

# Sourcing Deception and Influence by Design: How the CCP Uses TikTok to Fight the Trade War

## Executive Summary

On April 2, 2025, U.S. President Trump announced the imposition of a reciprocal tariff policy that imposed a raft of new tariffs on global trading partners, including a 145% duty on goods imported from China. In the weeks following, mainstream media outlets have reported on a viral social media trend urging global consumers to buy directly from Chinese manufacturers in order to cut-out the “middleman”, i.e. major Western brands, in order to buy significantly cheaper products.<sup>1</sup> Though trade experts and brand ambassadors have noted that these videos are misleading and are likely advertising counterfeit and replica goods,<sup>2</sup> they have received exposure of >50M views on TikTok alone while Alibaba became the #1 app downloaded on iOS in the U.S.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond merely promoting counterfeit and replica goods, many of these videos amplify a broader narrative that it is Western companies, not Chinese manufacturers, who are truly deceiving and overcharging consumers. By framing Chinese suppliers as the authentic and fair alternative to alleged Western exploitation, the campaign taps into consumer resentment and distrust toward Western corporations, subtly shifting blame and deflecting scrutiny away from Chinese commercial practices. Crucially, all of this is unfolding on TikTok, a platform widely recognized as a form of persuasive technology, where algorithmically optimized content is specifically designed to influence user perceptions, shape attitudes, and drive behavioral change at scale. And it could be working: TikTok users are increasingly engaging with this content, with thousands of “hearts” and comments sections inundated with highly engaged anti-Western commentary like “China is dismantling capitalism in the USA and I am so happy for us” and “This is how you win a trade war.”

In the first two weeks of this campaign, TikTok videos tagged with the #sourcing received hundreds of cross-platform millions of views with content featuring Chinese factory tours and sourcing tips. As a result, this trend has become a recurring feature on the “For You” pages of hundreds of thousands of American users, catapulting a network of previously unknown Chinese influencers with a combined following in the millions into the mainstream and global media spotlight.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.techtimes.com/articles/310026/20250416/chinese-suppliers-troll-us-shoppers-cheaper-luxury-products-tiktok-are-they-fake.htm>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.forbes.com/sites/gennacontino/2025/04/16/those-tiktok-wholesale-finds-from-china-from-birkins-to-birkenstocks-are-probably-fake-heres-why/>

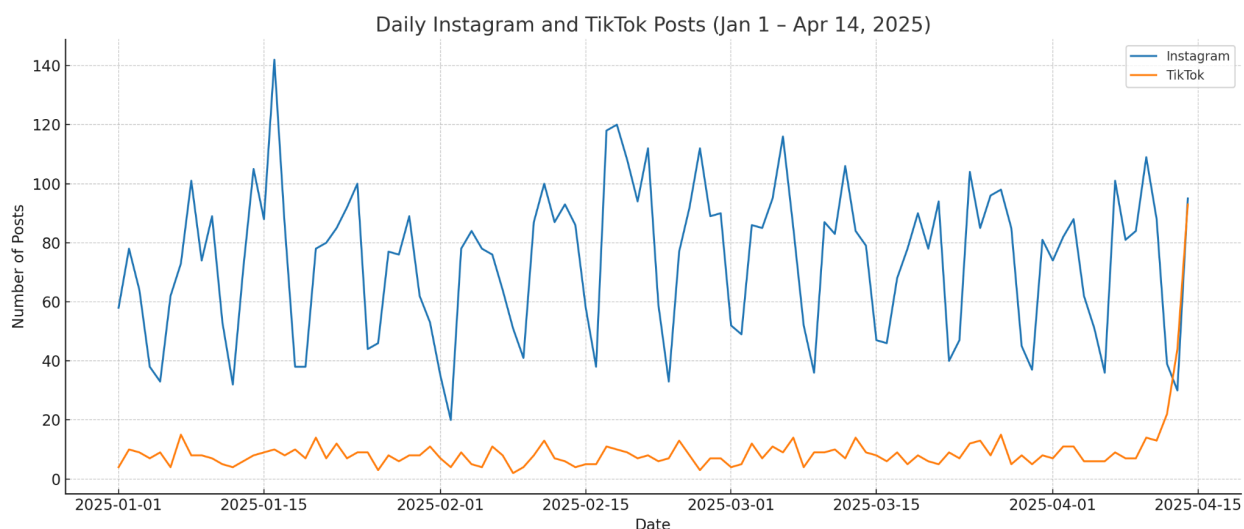
<sup>3</sup><https://www.tipranks.com/news/alibaba-baba-hits-number-one-in-the-sales-charts-as-americans-go-bargain-hunting>

This digital trend that markets itself as organic and pro-consumer appears, after closer analysis, just the opposite. This brief presents a data-driven analysis of the so-called “Shopping in China” campaign, a top-down initiative implemented by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the immediate aftermath of the U.S.’ newly unveiled reciprocal tariff policy. Notably, just days after the trend began to surge on TikTok, *People’s Daily*, the official newspaper of the CCP, announced the launch of a **“major consumption promotion campaign to foreigners,”** reinforcing that this was not a grassroots movement but part of an orchestrated effort to redirect global consumer behavior. Despite several media outlets covering the viral sourcing trend, few if any acknowledged its likely connection to this officially sanctioned campaign. Key findings of this brief include:

- The recent virality behind the #sourcing TikTok trend represents a social media vector of the CCP’s Ministry of Commerce’s “Shopping in China” campaign.
- Open-source profiling of key TikTok influencers amplifying this campaign reveals a number of ties to Chinese big-tech companies that are linked to the CCP propaganda and intelligence apparatuses.
- Reviews and feedback from customers of the China-based suppliers advertised in the TikTok campaign suggest that they are promoting tariff evasion and counterfeit smuggling.
- User journeys conducted on TikTok testing the algorithmic stickiness of exposure to target content showed more than 4X higher “stickiness” for #sourcing videos in users’ For You feed relative to control (“NHL”) content.

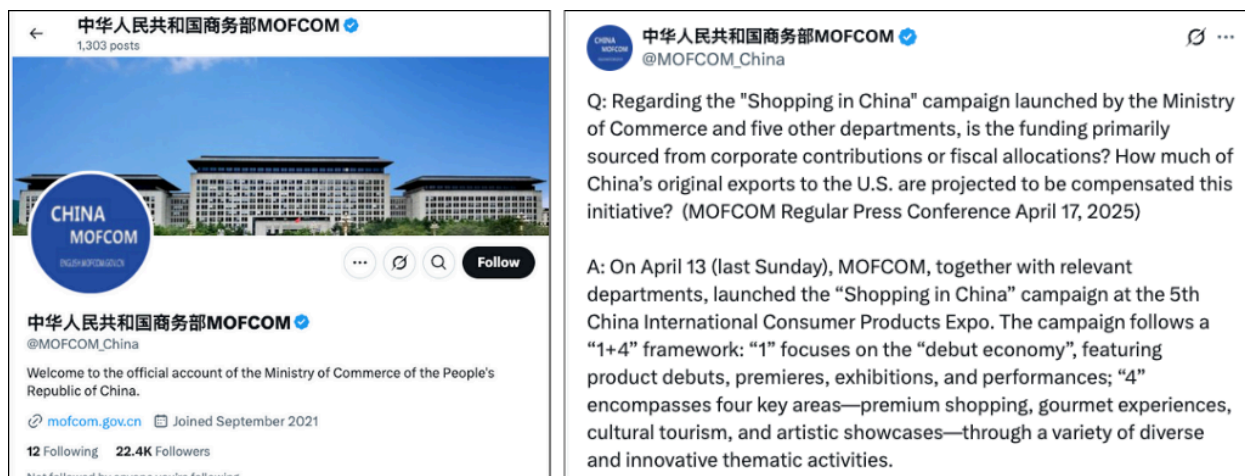
### “Shopping in China” Kickoff and Cross-Platform Spread

The ecosystem of TikTok influencers advertising the services of China-based sourcing agents to connect Western brands with local manufacturers has existed since at least 2023. However, within a week of the U.S.’ announcement of the reciprocal tariff policy on April 2, 2025, TikTok content measuring #sourcing enjoyed a viral breakout in terms of both post volume and net exposure.



The time series graph above shows Instagram (IG) versus TikTok (TT) YTD post volume for mentions of #sourcing.<sup>4</sup> On and after April 10, TikTok post volume increased by an order of magnitude whereas chatter on Instagram remained relatively constant. On IG, mentions of #sourcing assumes a semi-regular sinusoidal pattern reflecting perturbations between weekdays and weekends. In stark contrast, the TT dataset illustrates historically lower levels of chatter followed by a clear inflection point on April 10, 2025 that is indicative of campaign kickoff and a corresponding surge in traction for posts mentioning #sourcing.

The following week, CCP governmental sources confirmed the launch of the so-called “Shopping in China” campaign. An X post from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce’s official account states that the campaign was launched on April 13th and is backed by a number of governmental departments. The campaign is targeting not just China’s domestic market but also global consumers, who are warmly invited, “to visit China, purchase premium Chinese goods, savor Chinese culinary delights, and admire China’s natural and cultural wonders, collectively experiencing the unique appeal of ‘Shopping in China.’”<sup>5</sup> This official CCP campaign launch directly preceded the Canton Fair, China’s oldest and largest trade fair, which is currently being held from April 15-May 5, 2025. On April 11th, the official newspaper of the CCP, the People’s Daily, also announced a “major consumption promotion campaign for foreigners,” to be launched on April 13th.<sup>6</sup>



These videos have also trended beyond the TikTok ecosystem and are being amplified across multiple social media platforms. Sourcing directly from China is frequently discussed in a robust Reddit “replicas” ecosystem with more than 2 million cumulative members across large, active subs including [r/FashionReps](#) (1.4M members), [r/1688Reps](#) (76K), [r/Flexicas](#) (144K), [r/weidianwarriors](#) (68K), [r/RepladiesDesigner](#) (183K).

<sup>4</sup> This time series analysis was performed on a sample set of nearly 15K IG posts and nearly 5K TT posts.

<sup>5</sup> [https://x.com/MOFCOM\\_China/status/1913166550565326988](https://x.com/MOFCOM_China/status/1913166550565326988)

<sup>6</sup> <http://en.people.cn/n3/2025/0411/c90000-20300564.html>

Alongside sustained chatter on Reddit, the target #sourcing videos have been circulated virally on X. Initial seeding on X was performed by influencer accounts that generated >50M views for target videos that originated on TikTok. Thereafter, bot-like accounts on X began amplifying the video content with the identical caption, “China just killed the luxury goods industry. It's gone, there is no coming back.”<sup>7</sup> This multi-platform spread reflects the campaign's layered approach, which combines authentic engagement, coordinated promotion, and inorganic amplification to reach global audiences and normalize alternative sourcing practices. We further note that TikTok, alongside other major social media platforms (IG, FB, X), is banned for users based in mainland China barring specific exceptions granted by government-linked internet service providers.



When viewed sequentially, these data points create a catalyst flow that is highly suggestive of a coordinated, top down campaign:

- April 2: Imposition of significant tariffs on imports from China to the U.S.
- April 10: Content advertising direct #sourcing from Chinese manufacturers for Western brand goods kicks off on TikTok, and quickly exhibits cross-platform breakout.
- April 13: The CCP Ministry of Commerce announces the launch of the “Shopping in China” campaign.
- April 15: China’s largest trade fair kicks off, and is attended by a number of the #sourcing influencers who drove social media virality in the days prior.<sup>8</sup>

### Evidence of Coordination

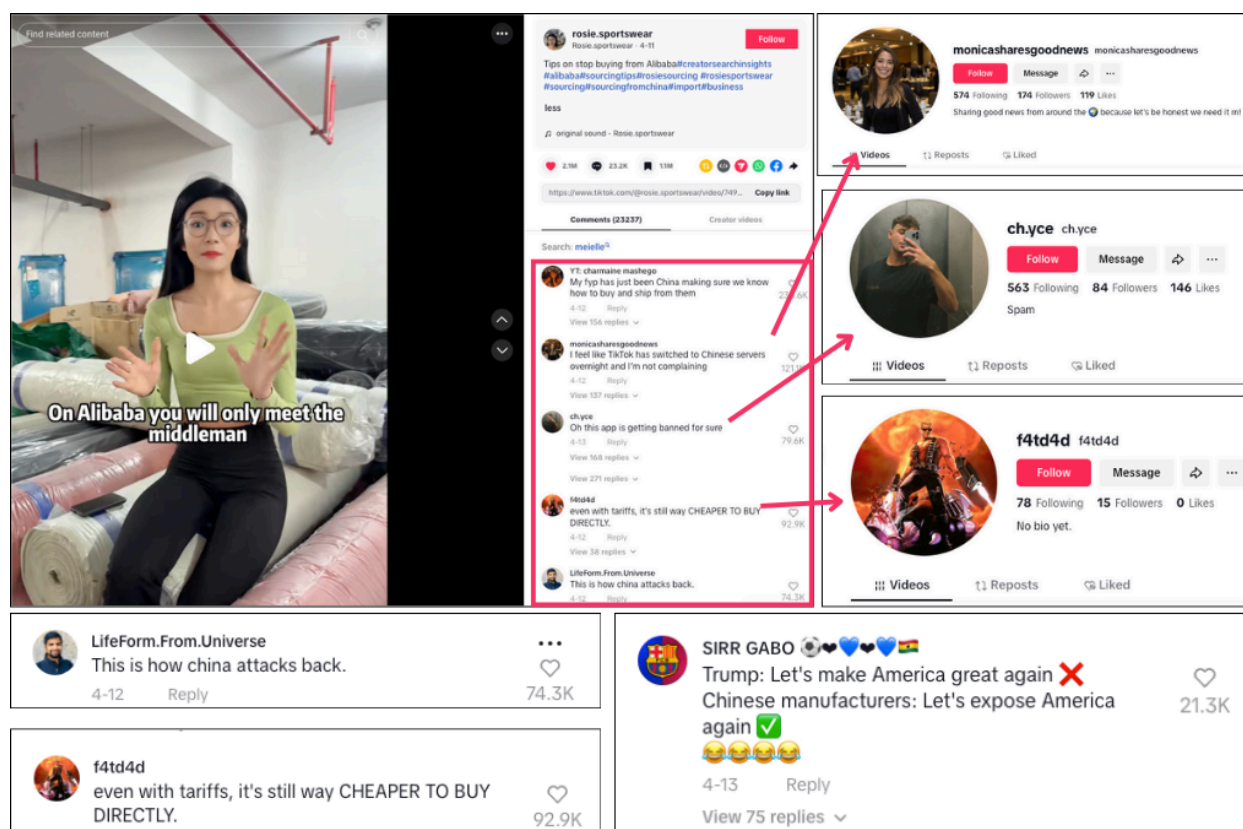
A TikTok video that helped catalyze the #sourcing trend on social media was posted on April 10 posted by user @rosie.sportswear, an account managed by a young Chinese woman who

<sup>7</sup> [https://x.com/search?q=china%20killed%20luxury%20goods&src=typed\\_query&f=live](https://x.com/search?q=china%20killed%20luxury%20goods&src=typed_query&f=live)

<sup>8</sup> <https://cief.cantonfair.org.cn/>

claims, “❤️8 years [experience] specializing on sportswear.”<sup>9</sup> The target video has received nearly 17M views to date and >3M likes, comments, and shares.

Top liked comments included several that evoked a clear pro-CCP, anti-US take on the reciprocal tariff policy. In fact, three of the top 5 most-liked comments to the target video advance this precise narrative, and were posted by suspicious accounts that have **not** uploaded any original content, have <200 followers, lack account bios, and lack unique or verifiably non-AI generated profile pictures. We observed this same amplification profile across several dozen dedicated #sourcing influencer accounts. These top 5 comments accumulated over 600,000 likes and advanced a cynical anti-American, anti-capitalist narrative that the video’s 17M viewers were likely exposed to.



In addition to the immediate viral exposure and in-thread commentary critical of the U.S. we observed in @rosie.sportswear’s target post, the content of the video clip itself also mirrors a broader pattern that evidences significant coordination across the #sourcing ecosystem on TikTok. In fact, we identified over a dozen #sourcing influencers using the exact same script–“Stop buying on Alibaba, you’ll only meet the middleman who raises prices sky-high. Here are [n] better websites...” After voicing the above script, the target influencers generally recommend a number of alternate (non-Alibaba) Chinese online retailers and manufacturers.

<sup>9</sup><https://www.tiktok.com/@rosie.sportswear/video/7491837551662091550>



These findings point to the ongoing use of a highly structured video template that has been in circulation since at least 2023.

One of the first users we identified using this Alibaba script was @wholesale.master (220K followers), who employed it in a video posted on April 27, 2023 from the Canton Fair.<sup>10</sup> Via reverse image-to-text and then translation from Mandarin to English of his Canton Fair entry tag, we were able to establish that @wholesale.master is a registered buyer for Global Sources, which crunchbase describes as, “a Hong Kong-based B2B media company facilitating trade between China and the world through English language media.”

This telling relationship between #sourcing influencers on TikTok and Chinese big tech companies is not isolated. A similar method was used to ID two prominent other #sourcing influencers – @lunasourcing (1.1M followers) and her partner @lizchinasourcing (316K Followers) – who have posted several viral TikTok videos (>1M views) in recent weeks and are highly visible drivers of the campaign. On April 15, Luna and Liz uploaded a clip together from the Canton Fair wearing matching entry tags. Image-to-text transcription revealed that both influencers are employees of LinkedME, a Chinese company that, according to Crunchbase, “provides integrated big data intelligence services.”<sup>11</sup>





### Global Sources

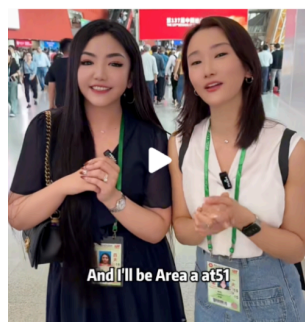
Growth Score **92** ↑ CB Rank **169832** ↑ Heat Score **91** ↑

Global Sources is a Hong Kong-based B2B media company facilitating trade between China and the world through English language media.

Acquired by **B** Blackstone Group Founded 1970 Delisted

Aberdeen, Hong Kong Island, Hong Kong 1001-5000

[www.globalsources.com](http://www.globalsources.com) [in](#)





### LinkedME

Growth Score **63** ↑ CB Rank **126823** ↓ Heat Score **89** ↑

LinkedME provides integrated big data intelligence services.

Founded Dec 19, 2014 Private Series A Haidian, Beijing, Ch

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Big Data Marketing

This finding that several leading #sourcing influencers are not the organic freelancers but rather employees of Chinese marketing intelligence companies further indicates top-down state involvement. It also sheds light on how Chinese big tech is effectively leveraging social media

<sup>10</sup><https://www.tiktok.com/@wholesale.master.com/video/7226716523354705157?q=stop%20buying%20on%20alibaba&t=1745332495441>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.crunchbase.com/organization/linkedme#>

virality on another Chinese-controlled arena (TikTok) to perform digital marketing and advertising for Chinese manufacturers and exporters. These overlaps illustrate how Chinese government policy, big tech, and manufacturing sectors are likely collaborating to promote a top-down campaign ultimately aimed at mitigating the impact of newly imposed U.S. tariffs on the Chinese economy.

### Deceptive Advertising and Tariff Evasion Tactics

The fact that several leading influencers in the #sourcing campaign are using an identical script for video clips or are employed by Chinese marketing intelligence firms testifies to top-down coordination of messaging, tactics, and objectives. One such TikTok account that used the Alibaba script and #sourcing in a viral video from April 6—just days before the significant increase in TikTok post volume—was posted by @nihaojewelry, the official account for a “one-stop online jewelry and clothing wholesale” that advertises “worldwide shipping.”<sup>12</sup> Analysis of this profile produced evidence pointing at the use of deceptive advertising techniques alongside potential tariff evasion tactics.

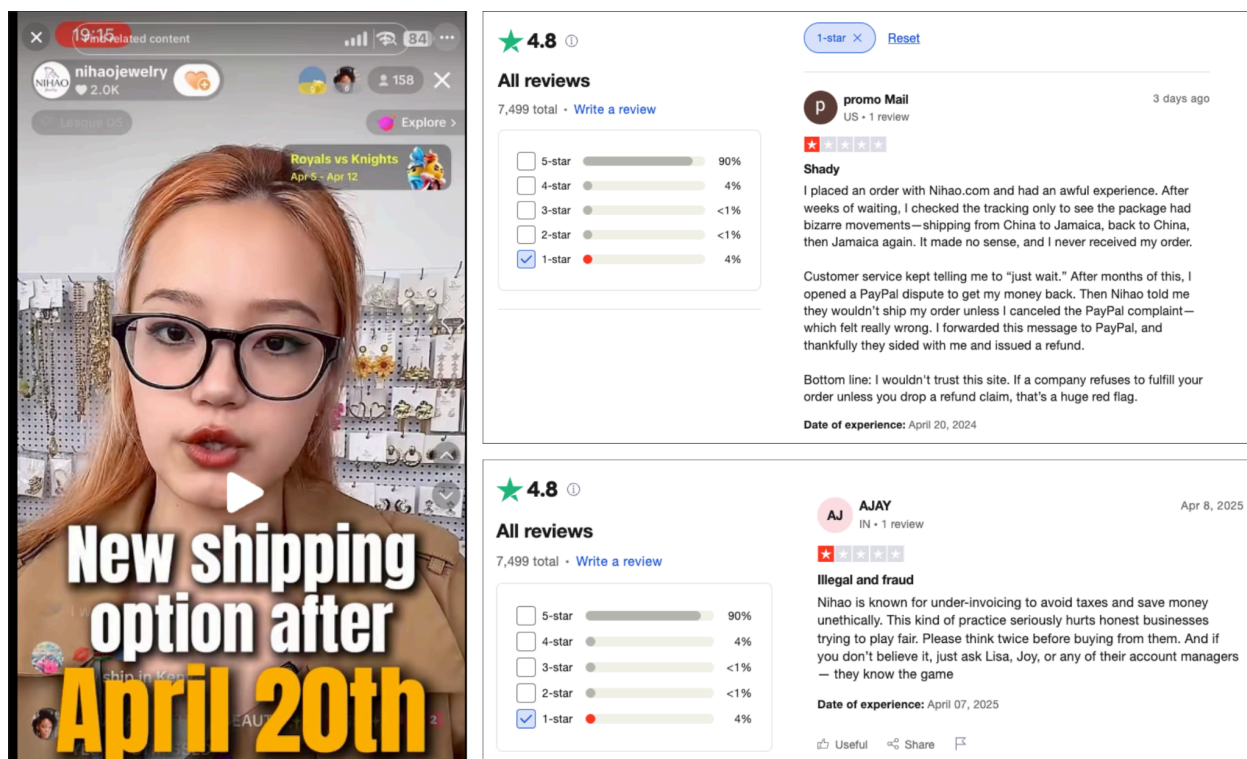
While @nihaojewelry’s more recent content flow features a young Chinese influencer in a warehouse or factory setting, videos prior to April 1, 2025 assume a very different format and aesthetic. For instance, a pair of videos posted back-to-back on March 6 and 8, 2025, showcase AI-generated deepfakes of American young women advertising Nihao’s products. However, these two videos did not receive significant traction. In fact, the average number of views for the 20 videos posted by @nihaojewelry since April 1 and its embrace of the more formulaic video format was 780K, compared to just 11K for the 20 videos posted prior to April 1 and the marketing pivot. This significant delta after April 1st may be indicative of TikTok’s selective, algorithmically-propelled amplification of #sourcing content in the wake of the reciprocal tariff imposition on April 2, 2025.



<sup>12</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@nihaojewelry>

Beyond its use of AI deepfakes as a deceptive marketing tactic, in April 2025 Nihao Jewelry was also accused of using triangle shipping and invoice fraud by disgruntled customers, likely as a technique to evade newly imposed tariffs. While the use of fake five-star reviews on sites like TrustPilot is unfortunately widespread,<sup>13</sup> analysis of lower reviews offers a more organic perspective into customer (dis)satisfaction.

In this regard, two recently posted one-star reviews to Nihao's TrustPilot profile are revealing. One US-based customer alleged his package was engaged in triangle shipping from China to Jamaica, an oft-used tariff evasion tactic. In another review from April 8, another user alleges invoice fraud likely used for tariff evasion via the de minimis loophole. In an April 15 video, @nihaojewelry even uploaded a video explaining that it is exploring "new shipping methods" to minimize costs to customers in light of the new tariff barriers.

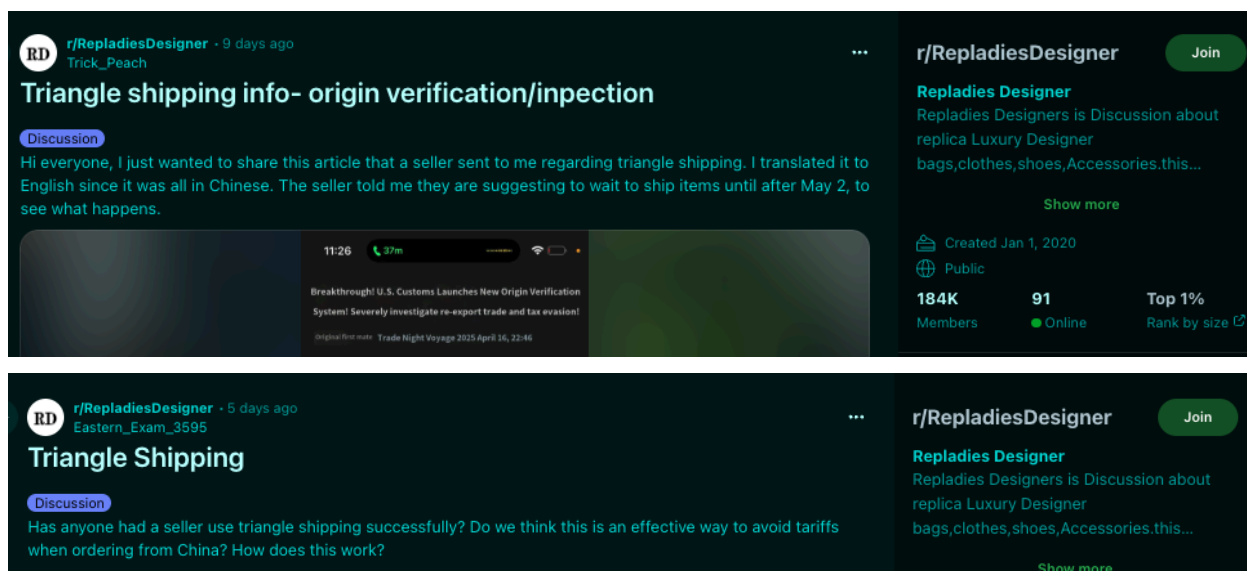


Reference to some of the thriving replica goods and China sourcing communities on Reddit reinforces the contention that Chinese manufacturers are coordinating efforts to evade U.S. import tariffs. In one subreddit containing 184K members that is dedicated to Chinese replica goods, at least two users in a single-week span made posts discussing triangle shipping. One user even translated a Mandarin-language article he claims to have received from a Chinese seller on how to engage in triangle shipping.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup><https://www.financemagnates.com/forex/trustpilot-fake-reviews-and-the-complicated-truth-about-transparency/>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/RepladiesDesigner/comments/1k286h3/triangle\\_shipping\\_info\\_origin/](https://www.reddit.com/r/RepladiesDesigner/comments/1k286h3/triangle_shipping_info_origin/)





While not definitive, these findings strongly support that allegation that some of the corporate stakeholders behind the #sourcing campaign—e.g. Nihao Jewelry—are using a combination of coordinated marketing strategies with tariff evasion techniques to bolster Chinese manufacturers while undermining Western brands and markets.

### User Journeys

The #sourcing campaign's TikTok vector is calibrated to young Western consumers, particularly young women, who are drawn to the financial benefits of directly sourcing expensive Western brand-name goods from China. Observations reinforcing this assumption includes:

- Videos are English-language, with relatively high production value and shared language across many categories of videos.
- TikTok is the primary vector, with engagement on the platform order of magnitude higher than identical content posted on Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube
- Subtle anti-capitalist tropes (e.g., "Why pay greedy American middlemen?") in both video content as well as top-liked comments paired with repeated glorification of the Chinese system's efficiency and fairness.
- Identically templated visuals linking specific Chinese provinces to specific goods is designed for non-Chinese consumers rather than trade exports or official brand representatives.

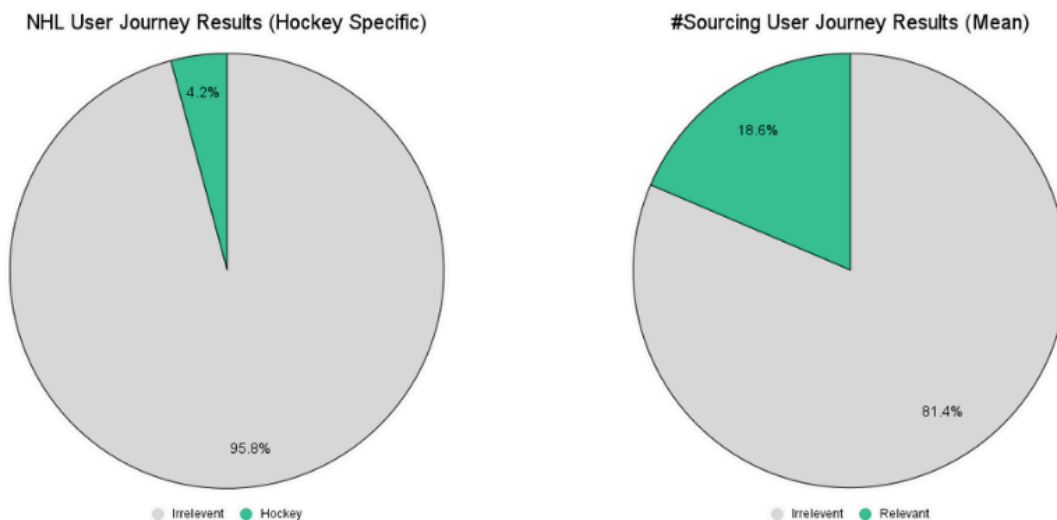
Understanding the dynamics of algorithmic stickiness on TikTok's For You Page (FYP) is critical to analyzing how campaigns such as #sourcing can be rapidly amplified and then entrenched in user experiences. Algorithmic stickiness refers to the degree to which minimal user engagement causes a platform's recommendation engine to increasingly surface related content.

On TikTok, where the FYP algorithm dynamically curates personalized feeds with extraordinary speed, even slight signals of interest can yield disproportionate shifts in exposure. Investigating how quickly sourcing-related content “sticks” to new user accounts offers insight into the platform’s susceptibility to content cascades, including those that may stem from organic or coordinated promotional activity. To test these dynamics, we conducted 10 controlled user journeys (UJs) that simulated the user experience for a U.S.-based, 22-year-old. The methodology we adopted featured:

- 1 control UJ focused on NHL (hockey) content during the Stanley Cup Playoffs period.
- 9 test UJs focused on sourcing-related content (#Sourcing).
- All accounts initially swiped through 20 neutral videos to establish a neutral baseline.
- Accounts were then exposed to increasing “doses” of #Sourcing content (1, 3, 5, 10, and 15 target videos).
- After each dose, users swiped through 20 additional FYP videos to observe algorithmic shifts.
- Engagement was standardized: sourcing videos were watched for 10 seconds and liked; neutral FYP content was watched for 2 seconds without engagement.

The results demonstrate a marked contrast between organic trending content and sourcing-related content stickiness. In the NHL control journey, only 5 out of 120 FYP videos (4.2%) reflected hockey content, despite real-world surges in interest around the Stanley Cup Playoffs. In contrast, all 9 sourcing-focused journeys exceeded 10% sourcing-related content penetration, with 5 reaching or exceeding 20% saturation (at least 24 out of 120 FYP videos). On average, sourcing content accounted for 18.62% of videos shown after minimal engagement.

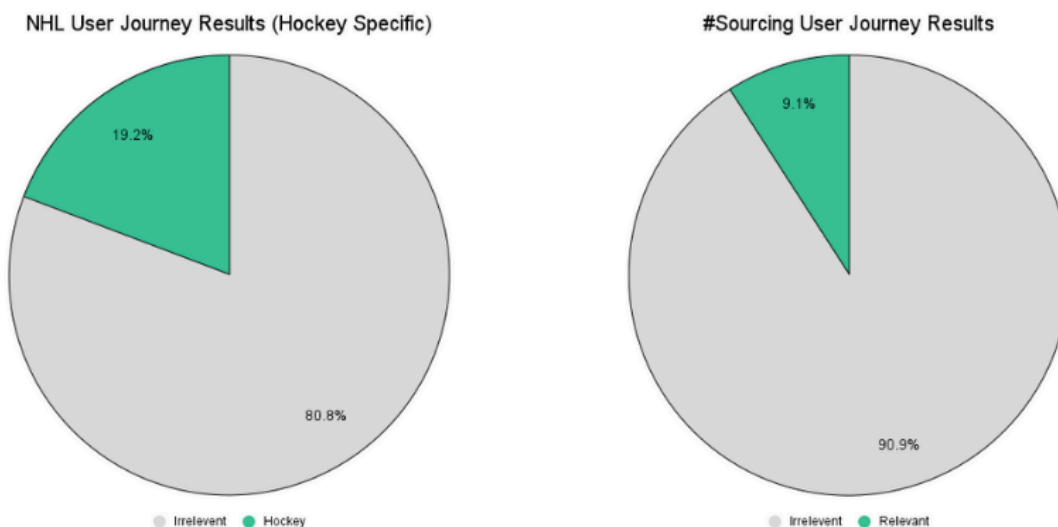
### TikTok Results



This methodology (ten experimental avatars testing recommended shorts after exposure to “sourcing” and “NHL”) was repeated on YouTube in order to establish a cross-platform basis of

comparison. Thereon, we observed inverse results that those observed on TikTok. On YouTube, the control avatar's recommended shorts composed 19.2% NHL content, versus a mean saturation score of 8.3% for #sourcing. In other words, On YouTube exposure to NHL content was nearly 2.5X more likely to result in similar content appearing in a user's recommendation feed relative to exposure to #sourcing content. That said, the net variance between control and test content saturation on YouTube was overall less pronounced than that observed on TikTok.

### YouTube Results



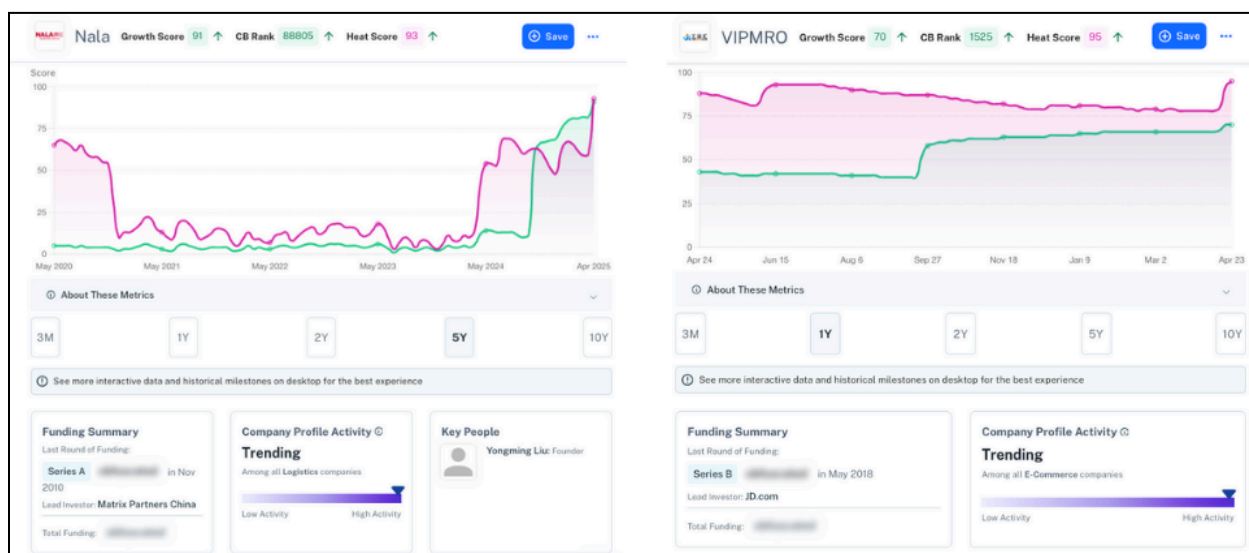
These findings suggest that TikTok's algorithm exhibits a pronounced sensitivity to #sourcing engagement signals, amplifying this category at rates notably higher than for naturally trending, non-politicized interest categories like professional sports. In contrast, YouTube showed higher sensitivity towards NHL content, while the delta between the test and control topics was lower than that measured on TikTok. Connecting this to the apparent target audience of the #sourcing campaign, TikTok may be exploiting the demographic of its American user base to achieve exposure unattainable on other platforms like Facebook and Instagram.

### Assessing Impact

This brief dissects a prominent social media vector of the "Shopping in China" campaign initiated by the CCP in the aftermath of U.S.' adoption of the reciprocal tariff policy. Though the lasting impact of this top-down campaign on China's trade balance and Western brands' bottom line is unclear as of late-April 2025, a number of preliminary observations do emerge—namely a jump in web traffic and market exposure for key Chinese manufacturers and ecommerce sites.

As mentioned above, the scripted Alibaba videos produced formulaically conclude with a number of Chinese ecommerce sites the influencers recommend. Two websites—vipmro.com and nala.com.cn—were mentioned 7 and 5 times respectively across a total of 20 target videos analyzed. While sales or financial data to China-based entities is unavailable, the Crunchbase

profiles for these two oft-cited ecommerce sites indicate significant increases in their “Heat Score” in April 2025.<sup>15</sup> Vipmro.com, the top recommended website, even exhibited a peak “Trending” score when consulted in late-April 2025, testifying to a measurable surge in market interest vis-a-vis target Chinese suppliers and ecommerce retailers. Combining this finding with the exposure in the tens or even hundreds of millions of cross-platform views for #sourcing content, the social media marketing component of the “Shopping in China” campaign can be classed a success.



In terms of evaluating the campaign’s impact on Western companies and brands, the CCP’s aggressive social media campaign around #sourcing generated higher viewership (>50M views minimum) in a three week period than, for instance, the State of the Union generally enjoys across all major networks. Meanwhile, luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, Hermes, and Birkin appear to be on the defensive as they attempt to reassert narrative dominance in the face of algorithmically-amplified and rapidly shared video content urging consumers to circumvent brands and buy directly from Chinese suppliers.

In sum, the “Shopping in China” campaign is an insightful case study for understanding how a CCP campaign advancing macroeconomic objectives manifested on the plane of social media. It also portends a future where state actors increasingly leverage the information space to perform perception hacking of a foreign public to advance core interests. While the #sourcing is a relatively benign application of this method, its potential national security implications are clear and concerning.

<sup>15</sup> According to Crunchbase, heat score measures the market interest or prominence of a company based on profile activity and presence in the media (<https://support.crunchbase.com/hc/en-us/articles/39902159873043-What-is-a-Heat-Score#:~:text=The%20heat%20score%20measures%20the,Scores%20range%20from%200%20%2D%20100>)