

Communicating About and Through Platform Values: Legitimizing Public Expression Regulation on X and Weibo 2007–2024

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that social media platforms communicate their governance strategies both *about* and *through* values across diverse sites of communication—*about* values in presenting normative ideals and *through* values to justify their content moderation practices. Moreover, we highlight the significance of analyzing platform values across temporal and regional contexts, especially beyond the Western sphere. Focusing on X and Weibo, we employed content and network analysis to examine how they articulated values in different venues to regulate public expression from 2007 to 2024. Our findings reveal an increasing convergence in how the two platforms communicate about values in their community guidelines, suggesting a trend of institutional isomorphism in response to shared challenges such as misinformation and online safety. However, they diverged in communicating through values in administrative posts. While X emphasized personal-level values such as self-expression, Weibo prioritized social-level values, particularly social and political security, often in the context of addressing concrete cases.

Keywords

platform value, legitimacy, platform governance, expression, social media platform, institutional isomorphism, corporate social responsibility

In 2022, soon after Elon Musk took over Twitter (now X¹), he announced his decision to reinstate US President Donald Trump and “further relax the platform’s speech limits” (Oremus, 2022). China’s Weibo, once a platform that highly encouraged nationalist sentiment, has recently curbed such speech—citing security reasons—following several incidents of violence against foreigners (Zhang, 2024). As these examples illustrate, social media platforms exhibit notable flexibility in their self-regulation.

Platforms refer to “sites and services that host public expression, store it on and serve it up from the cloud, organize access to it through search and recommendation, or install it onto mobile devices” (Gillespie, 2018b, p. 255). Over the past decade, social media platforms like X and Weibo have amassed considerable private power over public discourse (Klinger et al., 2023). Research has thus emerged to critically assess both the “governance of platforms”—the regulatory frameworks and legal regimes shaping their responsibilities—and “governance by platforms”—how platforms govern users’ interactions through design choices,

algorithmic architectures, platform rules, and enforcement mechanisms (Gillespie, 2018b; Gorwa, 2024).

Our research examines governance by platforms, specifically investigating how social media platforms communicate *values* to legitimize their enormous power over public expression (Haggart & Keller, 2021). As seen in the opening examples, different types of values, such as *self-expression* and *security*, are often strategically modified to align with the platforms’ political, commercial, and even personal agendas. These are considered “platform values,” which refer to the ideals that platforms invoke to articulate and justify their preferred form of governance (Scharlach

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et al., 2024). They are in flux and subject to ongoing negotiation among various internal and external stakeholders, including platform companies, users, governments, and advertisers (Gillespie, 2018a). Specifically, we examine and compare the construction and evolution of the platform values of X and Weibo between 2007 and 2024. Building on previous work (e.g. Chan et al., 2025; Hallinan et al., 2022; Scharlach et al., 2024), we argue that it is essential to examine platform values across *sites of communication*, *time*, and *regions*.

First, inspired by a constitutive approach in corporate communication (Cooren, 2020), we highlight the plurality in value communication that contributes to the legitimization of platform governance. Specifically, we advocate for examining platform values across diverse sites of communication with particular attention to community guidelines and administrative account posts. Community guidelines prescribe what a platform should be as a community and how various stakeholders should interact with it and among themselves (Scharlach et al., 2024). Platforms' administrative account posts (e.g. @safety; @weiboadmin) are also directed toward users, assuring them of their commitment to protecting online expression while actively demonstrating and explaining their efforts in content moderation. Both can be considered corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies that address an organization's responsibilities to stakeholders and society (Kim, 2023).

Theoretically, we posit that platforms strategically leverage these two sites to engage in public communication both *about* and *through* values. In community guidelines, platforms *communicate about* values by outlining their normative ideals; in administrative posts, they *communicate through* values by invoking these ideals to justify specific actions. For example, a platform may list many core values in its guidelines but later invoke specific ones, particularly *authenticity*, to justify the removal of a disinformation-spreading account. In other words, community guidelines offer a stable, predefined framework for articulating platform values, while administrative accounts engage in real-time legitimation work, justifying content moderation in response to specific incidents and user reactions. As such, the values emphasized in these two sites of communication may differ. Comparing them can reveal the complex and often fragmented process of value communication that plays a crucial role in legitimizing platform governance.

Second, we emphasize the importance of examining platform value communication as a longitudinal process. Research has shown that platform values shift over time in response to external changes (Chan et al., 2025). Theoretically, longitudinal research on platform policies and values helps understand platformization from an institutional perspective (Poell et al., 2021). However, such research remains scant primarily due to the methodological challenges in systematically documenting and analyzing policy changes. Using a combination of data collection and analysis methods, we

trace the evolution of how values are prioritized and framed on X and Weibo over an extended period of time.

Finally, given the tension between local realities in regulating platforms and the global flow of digital communities, critical questions arise about the convergence and divergence of platform values across national borders. X and Weibo, shaped by distinct political and cultural contexts, may define and articulate platform values in fundamentally different ways. However, drawing upon the theory of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), platform values may gradually converge across regions over time. A cross-regional comparison informs how platforms navigate the tension between local political, cultural, and regulatory demands and broader global digital norms.

Methodologically, we conducted a content and network analysis of X's and Weibo's community guidelines and administrative account posts from 2007 to 2024.² The findings reveal that the two platforms have increasingly converged in communicating *about* values in their community guidelines, but have diverged in how they communicate *through* values in administrative posts to legitimize their content moderation in practice.

Background

X and Weibo are among the most influential social media platforms in the West and East, respectively. The two platforms share a similar emphasis on breaking news and public affairs, a microblogging format, and default public visibility. Meanwhile, X and Weibo represent distinct models of platform governance, likely shaped by different cultural and political contexts, making their comparison especially compelling.

X, originally established as Twitter in 2006, has gained international prominence. It is widely recognized as a space for open political expression, though the discourse is often shaped by partisan dynamics (Jennings et al., 2020). Following Musk's takeover in 2022, X has undergone a notable rightward shift in its approach to content moderation, reflecting Musk's self-proclaimed stance as a "free speech absolutist" (Sengul, 2025). Mis- and disinformation have emerged as a pressing security concern for the platform (Vallance, 2023).

Weibo, launched in 2009, primarily serves the Chinese domestic audience. It operates under strict government oversight and navigates a delicate balance between enabling public expression and complying with state regulation (Li, 2023). Since the tightening of online speech around 2012, Weibo has shifted significantly from fostering civic-minded public engagement to prioritizing individual online fame and monetization of content creation (Han, 2018). More recently, scholars have highlighted the rise of intertwined fandom and nationalist discourses on Weibo (e.g. Wang & Luo, 2023). In response to their increasing commercialization and radicalization, Weibo has tightened content controls and moved away from its traffic-driven model.

The Quest for Legitimacy of Platform (Self-)Governance

Social media platforms have engaged in self-governance by setting extensive rules—such as community guidelines—to govern users' expression and by enforcing them through content moderation techniques (Gillespie, 2018a). While corporations historically preserved their legitimacy by adhering to national laws, economic globalization eroded the effectiveness of state regulations. Against this backdrop, transnational corporations have increasingly engaged in self-governance, helping protect public goods traditionally associated with the state, such as environmental sustainability and human rights (Scherer et al., 2006). This is exemplified by the widespread uptake of CSR in business discourses (Altman & Vidaver-Cohen, 2000). Advocates of CSR suggest it has the potential to align business practices with societal goods, whereas skeptics view it as a form of ethics washing that rationalizes private governance without bringing substantial changes (Christensen et al., 2013).

In particular, CSR arises in response to the normative pressure for corporations to seek legitimacy by conforming to societal expectations or publicly demonstrating their commitment to doing so (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Social media platforms face pressure to address their self-governance deficits as they have the power to influence public interests but operate without sufficient national regulation mechanisms (Haggart & Keller, 2021). For example, Scharlach (2024) examines how TikTok utilizes the CSR campaign “TikTok for Good” to distance itself from political conflicts and delegate responsibilities to its users—a strategy the author considers a soft form of platform governance. Moreover, while platform policies, especially terms of service and privacy policies, function as legal and governance instruments that protect platforms from liability (Gillespie, 2018a), the act of publishing and updating such policies can perform CSR functions by signaling platforms' ethical commitments to users and society (Scharlach, 2024). Platforms also regularly revamp their features to bolster corporate images, often framing these changes as efforts to improve user experience or promote social good (Highfield & Miltner, 2023; Scharlach, 2024).

An underexplored issue is how CSR communication is operationalized in distinct ways, especially from a non-Western comparative perspective (Kim, 2023). Regarding platform governance in the United States, intermediary immunity shields platforms from liability for user-generated content while granting them discretion in content moderation (Gillespie, 2018a). For many US platforms, publishing community guidelines (Gillespie, 2018a) and transparency reports (Reid et al., 2024) are largely an industry-driven practice in response to the techlash since the late 2010s. In contrast, China uses a state-led platform governance model, with agencies like the Cyberspace Administration exercising strong oversight. Laws like the 2017 Cybersecurity Law mandate platforms to monitor and remove content deemed

illegal or harmful to state interests (Creemers, 2024). Chinese platforms, therefore, must align their CSR initiatives with state regulations (Li & Zhang, 2025).

Building on this literature, our intervention focuses on establishing platform legitimacy as a sociological process (Schultz et al., 2013), where platforms justify their governance not only pragmatically but also through socially accepted values. In particular, we highlight how CSR communication addresses legitimacy concerns across sites of communication, time, and regions.

Platform Values Across Sites: Communication About and Through Values

Platform values are ideals that platforms invoke to articulate and justify their governance (Scharlach et al., 2024). Researchers have examined platform values across sites, including platform policies (Su & Chan, 2025), CSR campaigns (Scharlach, 2024), technological affordances (Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023), and user-generated content (Shifman et al., 2025). Two notable insights emerge from these studies. First, while values are often understood as abstract conceptions of personal and societal worth, their meanings are materialized and negotiated through communication (Shifman et al., 2025). Second, different stakeholders may have distinct interpretations of the very same values (Hallinan et al., 2022). In particular, Van Dijck et al. (2018) highlight the contested dynamics between public values, which serve the public interest, and platform values, which reflect the performative construction of ideals by private platforms.

Specifically, we examine and compare the communication of diverse and sometimes conflicting platform values across different sites. Scholars of CSR have advocated for a constitutive approach to understanding corporate communication (Cooren, 2020), which recognizes that corporations do not merely report on their actions but performatively construct their identities through both planned and emergent communication. Importantly, different communication sites—such as policy documents, press releases, and social media posts—serve different legitimacy functions, even when they articulate similar ideals (Schultz et al., 2013).

Building on this constitutive approach, we propose a theoretical distinction between two modes of platform value communication: communicating *about* values and communicating *through* values. Both modes function as performative forms of CSR communication, shaping stakeholder expectations about the values platforms claim to uphold. Communicating *about* values can be seen as a planned mode of CSR communication—one-way, relatively stable, and designed to project a coherent governance identity. It involves making explicit reference to abstract ideals, for example, when a platform outlines the values of *community*

and *authenticity* as its guiding principles in its community guidelines. These documents codify normative commitments and provide a well-crafted framework through which platforms define what they stand for (Scharlach et al., 2024).

Communicating *through* values aligns with an emergent form of CSR communication, functioning as responsive and interactive legitimacy work. It entails the use of value-laden language to justify particular actions. This often occurs in administrative account posts, where platforms respond to specific incidents and day-to-day decisions, such as suspending an account or addressing misinformation, citing values such as *security* or *authenticity* in justification. This mode of communication directly addresses a dynamic well-documented in CSR research: when corporate actions diverge from previously invoked values, companies risk reputational damage and face public pressure to align rhetoric with practice (Christensen et al., 2013; Schultz et al., 2013). Communicating through values, therefore, offers a more flexible discursive strategy for maintaining coherence between values and evolving practices.

Based on this conceptual framing, we ask:

RQ1: What values are prioritized in X's and Weibo's community guidelines?

RQ2a-b: What values are prioritized in X's and Weibo's administrative account posts? (a) How are values articulated in these posts? (b)

The Evolution of Platform Values

Previous research has highlighted the importance of longitudinal studies on governance frameworks (Chan et al., 2025; Dubois & Reepschlager, 2024) for two reasons. First, longitudinal studies can illustrate how platforms have continuously reframed what constitutes “inappropriate” content (Zolides, 2021) and who bears responsibility for harmful content (Dubois & Reepschlager, 2024).

Second, mapping platform values over time within governance frameworks can offer insights into platformization—an institutional process through which platforms embed their infrastructural, market, and governance logic into various sectors and spheres of life (Poell et al., 2021). These frameworks evolve in response to external normative pressures. Analyzing TikTok's community guidelines over time, for example, Chan et al. (2025) identified *safety*, *engagement*, and *community* as core values; in response to a legitimization crisis, the platform later added *authenticity* and *accountability* to bolster credibility. Given the evolving nature of value communication, we also explore how platform values change over time:

RQ3: To what extent do the values prioritized in X's and Weibo's community guidelines evolve over time?

RQ4: To what extent do the values prioritized in X's and Weibo's administrative account posts evolve over time?

The Convergence and Divergence of Value Communication Across Regions

Given the different political and regulatory environments, X and Weibo may prioritize different values. Moreover, the host countries of the two platforms—the United States and China—also have distinct cultural contexts that influence their respective value systems. The United States emphasizes individualism and personal rights, while China values harmony, cooperation, and collective needs (Tata, 2005).

However, as the platform ecosystem continues to globalize, the values of the two platforms may gradually converge, as diverse platforms increasingly align with shared public norms and values (Scharlach et al., 2024; Van Dijck et al., 2018). This trend aligns with the concept of “institutional isomorphism” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), which suggests that organizations within the same field tend to resemble one another, particularly when responding to shared constraints and challenges.

In communication research, Caplan and Boyd (2018) have argued that the increasing dependence of news organizations on social media platforms for producing and distributing content—shaped by algorithmic logic—has led to greater homogenization within the news industry. Extending this line of thought, we posit that social media companies themselves constitute an emerging organizational field and may similarly exhibit isomorphism. As Simon (2024) observes in the case of news organizations, uncertainty around technological innovations and global challenges like online misinformation and hate speech can drive *mimetic isomorphism*, prompting organizations to adopt the perceived successful practices of others. Likewise, social media platforms such as X and Weibo may also converge in promoting similar values, as both face common societal expectations in a globally connected environment.

While empirical studies on institutional isomorphism within communication research have consistently identified patterns of convergence across national contexts, the majority of this work has centered on Western countries (e.g. Becker et al., 2025; Simon, 2024). It remains unclear whether these dynamics hold in other regions. Therefore, we ask:

RQ5: Have the values prioritized in X's and Weibo's community guidelines become more aligned over time?

RQ6: Have the values promoted in X's and Weibo's administrative account posts become more aligned over time?

Methods

This study examines the platform values of X and Weibo as expressed in their community guidelines and administrative

Table 1. A Summary of the Four Platform Datasets.

	Date	Collected	Expression-related
Community Guidelines			
X	Jan 1, 2009–Jun 5, 2024	24 ver., 137 sec.	24 ver., 129 sec.
Weibo	May 28, 2012–Mar 13, 2024	16 ver., 304 sec.	16 ver., 254 sec.
Administrative Account			
X Blog	Dec 13, 2007–May 19, 2024	4794	1368
X @safety	Feb 1, 2017–Jun 30, 2024	1328	434
Weibo	Apr 22, 2012–Jun 30, 2024	3143	2726

account posts. We collected data from each platform, covering from inception through 30 June 2024. For X, we retrieved 24 versions of its community guidelines—officially titled *X Rules and Policies*—from the internet Wayback Machine, from 2009 to 2024. For Weibo, we obtained 16 versions of its community guidelines, including the *Weibo Community Charter* and the *Weibo Community Management Regulations*, from Zhao (2025). The Charter (nine versions) outlines overarching principles and prohibited behaviors, while the Regulations (seven versions) define key terms and enforcement procedures.³

For X, administrative account posts include two official governance accounts: the X Blog (blog.twitter.com and blog.x.com), which updates the platform’s policies, technical developments, and corporate values; and the @Safety account (formerly @Twitter Safety), which shares safety-related updates and policy changes. We collected 4794 blog posts (since 2007) and 1328 account posts (since 2017) using BrandWatch, a social listening platform. For Weibo, since it does not have a blog like X Blog, we scraped all posts from @Weiboadmin, which announces policy updates and enforcement actions, using Selenium in Python. This resulted in 3143 posts from 2012 onward (see Table 1). Although the administrative data sources are not strictly equivalent across the two platforms, we include all available sources to comprehensively capture their governance communication efforts and maintain comparable data volumes.

Content Analysis

We conducted a manual content analysis. Considering the length of each community guideline document, we divided them into sections based on clauses, with each section encompassing approximately one to two clauses. The unit of analysis for coding the community guidelines is a section. X’s community guidelines consist of 137 sections, and Weibo’s community guidelines contain 304 sections. The unit of analysis for coding content published by Weibo’s and X’s administrative accounts is a post, and for coding Xblog, a blog entry.

The first author and a communication-major graduate student performed the content analysis. They first decided whether each coding item was related to the governance of

public expression. Items deemed irrelevant were excluded from the analysis. For relevant ones, the coders identified the specific values (RQ1, RQ2a). Based on the previous literature, we developed a comprehensive analytical framework to examine platform values at three levels: personal, social, and platform. Scholars in psychology and sociology (e.g. Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022) often distinguish between personal and social values. Specifically, values at the personal level pertain to those that prioritize personal concerns, such as *creativity*, *self*, *popularity*, *hedonism*, and *privacy*. Social values are associated with societal issues, such as *citizenship*, *universalism*, *security*, and *tradition*. Considering Chinese politics and based on our preliminary review of the data, we further divided security into *political security* and *social security*. In addition, scholars of platform studies (e.g. Chan et al., 2025; Hallinan, 2023; Scharlach et al., 2024) have identified a set of values specific to the platforms, representing the norms intended to cultivate a supportive service environment. These include the values of *community*, *authenticity*, and *transparency*. See Supplemental Appendix A for the value list.

To analyze how the two platforms articulate the specific values (RQ2b), coders assessed whether a specific value is promoted or discouraged. For each promoted value, they further determined whether it is encouraged by fostering value-aligned behavior—a positive framing—or by discouraging opposing behavior—a negative framing. In addition, the coders annotated the topics associated with the discussion of these values. The topic list was developed based on previous literature spanning different cultural contexts (e.g. Guo, 2019; Jones et al., 2023). Eleven topics are included: *politics*, *military/terrorism*, *economy/finance*, *crime*, *health/environment*, *entertainment/sports*, *race/religion*, *nationalism*, *gender*, *misinformation*, *fandom*, and *cyberbullying*. See Supplemental Appendix B for the codebook.

The two coders were instructed to document values and topics that were not initially included in the codebook but appeared frequently in the data. While researchers’ positionality inevitably influences the analysis, this concern is mitigated by our theoretically grounded codebook and the allowance for open coding.

A 10% stratified random sample of coding items based on the data type was drawn to assess intercoder reliability. After

Table 2. Platform Values in Community Guidelines and Administrative Account Posts.

Rank	Community guidelines		Administrative accounts	
	X (N= 129)	Weibo (N=254)	X (N= 1,802)	Weibo (N=2,726)
1	Community (68,52.71%)	Soc. security (122, 48.03%)	Self (870, 48.28%)	Authenticity (1,678, 61.56%)
2	Soc. security (43, 33.33%)	Authenticity (122, 48.03%)	Community (448, 24.86%)	Community (1,170, 42.92%)
3	Privacy (33, 25.58%)	Community (112, 44.09%)	Popularity (343, 19.03%)	Soc. security (666, 24.43%)
4	Authenticity (30, 23.26%)	Pol. security (62, 24.41%)	Citizenship (209, 11.60%)	Popularity (594, 21.79%)
5	Popularity (24, 18.60%)	Privacy (51, 20.08%)	Authenticity (196, 10.88%)	Universalism (471, 17.28%)
6	Self (12, 9.30%)	Popularity (40, 15.75%)	Universalism (171, 9.49%)	Pol. security (419, 15.37%)
7	Universalism (10, 7.75%)	Creativity (34, 13.39%)	Creativity (163, 9.05%)	Privacy (310, 11.37%)
8	Creativity (10, 7.75%)	Universalism (21, 8.27%)	Privacy (150, 8.32%)	Tradition (224, 8.22%)
9	Citizenship (9, 6.98%)	Transparency (9, 3.54%)	Soc. security (136, 7.55%)	Creativity (162, 5.94%)
10	Transparency (1, 0.78%)	Tradition (8, 3.15%)	Hedonism (127, 7.05%)	Hedonism (43, 1.58%)
11	Tradition (0, 0)	Self (5, 1.97%)	Transparency (125, 6.94%)	Self (33, 1.21%)
12	Pol. security (0, 0)	Citizenship (5, 1.97%)	Pol. security (96, 5.33%)	Transparency (26, 0.95%)
13	Hedonism (0, 0)	Hedonism (1, 0.39%)	Tradition (39, 2.16%)	Citizenship (1, 0.04%)
Personal	70, 54.26%	101, 39.76%	1,252, 69.48%	916, 33.60%
Social	59, 45.74%	145, 57.09%	516, 28.63%	1,009, 37.01%
Platform	81, 62.79%	181, 71.26%	670, 37.18%	2,321, 85.14%

five rounds of tests, all variables reached an accepted level of Krippendorff's α values (i.e. 0.68 according to Krippendorff (2004)), ranging from 0.69 to 0.95. The two coders then independently coded the remaining data.

Data Analysis

A network analysis was performed to explore the association between platform values and topics. Specifically, we constructed a two-mode network for each platform, with value and topic representing each mode. The co-occurrence of two values, two topics, and a value and a topic within one unit of analysis defines an edge. We then visualized the two networks and conducted a Singular Value Decomposition (SVD) analysis, a matrix factorization technique to identify latent structures within high-dimensional data. In addition, we employed the Quadratic Assignment Procedure (QAP) to analyze the correlations between different value-topic networks.

To examine the evolution of platform values, we divided the timeline into five stages primarily based on the updates to the community guidelines of both platforms (see Supplemental Appendix C). Stage 1 (2007–2011) and Stages 2 and 3 (2012–2014, 2015–2016) mark the policy conceptualization phases of X and Weibo. In Stage 4 (2017–2020), X made frequent adjustments to its community guidelines, while Weibo's guidelines remained stable. Stage 5 is a phase during which both platforms actively updated their guidelines (2021–2024).

Results

RQ1 asked about the values prioritized in the community guidelines of X and Weibo. As Table 2 illustrates, the top

three values prioritized in X's community guidelines are *community* ($N=68$, 52.71%), *social security* ($N=43$, 33.33%), and *privacy* ($N=33$, 25.58%). The top values promoted by Weibo are: *social security* ($N=122$, 48.03%), *authenticity* ($N=122$, 48.03%), and *community* ($N=112$, 44.09%). In other words, both platforms emphasized *community* and *social security* as their core values. On the other hand, the mention of *political security* constitutes nearly a quarter ($N=62$, 24.41%) of Weibo's community guidelines, ranking as the fourth most important value, whereas X's community guidelines have made no mention of it. In addition, both X ($N=81$, 62.79%) and Weibo ($N=181$, 71.26%) emphasized platform-level values most prominently in their guidelines. As for the values at the other two levels, X (54.26%) was more likely to mention personal-level values than Weibo (39.76%): $\chi^2(1, N=383)=7.28, p<.05$. Weibo (57.09%) tended to emphasize social-level values more than X (45.74%): $\chi^2(1, N=383)=4.43, p<.05$.

RQ2a focused on values emphasized in the administrative account posts. As shown in Table 2, the top three values emphasized in X's administrative posts are *self* ($N=870$, 48.28%), *community* ($N=448$, 24.86%), and *popularity* ($N=343$, 19.03%). Weibo highlighted *authenticity* ($N=1,678$, 61.56%), *community* ($N=1,170$, 42.92%), and *social security* ($N=666$, 24.43%). Both X and Weibo prioritized the value of *community* in their administrative posts. While *self* and *citizenship* ranked as the first and fourth most important values on X, they were rarely mentioned in Weibo's administrative account.

As for the level of the values, X highlighted personal-level values the most (69.48%), significantly more than Weibo (33.60%): $\chi^2(1, N=4,528)=559.53, p<.05$. Weibo prioritized platform-level values (85.14%) to a significantly

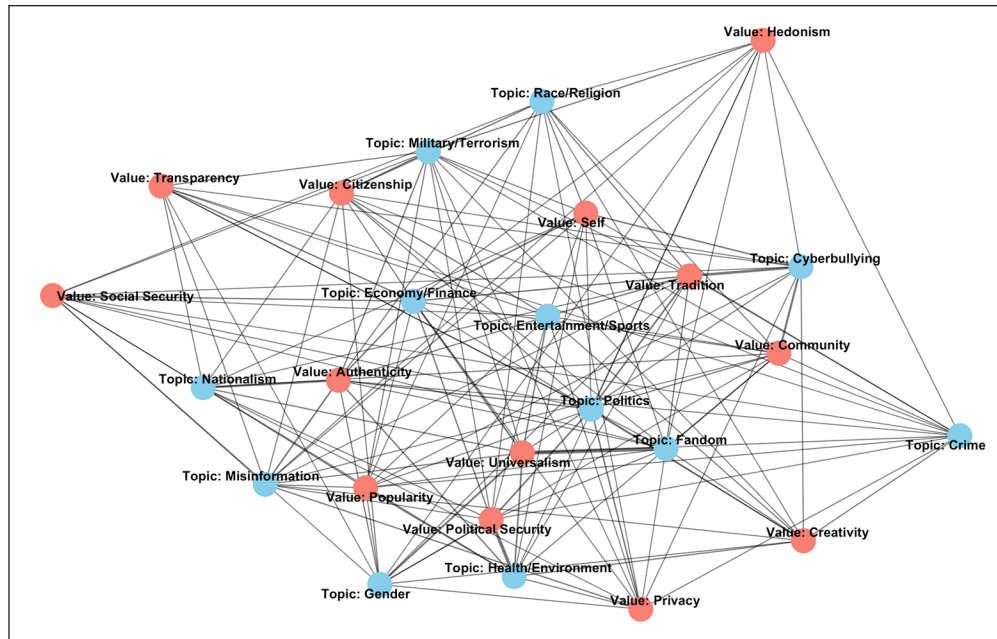


Figure 1. Network visualization of values and topics in X administrative accounts.

greater extent than X (37.18%): $\chi^2(1, N=4,528)=1113.00$, $p < .05$. Moreover, Weibo (37.01%) was also more likely than X (28.63%) to reference social-level values: $\chi^2(1, N=4,528)=34.10$, $p < .05$.

RQ2b examined how values were articulated in the administrative account posts of the two platforms (see Supplemental Appendix D). Results show that the values were framed very differently in X and Weibo. Nine out of the 13 values in X's administrative account posts were framed positively, encouraging users to align their behavior with these values. In contrast, nine values in Weibo's administrative account posts were framed negatively, with promotion achieved by discouraging behaviors that oppose these values. Considering *universalism* as an example, X promoted this value by directly encouraging inter-racial support (XB201801⁴), whereas Weibo addressed the same value by prohibiting hate speech and biases against certain ethnic and national groups (WB202201).

Some values were discouraged by the platforms. For example, in 452 Weibo posts, the value of *popularity* was opposed due to the concern over excessive marketing and the manipulation of fake followers. Twenty-nine Weibo posts criticized the value of *hedonism*, particularly condemning the promotion of flaunting wealth and luxurious lifestyles (WB201701).

When it came to the association between values and topics, X and Weibo were similar in discussing four values: *popularity* was mainly discussed in the context of *economy/finance*, *political security* in *politics*, *social security* in *crime*, and *authenticity* in *misinformation*. For instance, regarding the value of *popularity*, both platforms emphasized the

commercial benefits brought to users due to platform visibility (XB201301; WB202401).

For other values that were mentioned frequently on both platforms, they were associated with different topics. Since Weibo often groups user disputes with false information in the same post, many values appeared alongside the topic of *misinformation*. For example, while *universalism* was discussed with the topics of *gender* (40.35%) and *race/religion* (35.67%) on X, it was frequently co-mentioned with *misinformation* (70.91%) on Weibo. Specifically, Weibo opposed the fabrication of false information to incite hateful speech between groups (@WB202101). In addition, while many X posts ($N=310$, 17.20%) discussed values at an abstract level, the majority ($N=2676$, 98.17%) of Weibo posts articulated values in connection with specific, concrete topics and cases.

Figures 1 and 2 visualize the value-topic networks as represented on the two platforms' administrative account posts. Supplemental Appendix F presents the centrality scores of values and topics in each network. The most central value and topic in X's network are *self* and *entertainment*, respectively. Conversely, the value of *authenticity* and the topic of *misinformation* dominate Weibo's network. Correspondingly, the SVD analysis (see Supplemental Appendix G) shows that the dominant cluster of X's network comprises the nodes: *self*, *entertainment*, and *fandom*, which explains 56.17% of the variance. An example post illustrating this narrative is X's engagement during the Billboard Music Awards, where it actively encouraged self-expression by interacting with the musical stars' accounts (XB201201). Weibo's main cluster includes the nodes of *community*, *authenticity*, *crime*, and *misinformation*, accounting for 77.17% of the variance.

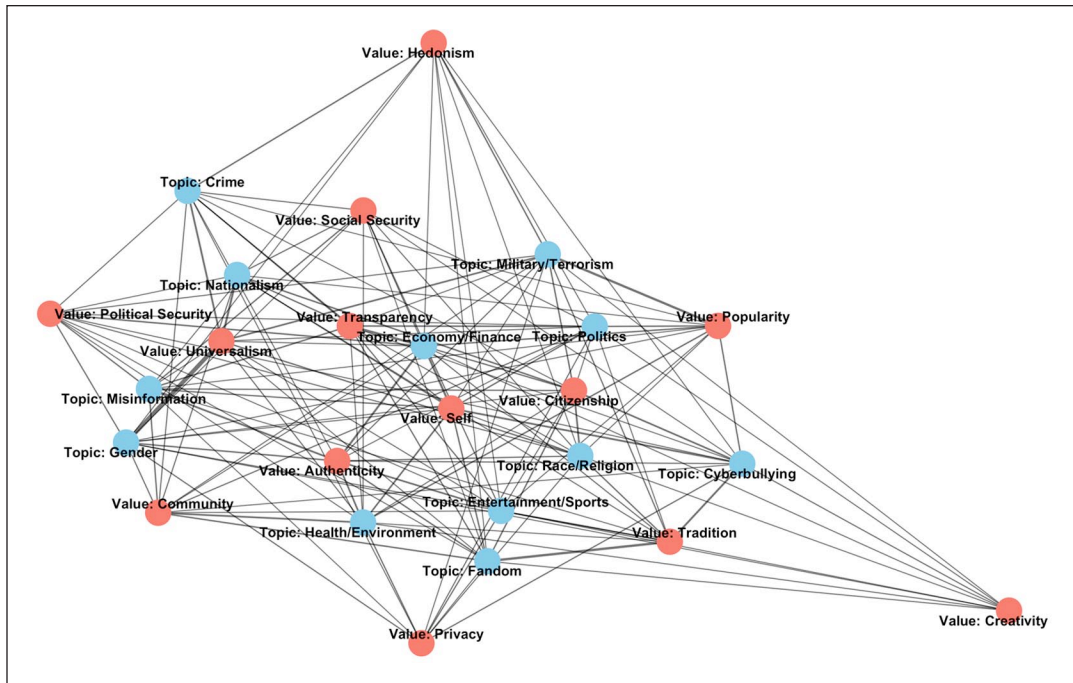


Figure 2. Network visualization of values and topics in Weibo administrative accounts.

Table 3. Platform Value Evolution in Community Guidelines.

X (N = 129)					
	Stage 1 (N=7) 2007–2011	Stage 2 2012–2014	Stage 3 2015–2016	Stage 4 (N=78) 2017–2020	Stage 5 (N=44) 2021–2024
1	Creativity/Privacy /Soc. security / Commun. (42.86%)	N/A	N/A	Commun. (57.69%)	Commun. (45.45%)
2	N/A	N/A	N/A	Privacy (28.21%) Soc. security (28.21%)	Soc. security (40.91%)
3	N/A	N/A	N/A		Authent. (25.00%)
Weibo (N=254)					
	Stage 1 2007–2011	Stage 2 (N=66) 2012–2014	Stage 3 (N=21) 2015–2016	Stage 4 (N=60) 2017–2020	Stage 5 (N=107) 2021–2024
1	N/A	Authent. (69.70%)	Authent. (47.62%)	Authent. (46.67%), Soc. security (46.67%)	Soc. security (57.94%)
2	N/A	Soc. security (39.39%)	Commun. (42.86%)		Commun. (51.40%)
3	N/A	Commun. (34.85%)	Soc. security (28.57%)	Commun. (41.67%)	Authent. (35.51%)

Note. To clarify, the data of X in Stage 1 starts from 2009.

Many posts are part of Weibo’s content moderation efforts since 2019, which lump together illegal, harmful, and misleading information under the label “politically harmful content.” (WB201901)

RQ3 asked about the evolution of values in the community guidelines. As shown in Table 3, *community* and *social security* remained the top two emphasized values

across different stages of X’s community guidelines. *Authenticity* ranked as the third most emphasized value in Stage 5, representing about one-fourth of the guideline context (N=11, 25.00%). As for Weibo’s community guidelines, *authenticity* was the dominant value from Stage 2 to Stage 4, but *social security* became the most mentioned value in Stage 5.

Table 4. A Comparison of Platform Values.

	Weibo vs X guidelines Spearman's rho	Weibo vs X admin account Spearman's rho	Weibo vs. X admin account QAP β
Overall	.66*	.17	.43
First vers.	.57*	N/A	N/A
Stage 1	N/A	N/A	N/A
Stage 2	N/A	-.07	.02
Stage 3	N/A	-.01	.02
Stage 4	.70**	.25	2.34**
Stage 5	.70**	.37	4.85***

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

RQ4 explored the evolution of values reflected in the administrative accounts. As illustrated in Supplemental Appendix H, on X, the value of *self* was emphasized the most throughout the first four stages, which was replaced by *community* in Stage 5. *Social security*, a value not focused on earlier, was the fourth most mentioned value in Stage 5. When it came to Weibo, its mentioned values were relatively stable over time. For example, *authenticity* and *community* remained the top two emphasized values throughout all stages.

RQ5–6 examine the potential convergence of platform values. As shown in Table 4, the platform values emphasized in X's and Weibo's community guidelines were positively and significantly correlated overall ($\rho = 0.66$, $p < .05$). When comparing their different versions over time, the first versions of each platform's community guidelines showed a moderate correlation ($\rho = 0.57$, $p < .05$). In Stages 4 and 5, the correlation strengthens further (both: $\rho = 0.70$, $p < .01$).

Conversely, the values promoted in the two platforms' administrative account posts were not correlated at all in terms of their rank order. When considering the value-topic association, the two platforms' value-topic networks were also not correlated overall. However, the network correlation became positively significant in Stage 4 ($\beta = 2.34$, $p < .01$) and Stage 5 ($\beta = 4.85$, $p < .001$). In other words, although the priority of values promoted on the two platforms differs, the values were articulated in similar ways as they were increasingly tied to the same topics.

Discussion

We undertook a timely and systematic analysis of X's and Weibo's community guidelines and administrative account posts over the last two decades, shedding light on the dynamics of platform value communication across sites of communication, time, and regions. The study reveals that the two platforms have increasingly converged in communicating *about* values in their community guidelines, but have diverged in how they communicate *through* values in administrative posts to legitimize their content moderation in practice.

First, the study demonstrates that X and Weibo, despite operating in distinct political, cultural, and regulatory environments, have significantly aligned in the values prioritized in their community guidelines. Both platforms place strong emphasis on *community*, *social security*, and *authenticity*, with this convergence becoming more pronounced over time. Notably, *community* and *safety* (similar to *social security* in our research) have also been identified as core values in prior research examining other social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (e.g. Chan et al., 2025; Scharlach et al., 2024). Most platforms appear to emphasize creating an engaging community to foster interpersonal relationships, while their focus on security serves to justify content moderation measures and ensure regulatory compliance. As we have argued, a platform's guidelines are often carefully crafted to showcase its CSR commitment. The observed convergence in this study, along with findings from other research, highlights the global alignment of CSR for social media platforms. Across borders, platforms communicate *about* a shared set of values in regulating public expression in line with priorities deemed essential by users, advertisers, governments, and other stakeholders worldwide.

Conversely, X and Weibo *communicate through* different values in their administrative posts to justify their content moderation practices. We identify two key distinctions. First, X was more likely to evoke personal-level values such as *self*, *popularity*, and *citizenship*, whereas Weibo focused more on social-level values, including *social* and *political security*. This distinction aligns with the cultural and political differences between the two platforms' host countries.

In addition, the two platforms' administrative posts articulate values in different ways—X mostly adopts a positive framing (i.e. encouraging A due to value B). For example, it placed significant emphasis on the value of *popularity*, frequently offering recommendations to help individual accounts gain more followers. By invoking this personal value, X implicitly justifies its profit-driven motives, as fostering follower growth directly supports its revenue generation model. X also frequently leverages the value of *self-expression* to encourage expressions on a range of topics: from sports events to elections. Amid a declining user

base in the United States, X has also been actively pursuing overseas markets, promoting free expression globally, and urging foreign governments to uphold this value. For instance, in 2014, Twitter challenged the access ban in Turkey ahead of its national election, emphasizing that “millions of people in Turkey [. . .] turn to Twitter to make their voices heard” (XB201401).

In contrast, Weibo frequently presents values negatively (i.e. prohibiting A due to value B), typically in dealing with concrete cases. For example, Weibo’s administrative posts frequently invoked the value of *authenticity* to justify account penalties, particularly when removing content or accounts deemed to spread misinformation. Moreover, it not only approved but also opposed certain values, such as *popularity*. In the Chinese context, it was invoked as a means of regulating unwanted content in Weibo’s platform governance, arguing that the pursuit of personal fame fuels clickbait and should be curbed. Like X, Weibo is also a highly commercialized platform that previously championed the value of *popularity* and extensively encouraged online traffic. However, it has since scaled back this strategy in response to government directives and the growing real-world consequences, such as scam marketing, it has faced in recent years. In general, Weibo takes a highly interventionist approach to regulating online expression, selectively adjusting values in specific ways to legitimize its actions. In some ways, Weibo’s articulation of values parallels the Chinese government’s strategic use of popular discourses such as “positive energy” (Chen & Wang, 2019), aiming not merely at top-down control, but at encouraging the internalization of state or corporate interests among citizens.

Despite the overall insignificant correlation between values prioritized in X’s and Weibo’s administrative posts, we observe a growing trend of convergence over time (i.e. from $-.07$ to $.37$). In addition, in Stages 4 and 5, the value-topic networks of the two platforms became significantly aligned. In other words, the platforms not only communicate *about* similar values, but also show a tendency to communicate *through* the same value frameworks to justify their governance practices. A significant shift emerged in Stage 5, which began in 2021 and overlaps with Musk’s takeover of Twitter in 2022. In this period, X transitioned from its long-standing emphasis on *self-expression* to prioritizing *community* and *authenticity*, aligning more closely with Weibo. Specifically, X increasingly invoked these two values to justify its content moderation actions targeting hateful speech and misinformation. Also, *social security* became a prominently mentioned value in X’s administrative posts, rising to fourth place in Stage 5 after ranking between 8th and 11th in earlier stages. Returning to the Turkey case, before another national election in 2023, X restricted access to certain content within the country. Two months prior, X stated it had taken action in response to government legal requests, listing Turkey as one of the top-requesting countries. Within the same case, X’s emphasized value shifted from *self-expression* to *social*

security over the decade—seemingly contradicting Musk’s self-claimed stance as a “free speech absolutist.”

To summarize, our study reveals that platform values are not necessarily consistent across different communicative sites, have shifted over time, and have increasingly converged across platforms operating in distinct regional contexts. Building on these findings, we offer three key theoretical contributions. First, we differentiate between platforms communicating *about* and *through* values, an important conceptual distinction supported by empirical observations. Informed by the constitutive approach in corporate communication, both community guidelines and administrative accounts can be considered CSR conduits through which platforms articulate normative commitments and address stakeholder expectations. While the two modes of communication may overlap in practice—for instance, administrative posts may also communicate *about* values when referencing platform rules—maintaining the distinction has proven analytically valuable. It allows us to trace how aspirational values are codified in guidelines versus how they are enacted in practice, revealing potential divergence between stated ideals and applied rationales that might otherwise remain obscured. In this way, platform value communication constitutes a layered discursive process of governance.

Second, our research highlights the interpretive flexibility of platform values over time. While existing research has begun to examine how platform values shift in response to external pressures (Chan et al., 2025), much of this work is confined to relatively short timeframes or isolated case studies. We extend this line of inquiry by adopting an institutional lens to trace how platform values of X and Weibo emerge, adapt, and become stabilized over nearly two decades. Tracing the changing emphasis on different values and topics reveals how platforms selectively foreground societal concerns—such as misinformation, safety, or national identity—not only to respond to public expectations, but also to frame themselves as ethical and competent actors capable of governing digital expression. Our study demonstrates how longitudinal analysis provides a more nuanced understanding of how platforms construct legitimacy over time and addresses persistent methodological gaps in tracking value evolution across communicative domains.

Third, our findings reflect a broader trend of institutional isomorphism in platform governance across regions, primarily evident in how platforms communicate about values, though similar patterns are also observable in communication through values. Building on the previous literature (e.g. Simon, 2024), we suggest that this convergence in the communication field extends beyond the Western context. Our analytical emphasis on isomorphism transcends a binary opposition between China- and US-based platforms by highlighting the potential converging industry and socio-political pressures that shape platform governance across space. This is likely driven by uncertainties brought by emerging

technologies as well as common global challenges, such as the continuing spread of misinformation and the growing demand for a safe and supportive online community.

Our research is limited in several aspects. In our analysis of X's administrative posts, we do not differentiate between content from the @Safety account and the X Blog, though a more nuanced examination could yield additional insights. Beyond these channels, future research should investigate additional sites of value communication. Given that institutional isomorphism involves numerous actors within the same organizational field, future research should consider analyzing a broader range of social media platforms and their asymmetric interdependence, further exploring this trend through interviews with practitioners in platform policymaking and content moderation.

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Author contributions

Tianchan Mao: Conceptualization, data analysis, writing-method & results.

Chris Chao Su: Data analysis, writing-introduction & literature review.

Ngai Keung Chan: Writing-introduction & literature review.

Lei Guo: Conceptualization, writing-all, review and editing.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. We will use “X” to refer to the platform hereafter, but will retain “Twitter” when referring to content related to actions taken before its rebranding to X.
2. To clarify, while Weibo was founded in 2009, the Xblog posts analyzed in this study date back to 2007. Accordingly, the overall dataset covers the period from 2007-2024, encompassing all data sources used in this study.
3. The dataset from Zhao (2025) includes Weibo policy documents collected up to October 2022. As archived versions were no longer accessible via the Internet Wayback Machine, we manually retrieved later documents. The only two available versions were published on 13 March 2024. The *Weibo Community Management Regulations* have since been renamed *Weibo Complaints Handling Guidelines*. This limited availability is noted as a study limitation.
4. All references to the analyzed data can be found in Supplemental Appendix E.

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