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MALAYSIA'S NATIONAL IMAGE PORTRAYED BY SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS VIA DOUYIN: THE DUAL APPEAL OF LIVABILITY

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ABSTRACT

A nation's image constitutes a critical determinant of its international standing, with livability dimensions of national image increasingly shaping migration flows, investment decisions, and tourism attraction. This study examines how China's social media influencers portray Malaysia's livability as a key component of its national image via Douyin. Through qualitative content analysis of 80 videos from prominent social media influencers, this research identifies two predominant framing themes: development-oriented resource allocation and harmonious social atmosphere. The first theme illuminates structural elements underpinning Malaysia's livability proposition, including its education system, favorable business environment, and competitive cost of living. The second theme emphasizes Malaysia's political stability and community spirit, highlighting the nation's social cohesion. These complementary narratives collectively portray Malaysia as a livable destination that successfully balances material development with societal harmony. The findings contribute to the emerging discourse on digital diplomacy and the role of non-state actors in national image construction, offering theoretical insights into how social media influencers shape international perceptions from a personal perspective.

Keywords: social media influencers; national image; Malaysia; livability; Douyin

INTRODUCTION

National image is defined as the overall perception of a country by external audiences (Boulding, 1959). As a vital intangible asset on the global stage, a country's image profoundly influences its economic development, political leverage, and cultural soft power (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015). Social media has proliferated in recent years, transforming how countries present themselves and communicate with global audiences (Anholt, 2009). In an era of intense competition for mobile human capital, financial investment, and symbolic prestige, the ability to project a compelling national image of high quality of life has become a crucial factor in shaping a nation's global standing and appeal (Zenker et al., 2017). Therefore, livability has emerged as a particularly salient dimension that significantly influences how countries are perceived internationally.

Livability generally refers to the overall conditions that affect residents' daily life experience, including individuals' happiness, comfort, and access to basic services in a particular area (Veenhoven, 2000). It reflects the combined effect of many factors, such as the level of economic development, social equity and stability, the quality of education and medical services, and the accessibility of cultural and leisure resources (Okulicz-Kozaryn & Valente, 2019). Studies have

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shown that areas with higher quality of life can not only improve residents' subjective satisfaction, but are also more likely to achieve community stability and sustainable development (Norouzian-Maleki et al., 2015). In the context of increasingly fierce global competition, livability has become an important part of a country's soft power. It not only affects individuals' willingness to migrate and investment decisions, but also becomes an important condition for attracting high-quality talents (Zenker et al., 2013).

As a prominent emerging economy in Southeast Asia, Malaysia has strategically utilized diverse communication channels to shape its national image in recent years, with particular emphasis on its livability advantages. One of the country's key initiatives is the Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) program, which offers eligible foreign nationals a renewable ten-year multiple-entry visa. Since its introduction in 2002, the program has attracted 43,943 principal applicants from 131 countries (Abdul-Aziz et al., 2014). Wong and Musa (2014) highlight that the program's fundamental objectives are to stimulate international migration, investment flows, and tourism expenditure. From an economic perspective, between 2002 and 2019, the MM2H program generated approximately 11.89 billion ringgits for Malaysia's economy through visa fees, real estate and automobile purchases, fixed deposits, and daily consumption (Yee, 2021).

Malaysia places particular emphasis on cultivating its national image within the China's market (Ismail et al., 2024). Since establishing a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2013, bilateral cooperation has intensified across trade, infrastructure development, and cultural exchange (Yu, 2023). The year 2024 marks the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Malaysia, presenting a significant opportunity to deepen bilateral cooperation and enhance Malaysia's international standing (Kuik, 2021). Nevertheless, despite Malaysia's concerted efforts to promote its livability image, substantial challenges persist. For instance, the MH370 flight incident adversely affected the perceptions of safety among China's tourists, prompting some to question Malaysia's security standards (Wang, 2022). Furthermore, prevailing stereotypes on social media often portray Malaysia as underdeveloped or plagued by poor social security, thereby undermining the officially promoted narrative of livability.

In today's increasingly competitive global landscape, traditional approaches to national image communication struggle to meet the contemporary requirements for information dissemination (Dinnie, 2015). Social media platforms, especially Douyin in China, offer new possibilities for the construction and dissemination of national image (Fung et al., 2018). Douyin's instant feedback mechanism, virality and user-generated content enable the shaping of national image to be carried out in a more flexible and dynamic way. Due to China's limited access to mainstream international platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, Douyin plays a leading role in shaping the public's perception of the outside world in China. Compared with Instagram's emphasis on high aesthetics and brand orientation, Douyin focuses more on improvisation, user interaction and content popularization. Its algorithm-driven personalized recommendation system also significantly enhances user engagement, allowing creators to tell culturally relevant stories in a way that is closer to the audience (Lee et al., 2025). These platform characteristics make Douyin a powerful medium for showcasing a country's livability and cultural appeal.

China's social media influencers (SMIs) are playing an increasingly prominent role in shaping how the public perceives Malaysia. Through personalized storytelling and first-hand experiences, they offer audiences a more vivid and relatable image than traditional state-led promotions (Chen et al., 2024). By engaging emotionally and responding in real time to audience feedback, SMIs help ensure that the national image they present remains dynamic and aligned with the interests of their followers. Despite their growing influence, little research has explored how China's SMIs

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portray Malaysia on domestic platforms—especially amid Malaysia's active promotion of the "Malaysia My Second Home" (MM2H) initiative to attract foreign talent and investment (Koh, 2024). To address this gap, the study examines how SMIs construct and portray Malaysia's national image via Douyin, with a focus on the dimension of livability. According to Entman's (2007) framing theory, it considers how SMIs selectively highlight aspects of everyday life to guide public perception . A qualitative content analysis of 80 Douyin videos by China's SMIs was conducted to explore how livability is framed and how these portrayals may influence audience understanding of Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

NATIONAL IMAGE AND LIVABILITY DIMENSION

The concept of national image is commonly traced to Boulding (1956), who introduced it through a social psychological lens while analyzing the Cold War international system. In his definition, Boulding highlighted how a country is perceived by other international actors, underscoring the importance of the "other"—the views held by external publics (Meng, 2020). National image is widely understood as an attitudinal construct that significantly influences a country's global standing and political leverage (Buhmann, 2016). As international perception becomes increasingly vital, many governments are proactively shaping their image through strategic communication and digital diplomacy (Xu et al., 2024). In today's global context, a country's image and reputation often carry more strategic weight than its physical resources (Gilboa, 2012). Research shows that national image shapes foreign publics' overall perceptions (Kunczik, 2003), which in turn affect foreign direct investment (Kunczik, 2002), tourism (Ayoub & Mohamed, 2024), labor market appeal (Mahendru et al., 2024), and international students' educational choices (Hong & Hardy, 2024).

More recently, "livability" has emerged as a key indicator of governance quality and development, playing a growing role in how countries are evaluated by global audiences (Veenhoven, 2024). Although the criteria for livability vary from culture to culture and region to region, in most cases, people generally focus on several key aspects, such as accessibility, inclusiveness (Oberlink, 2006), fairness, sense of security, continuity of life, and participation of residents (Lynch, 1976). Livability shapes a country's image not only in terms of its attractiveness to immigration, tourism and foreign investment, but also affects the attitude and decision-making of the international community at the diplomatic level (Wong & Musa, 2014). When a country is seen as livable, it is often also seen as well-governed, trustworthy and full of opportunities. Therefore, in-depth exploration of how livability affects a country's national image will not only help expand the boundaries of traditional national image research, but also provide a new direction for countries that hope to enhance their attractiveness in global competition.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS PORTRAY NATIONAL IMAGE

According to the definition of De Veirman et al. (2017), SMIs are individuals with a large number of followers in a specific field and are generally regarded as reliable trendsetters. According to their standards, users with more than 21,000 followers can be classified as influential SMIs. In the research fields of brand communication, advertising, and public relations, SMIs have always been

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regarded as an important bridge between brands and consumers, or organizations and relevant interest groups (De Veirman et al., 2017). Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) pointed out that SMIs often establish a long-term, personalized brand relationship with their fans. They not only provide information or entertainment by continuously publishing content and interacting with the audience, but also subtly influence the audience's views and attitudes. The key to SMIs' influence is that they can continuously produce high-quality content and maintain close contact with fans, especially influencing public opinion (Pitafi & Awan, 2024).

In recent years, the role of SMIs has gone far beyond the scope of commercial promotion. They are increasingly involved in discussions on politics, social issues and even international affairs (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020). Compared with official channels, SMIs often share natural, authentic and consistent content, which is easier to gain the trust of the audience and strengthen their credibility in communication (Wang & Weng, 2024). Because social media audiences tend to believe in the "first perspective" from daily life rather than those planned and packaged propaganda content (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020). Through vivid storytelling and personal narratives close to life, SMIs gradually construct an impression of a specific country in the minds of international audiences (Wahab et al., 2025). Despite this, there is still limited research on how SMIs play a role in the construction of national image. Therefore, this study hopes to fill this gap and focus on how China's SMIs on the Douyin platform present the national image of Malaysia, especially in the specific expression of the dimension of "livability".

MEDIA FRAMING

Goffman (1974) was among the first scholars to introduce the concept of framing, defining it as a subjective structure that individuals or organizations use to interpret and understand social events, thereby playing a crucial role in shaping perceptions of the social world. Gitlin （1995）pointed out that the operation of the frame depends on the media's strategic selection and emphasis on certain aspects of reality, and these trade-offs directly affect how the audience understands and interprets events. On this basis, Entman （1996）further systematized the operating mechanism of the media frame. He emphasized that the frame is not only reflected in the screening of content, but also determines which information is more prominent, thereby subtly influencing the agenda setting process. According to his point of view, by highlighting certain elements, the media frame can guide the audience to define the nature of the problem, analyze the causes behind it, form moral judgments, and even think about possible solutions.

As a core element in the public discourse system, the media frame is not only an extension of the development of the frame theory, but also an important tool for giving meaning and influencing public cognition and emotions in political communication（Otmakhova & Frermann, 2025）. In the era of social media, scholars are also paying more and more attention to the operating mechanism of the frame theory in social digital space (Collison-Randall et al., 2024). The biggest feature of social media is that users create content, but users often tend to emphasize certain topics while consciously or unconsciously ignoring other content. This is because users are often guided by their own cultural values and belief systems in the process of understanding and disseminating information. This highly personalized way of information interaction can easily exacerbate the "echo chamber" phenomenon, that is, the information that users are exposed to is usually consistent with their own identity and worldview, or even repeatedly reinforced (Collison-Randall et al., 2024).

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In the past, national narratives were mostly dominated by governments or traditional mainstream media. Today, social platforms make this process more open, allowing influential creators and even ordinary users to actively participate in and influence a country's image in the international community （Güran & Özarslan,2022）. In the evolving media landscape, the power to shape narratives no longer belongs solely to official or mainstream media. Instead, SMIs are playing an increasing role. They emphasize specific facts and provide selective interpretations to construct people's perceptions of a country. As Gonzalez et al. (2024) point out, SMIs often build content around emotions and lifestyles. In the case of Malaysia, SMIs use framing strategies to show the country's livability. They emphasize the aspects of daily life that make Malaysia seem desirable. These choices shape audiences' perceptions of the country's national image.

METHOD

This study adopts the interpretivist research paradigm and uses qualitative content analysis to interpret the data. Specifically, we classify and analyze the text according to the established coding rules (Krippendorff, 1980). In terms of sample selection, the study combines purposive sampling (Neuendorf & Kumar, 2015) and criterion sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) to obtain relevant data. Douyin was selected as the main research platform because of its extensive influence in China's social media, especially in guiding public opinion (Li, 2024). In order to minimize the bias caused by the platform algorithm recommendation, we searched the sample accounts with the keyword "Malaysia" without logging into the account to avoid with the algorithm bias on the recommended content (Bryman, 2016).

The screening of influencer accounts follows three basic criteria. First, each SMIs' account has at least 21,000 followers, which is a key factor in measuring its influence (De Veirman et al., 2017). Second, the account content must focus on the theme of "Malaysia". Researchers checked the video content and the account profile and tags to see "Malaysia" related content. Third, since the construction of national image originates from the way "others" view and understand (Boulding, 1956), and this study focuses on how China's audiences view Malaysia, only SMIs of Chinese nationality are included. This is identified based on their SMIs self-introduction and page information. In the end, a total of 8 accounts met the above conditions and were included in the sample. In the selection of sample video content, influence indicators, especially the number of likes, were considered. The number of likes not only reflects the degree of resonance between the video and the audience, but also reflects its dissemination and social attention (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Videos with a high number of likes usually have a larger audience base and a stronger influence, so they are more valuable for research, especially in the context of national image construction. The top ten videos with the most likes from December 1, 2020 to December 31, 2023 were selected from each account.

To ensure organized data handling, each video was systematically labeled using a numerical coding scheme. For instance, videos from the first account were marked as V1.1 through V1.10, those from the second account as V2.1 through V2.10, and so on, continuing in this pattern up to V8.10. All video content was fully transcribed and analyzed using NVivo 14 (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative content analysis generally involves three significant steps: open coding, category creation, and abstraction (Kyngas & Vanhanen, 1999). This study adopted open coding to identify codes, axial coding to create categories, and selective coding to abstract themes

(Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In the open coding stage, each sentence of the transcribed text was used as the smallest analysis unit, and initial codes were annotated (such as Chinese education, healthcare, MM2H, diploma, etc.) to capture the specific content conveyed by the influencers. In the axial coding stage, the primary codes obtained from the open coding were classified and integrated to identify higher-level conceptual categories. Multiple codes were integrated into the following core categories based on internal connections, such as Education, Business, and Political Stability. During the research process, peer debriefing was employed further to clarify the overlaps and differences between the codes, ensuring the logical clarity and internal consistency of the classification standards. Finally, the above categories were further abstracted into two themes: Development-Oriented Resource Allocation and Harmonious Social Atmosphere. Throughout the process, one researcher completed the coding. To mitigate the researcher's personal bias in the coding and interpretation process, we employed triangulation to ensure the comprehensiveness and diversity of the data (Flick, 2018), as well as reflective memos and peer debriefing (Nowell et al., 2017). After the initial round of coding, the researchers revisited the original data multiple times and refined the thematic categories to ensure greater consistency and accuracy. For ethical considerations, this study was approved by the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (Reference No.: TNC2/UMREC_4117). To protect the identities of the social media influencers involved and reduce any potential risks, all identifiable information was removed during the research process.

RESULTS

Through analysis, this study identified two core themes that affect the perception of Malaysia's livability: development-oriented resource allocation and harmonious social atmosphere. The former emphasizes Malaysia's structural development strategies in improving the education system, business environment and cost of living, which constitute the material basis for attracting immigration and foreign investment. The latter focuses on political stability and community cohesion, showing Malaysia's social atmosphere of maintaining order and inclusion in a diverse society. These two themes complement each other, reflecting the image of a country that attaches equal importance to material development and social relations, and together construct Malaysia's comprehensive attractiveness as an ideal place to live.

DEVELOPMENT-ORIENTED RESOURCE ALLOCATION

Development-oriented resource allocation usually refers to the planned allocation of key resources by a country in the process of promoting socio-economic growth and improving the quality of life (Glaeser et al., 2001). This model is not only reflected in the continuous improvement of infrastructure and public services, but also reflects the overall layout of the national strategy in attracting talent and capital. Related research points out that countries with a sound education system are more likely to obtain transnational talent, capital inflows and international cooperation, thereby enhancing global competitiveness (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2012). For example, by expanding international student recruitment and collaborating with overseas universities, some countries have gradually become regional education hubs (Maringe & Foskett, 2012).

In addition, a business environment with a stable economy, standardized governance, and investment-friendly policies is also critical. The World Bank's Ease of Doing Business study shows that simplified regulatory procedures, reasonable tax mechanisms, and a stable rule of law system help attract foreign direct investment and stimulate economic vitality (Djankov et al., 2002).By maintaining a relatively stable and open investment policy and a sound financial infrastructure, Malaysia has successfully shaped itself into one of the most attractive business nodes in Southeast Asia (Athukorala, 2014).

The cost of living, as a quantifiable indicator of real conditions, also plays a key role in assessing livability. Whether housing is affordable, whether food prices are reasonable, the accessibility of medical services, and daily consumption expenditures constitute a direct reflection of residents' living experience. These specific and measurable living indicators are particularly important for international audiences, including China, because they often want to make judgments based on real and specific data when considering whether to work, study or settle overseas for a long time (Yusuf & Nabeshima, 2006). By framing Malaysia's national image around development-oriented resource allocation, SMIs reinforce its appeal as a modern, livable destination.

EDUCATION SYSTEM

A high-quality and diverse education system not only determines future opportunities for families' children but also reflects a nation's strength in cultural preservation and innovation. For international students and their families considering migration, the quality of education directly influences their relocation decisions (Waters & Wang, 2023). Malaysia has successfully transformed its educational resources into a core component of its livability strategy by developing a diversified education system and offering high-quality international education. This educational diversity is directly rooted in Malaysia's rich ethnic composition, which has resulted in a unique system where Malay-medium, Chinese-medium, and Tamil-medium schools coexist (Raman, 2022). For instance:

> "Before 1952, Malaysian schools were divided into three types: Malay schools, Chinese schools, and Tamil schools (Indian language)." (V4.4)

Joseph (2017) indicates that Malaysia's education system, by respecting and safeguarding the cultural heritage needs of various ethnic groups, has created an inclusive environment in which all groups can maintain their cultural distinctiveness while integrating into Malaysian society**.** This educational pluralism can be considered a crucial mechanism for Malaysia to successfully address the challenges of cultural diversity (Sua & Santhiram, 2017). The completeness of Malaysia's Chinese education system also is a significant manifestation of this diversity. Currently, Malaysia operates over 60 independent Chinese secondary schools, where, apart from instruction in English and Malay, all other subjects are taught in Chinese (Sua & Santhiram, 2017). For example:

> "Malaysia is the country with the most complete Chinese education system outside of China." (V5.6)

> "Malaysians place great importance on Chinese education, with comprehensive systems in place from primary through tertiary levels." (V3.5)

The Chinese education system is one of Malaysia's key factors in its livability, especially for Chinese families with educational needs. Chinese education in Malaysia enhances cultural continuity, mitigates language barriers, and strengthens societal cohesion, making the country more attractive for living. Its growing recognition extends beyond the Chinese community, fostering cross-cultural learning and ethnic integration (Sua & Santhiram, 2017). Moreover, Malaysia's competitive advantage in the international education sector is especially evident in its provision of cost-effective educational options. Many international students choose Malaysia as a study destination not only because of its high educational quality but also due to relatively low tuition fees and living costs (Thoo et al., 2022). As one SMI states

> "High educational standards at affordable costs are the most direct advantage." (V8.9)

This cost-effectiveness is a key factor influencing student mobility, as financial considerations often play a decisive role in international education choices (Bodycott, 2009). Malaysia's increasingly internationalized education system plays a key role in promoting cross-cultural exchanges, which is manifested in diversified academic cooperation, the creation of a cross-cultural learning environment and the improvement of student mobility (Wahidmurni et al., 2024). Schmaus (2016) pointed out that cross-cultural dialogue in the educational process is essential for broadening students' horizons and promoting mutual understanding. While balancing educational quality, economic affordability and cultural diversity, Malaysia continues to consolidate its international image as an ideal place to study and live. The current portrayal of education is dominated by "high quality" and "universality", presenting a positive image, however, have to admit that this structure has the potential to weaken the focus on structural issues. such as the uneven distribution of urban and rural educational resources and the limited educational opportunities for indigenous peoples and marginalized groups. This tendency to simplify may form a single framing, simplifying complex reality into a unified and idealized image.

BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Countries that offer clear regulations, dependable legal systems, and consistent economic activity tend to attract more interest from international investors and business owners (Dinnie, 2015). In turn, it contributes indirectly to improved living standards by promoting employment and economic growth (Mishra et al., 2024). Malaysia's importance in the region, according to many SMIs, lies partly in its resource-rich economy. Items such as petroleum, palm oil, rubber, and even pepper are commonly pointed out as core contributors to its economic strength:

> "Soft gold is also extremely abundant here, such as petroleum, palm oil, rubber, pepper, and so on; its export volume is among the highest in the world." (V8.2)

These resource advantages have enabled Malaysia to forge a distinctive economic development pathway and create attractive investment opportunities. According to Qiang and Jian (2020), the availability of natural resources plays a significant role in shaping a country's competitive advantage, particularly by supporting the growth of industries that depend on these materials. Building on this foundation, Malaysia has expanded its value-added processing industries and integrated supply chains, strengthening its position in the global market through several highly competitive sectors. Lei et al. (2024) argue that countries with diversified resource

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bases are better equipped to cope with global economic uncertainties. This resilience helps cultivate a more stable national image, which is particularly attractive to investors seeking long-term stability. Malaysia's business landscape is also shaped by its steady economic development, which continues to draw attention from international observers. Historically recognized as one of the "Four Asian Tigers," Malaysia's economic trajectory attests to its relatively stable policy environment and sustained growth. SMIs often present comparative economic data to illustrate this point, such as:

> "Malaysia's per capita GDP is over $11,000, which is comparable to domestic (China) levels." (V6.6)

Through such comparisons, people can better understand how Malaysia is doing economically in Southeast Asia. That sense of stability matters, especially to investors thinking about long-term living prospects. According to Schwab and Sala-i-Martin (2017), a nation's economic scale and development level are foundational indicators of its investment attractiveness. Malaysia utilizes these features to demonstrate that its economy is stable and full of opportunities. At the same time, through the MM2H program, the country has implemented clear steps to attract both overseas professionals and capital. Wang (2022) points out that countries can improve how they're seen internationally by adopting smart strategies to draw in talent and capital. Malaysia's MM2H program stands out in this regard, not just by attracting international talent but also by creating space for new ideas and business ventures. As one SMI noted:

> "I chose Malaysia because it had tremendous potential, and I always said it was a country with great prospects." (V8.9)

This perspective, viewed from an investor's standpoint, validates Malaysia's attractiveness as a livable destination. According to Bakar et al. (2022) decisions about where to invest are shaped by a combination of market potential, institutions, workforce availability, and everyday living conditions. The MM2H initiative addresses these needs by offering a welcoming environment, both in terms of policy and lifestyle, that appeals to foreign investors seeking a stable base in Asia. As explicitly stated by some SMIs:

> "I have always emphasized that with Malaysia My Second Home, your money remains yours." (V8.5)

Such policy flexibility and responsiveness are key indicators of a robust business environment (Johnson & Tellis, 2008). Malaysia's flexible policy structure appears to value investor confidence and prioritizes stability in its foreign investment strategy. Bitzenis (2016) argues that when rigid requirements do not bind investors, they are more likely to commit for the long term, as autonomy encourages trust and repeat engagement. Moreover, one SMI observation highlights the organic link between the MM2H program and the entrepreneurial ecosystem:

> "Every year, numerous people come to claim MM2H as a pathway to start their businesses." (V6.8)

This observation underscores the synergistic effect between talent attraction and entrepreneurial support, which is crucial for the development of a dynamic economic ecosystem (Audretsch & Belitski, 2017). Through a multidimensional portrayal that integrates resource advantages, economic achievements, and open policy environments, Malaysia has successfully constructed an appealing image of its business environment. For enterprises and individuals seeking a stable,

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open, and growth-oriented investment environment, Malaysia's strategic approach to resource allocation positions it as an attractive investment destination in the East Asian region. The portrayal of the business environment also reflects the framing bias of "selective exposure." SMIs tend to focus on successful investment cases and institutional convenience while excluding bureaucratic barriers, institutional opacity, and other content that may affect the experience of foreign investors. This frame exclusion may limit the audience's ability to predict potential risks.

COST OF LIVING

The cost of living is directly related to the economic burden of residence, encompassing aspects such as housing, daily expenses, and taxes. Relatively low living costs facilitate the integration of foreigners into local life, thereby enhancing the quality of life and economic adaptability (Akın, 2024). SMIs frequently emphasize Malaysia's cost advantages in areas such as healthcare, food, and housing, which not only enhance the nation's image as a livable destination but also showcase its comprehensive competitive appeal in a globalized context. Firstly, affordable healthcare is a crucial factor in enhancing living standards and alleviating the overall cost burden. Villiers de Villiers Scheepers et al. (2023) found that low living costs, particularly in the healthcare sector, can significantly enhance a country's attractiveness to foreign investment and international talent. This is exemplified in SMIs' content:

> "Residents only pay about one Malaysian Ringgit for a doctor's visit, which is roughly equivalent to 1.7 RM." (V5.9)

Cutler (2004) argues that affordable healthcare services are a crucial element in alleviating financial pressure on households, allowing more resources to be allocated to other areas that enhance quality of life. Secondly, the affordability of housing and everyday consumer goods is another cornerstone of Malaysia's cost competitiveness. Such as:

> "The cost of oil is even lower than that of bottled water." (V6.6)

> "The cost of living is very low; even housing is affordable" (V6.1)

These examples are not mere price comparisons; they reflect a systematic cost advantage in essential areas such as housing, transportation, and daily necessities. In a globalized context, as Rodríguez-Pose et al. (2015) note, differences in the cost of living across regions have become a significant driver of talent and capital mobility. By maintaining relatively low living costs, Malaysia has successfully positioned itself as a highly cost-effective destination for residential purposes. This image not only appeals to international talent seeking a balance between quality of life and affordability but also provides a solid foundation for the success of initiatives such as the MM2H program. However, this type of framing has the potential to ignore the potential impact of factors such as class, occupation, and cultural differences that affect the experience of living costs. For example, the low cost of medical services is presented as an advantage that "benefits all people," but in fact, this narrative is more closely aligned with the experience of a specific middle-class expatriate group rather than encompassing lower-class labor migrants or local low-income groups. This framing not only obscures social stratification but may also mislead potential immigrants about their expectations of actual living conditions.

HARMONIOUS SOCIAL ATMOSPHERE: POLITICAL STABILITY AND COMMUNITY SPIRIT

In this study, "social atmosphere" mainly refers to the collective attitudes, cultural values and interpersonal interaction patterns that are prevalent in a country. These factors are usually shaped by the interaction between the political system and social relations, and invisibly affect people's perception of security, belonging and overall life happiness. In Malaysia, relative political stability and community spirit have jointly built a harmonious social order, which has become one of the core factors supporting its livability. Political stability provides institutional guarantees for social operations, helps to achieve policy continuity, fair governance and the maintenance of public order. When citizens generally believe that the law is implemented and the leadership has direction and coherence, their trust in the system will also increase (Kaufmann et al., 2011) . In Malaysia, the outside world generally associates political stability with a strong leadership style and a clear diplomatic strategy, which further strengthens its image as a "safe and orderly country" in the international community. Some studies have pointed out that this political stability not only supports the country's economic growth, but also helps to enhance social cohesion and the overall attractiveness of the country (Yekeen & Misnan, 2024).

However, what really builds social identity and a sense of belonging is the "community spirit" rooted in daily life. This spirit is reflected in the mutual assistance of neighbors, the daily integration of multiple cultures, and collective participation in community activities. In a country composed of multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups, such as Malaysia, this kind of social warmth permeates almost every ordinary scene. It is these specific and micro interpersonal connections that constitute the foundation of social trust and stability (Putnam, 2000). When political stability meets this community spirit, the result is a social environment that feels both secure and welcoming. Through SMIs emphasize this balance, shaping Malaysia's national image as a country that offers both safety and a warm, inclusive social atmosphere.

POLITICAL STABILITY

Scholars have long argued that a stable political environment reduces social conflict and governance risks (Hegre & Nygård, 2015), thereby facilitating sustained investment in infrastructure and public services, enhancing citizens' quality of life, and attracting foreign investment through a predictable and reliable governance framework (Jensen, 2003). SMIs further emphasize this stability through positive portrayals of the current government, particularly the expectations surrounding the leadership of Prime Minister Anwar. One SMI states:

> "This term of Prime Minister Anwar is, for me, the most promising... the better the economy, the happier I am doing business and living here." (V8.9)

Political stability provides the necessary foundation for implementing long-term economic strategies, thereby facilitating sustainable development (Qamruzzaman & Karim, 2024). In the era of deep globalization, the decision-making capabilities and economic policy directions of national leaders are critical, particularly for Southeast Asian countries that are highly dependent on foreign investment and international trade. Anwar's leadership, perceived by SMIs as

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"promising," directly influences Malaysia's global economic standing and its ability to attract foreign direct investment.

Furthermore, in the context of Malaysia's extensive international relations, the relationship between Malaysia and China is a significant focus for SMIs. Although the discussion of Sino-Malaysian diplomatic relations may not dominate the narrative, its presence carries considerable communicative weight, especially in the context of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Malaysia in 2024. Malaysia's diplomacy with China is often symbolized through elements such as "panda diplomacy," which plays a key role in deepening bilateral friendship and economic cooperation. For example, some SMIs vividly describe scenes at Malaysia's Panda Conservatory while also expressing optimistic expectations for Sino-Malaysian international relations:

> "China and Malaysia are like one family; may our friendship last forever. Next year marks the 50th anniversary of our diplomatic ties, and I hope both countries continue to prosper." (V6.4)

Additionally, SMIs convey Malaysia's diplomatic stance by emphasizing its independent, balanced, and pragmatic foreign policy:

> "It does not engage in the power struggles of major countries, nor does it bully its smaller neighbors. It is a solid Third World country." (V4.3)

Such a diplomatic posture further reinforces Malaysia's national image as an independent, rational, and stable international actor. This reputation is beneficial both for its national image and for creating a favorable investment environment. Through positive evaluations of its political stability and optimistic projections for future development, SMIs effectively communicate to China's audiences that Malaysia is a politically stable nation. This national image helps attract China's tourists and investors while also fostering broader bilateral cooperation, thereby further solidifying Malaysia's international standing and regional influence.

COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Community spirit is the set of shared values that exist within a society (Etzioni, 1994). In Malaysia, this cultural trait plays a critical role in fostering high levels of social cohesion and trust among community members. When a society generally adheres to ethical standards and mutual assistance, social networks and neighborly relations tend to be more robust, reducing social friction and crime rates (Bruhn, 2009). Such an environment not only enhances the efficiency of public services and resource allocation but also creates a warm and harmonious atmosphere that improves the overall quality of life. These SMIs consistently highlight the warmth, friendliness, and inclusivity of Malaysians, portraying a society where cultural diversity is embraced in everyday life. For instance:

> "Every Malaysian I have met is very kind and friendly." (V6.9)

> "The Malay friends I met in Malaysia are adorable and friendly. I recall when I first arrived in Malaysia, I mentioned that I wanted to experience wearing a headscarf, and my Malay friends introduced it to me, even teaching me how to wear it. I also

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> wore traditional Malay attire to school with them, and they introduced me to delicious local food." （V1.7）

The effective construction of a national image is closely linked to harmonious interactions among citizens (Boulding, 1956). Malaysia's social atmosphere, characterized by the peaceful coexistence of its multi-ethnic communities, offers a safe and congenial living environment for both locals and expatriates. This inclusive atmosphere reduces the cultural adaptation challenges faced by outsiders, thereby enhancing the country's overall livability. Furthermore, the resilience, dedication, and collective spirit of the Malaysian Chinese community are deeply embedded in the nation's social and economic fabric. As one SMI notes:

> "When ten people came to Malaysia, two became prosperous, so the first thing they did was build Chinese schools. This reflects the contributions and sacrifices of the older generation of Malaysian Chinese." （V8.4）

This statement highlights the strong sense of social responsibility within the Malaysian Chinese community. Instead of focusing solely on making money for themselves, many people choose to give back by supporting community programs, volunteering, or helping others get started. This kind of involvement echoes what Putnam's (2000) described as the power of civic participation in building stronger social ties. When people look beyond their own goals and care about others' well-being, they help create a more supportive, livable society, a point also emphasized by (Coleman, 1988), who saw such networks as crucial to social capital.

The Malaysian Chinese community exemplifies this principle through sustained investments in education, local businesses, and community welfare, which generate long-term opportunities for future generations. In contexts where education is prioritized, and families can maintain economic stability, there is often a greater capacity for a country to grow in a consistent and balanced manner (Luthans et al., 2007). This habit of giving back—deeply embedded in cultural and social practice—has arguably become part of what makes Malaysia a more livable country. It helps shape an environment where both citizens and newcomers can find not only opportunities but also a sense of belonging in a forward-thinking, community-oriented society.

Moreover, the harmonious coexistence and mutual respect among Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups foster a distinctive form of social capital. This social capital, manifested in everyday interactions and extending to economic and cultural exchanges, plays a critical role in shaping the nation's livability. As Coleman (1988) explains, social capital is rooted in interpersonal networks that support not only personal growth but also the advancement of society as a whole. This theme also reflects the positive frames of cultural inclusiveness and coexistence of diversity. However, in the media framing, SMIs whether consciously or unconsciously, remain silent on conflicting issues, thereby weakening the public's awareness of potential social contradictions.

In conclusion, the two themes identified in this study—development-oriented resource allocation and harmonious social atmosphere—form an internally consistent narrative of livability. They do not operate in isolation but reflect a dynamic relationship between material conditions and social experiences. While the former supports structural stability and long-term development, the latter fosters social cohesion and emotional well-being. Together, they present Malaysia as a balanced and sustainable living environment. To ensure the credibility of these interpretations, the analysis was supported by reflective memos and peer debriefing, which enhanced transparency and strengthened the theoretical foundation of the study.

CONCLUSION

This study employed qualitative content analysis to examine how SMIs on Douyin frame Malaysia's livability, revealing how livability functions as a crucial dimension of Malaysia's national image in attracting global migration, investment, and tourism. Two core themes emerged in the construction of Malaysia's livability: Development-oriented resource allocation and harmonious social atmosphere. The first theme highlights Malaysia's structured approach to development, where the education system, business environment, and cost of living emerge as key factors influencing the nation's appeal as a livable destination. The second theme encompasses political stability and Malaysia's harmonious community spirit. These complementary themes collectively shape Malaysia's image as a livable nation in the global imagination. Understanding these dynamics carries significant theoretical and practical implications for enhancing Malaysia's attractiveness and competitiveness on the international stage, particularly in shaping its image within the crucial China's market.

From a theoretical perspective, SMIs, as decentralized frame construction subjects, selectively emphasize characteristics related to livability (such as social resources, convenience of life, and cultural inclusiveness), thereby expanding the application boundaries of frame theory. These SMIs construct consistent and emotionally resonant narrative frames through the strategic amplification and repetition of favorable narratives, which not only influence the audience's perception of Malaysia's livability but also significantly contribute to the symbolic construction of the national image in the digital space. From a practical perspective, this study also enriches the discourse of nation brand construction and demonstrates the potential of livability as a multidimensional soft power resource. Through the visual representation of daily life, public services, and community values, SMIs promote brand associations with Malaysia's positive national image, thereby expanding the traditional national brand model beyond economic or political capital. At same time, it is also necessary to critically examine the selective presentation and oversimplification that may exist in their content. Although the aspects of national experience they emphasize can effectively attract international attention, they may also inadvertently conceal complex social realities, leading audiences to misjudge the country's actual situation.

Looking ahead, Malaysia can further strengthen its national image as a "livable country" from multiple aspects. Publishing multilingual, high-quality short videos on social media platforms can not only fully demonstrate the country's living environment and development potential, but also help to enhance its recognition and attractiveness on a global scale. In addition, continuous improvements in basic public services such as education, medical care and housing, and the simultaneous optimization of the support system for immigrants and investors will help to improve the long-term sustainability of overall livability. Cross-cultural exchanges and promoting interaction between communities will also help to build a more inclusive and cohesive living environment. At the same time, the government can provide support in terms of policies and resources to encourage local enterprises, small and medium-sized companies and non-governmental organizations to actively participate in international promotion, presenting a more authentic and diverse image of Malaysia from different perspectives. In order to reach international audiences more effectively, it is also necessary to develop targeted communication strategies and tailor content according to different cultural backgrounds and information preferences, so as to further enhance Malaysia's attractiveness and competitiveness on the global stage.

Nevertheless, this study acknowledges several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the exclusive focus on Douyin as a single platform constrains our understanding of how Malaysia's national image is constructed across diverse digital ecosystems. Future research could expand the scope to include other prominent China's social media platforms such as RedNote, Weibo, and Bili Bili to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Malaysia's national image construction across different digital environments. Second, analyzing content from only eight Douyin accounts within a specific timeframe may not fully capture the dynamic evolution of Malaysia's national image across digital platforms, thereby limiting our ability to observe longitudinal changes in Malaysia's image construction. Future studies could adopt a more extended temporal framework to explore these dynamic changes more thoroughly.

Furthermore, while this study focused specifically on framing Malaysia's livability, subsequent research could explore additional dimensions of media framing and investigate audience reception. Examining how these frames resonate with and influence China's audiences' perceptions would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of these national image construction efforts. Additionally, comparative studies examining how different ASEAN nations are framed in terms of livability could yield important insights into regional nation branding strategies and competitive positioning.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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