on social media, both theoretically and empirically.

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