

# **Consumer Video Activism in China: An Empirical Investigation into its Origins, Dynamics, and Impacts**

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## **Abstract**

Short videos and short-video-based (SVB) social media platforms are emerging as a handy tool for many Chinese consumers to safeguard their rights and interests. In characterising these efforts as “short video activism”, this thesis represents an empirical investigation into its origins, dynamics, and impacts. It critically engages with the literature on consumer activism and video activism, outlining three key phases of consumer activism (online forums and online petitions; social media platforms; SVB platforms) and introducing the fourth phase of video activism (short video activism) in China. This dissertation applies grievances generation theories and the concept of repertoires of contention to study this phenomenon. The findings show that businesses’ inactions and government departments’ negligence, and consumers’ practices of posting short videos on SVB platforms co-generate consumers’ grievances leading to the adoption of the short video activism tactics. This thesis argues that these practices become an inventive repertoire of contention for Chinese consumers.

A critical media practice approach is adopted in this thesis to examine the dynamics behind this phenomenon. Drawing on 56 interviewees with four groups of actors (consumers, media practitioners, PR officials, and government department officials), this thesis investigates the perceptions, motivations and impacts of the short video activism tactics. Furthermore, relying on the analysis of four paradigmatic cases, it reveals the complex negotiations between consumers, media, businesses, and government departments involved in these dynamics, and shows that these interrelationships can affect the effectiveness of these tactics. This thesis also develops a “consumer sphere” model, which further elucidates these complex interrelationships. The findings reveal that safeguarding their rights and those of the general public is the main motivation for Chinese consumers to use short videos to protest. Moreover, these tactics provide short video evidence that businesses and government departments cannot ignore, prompting them to respond to the demands of consumers.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Topic

Before New China launched a series of economic reforms in 1978, there were no “consumers” in China, only “suppliers” and “demanders” – Chinese people back then had to use money and specific “tickets” to exchange any life necessity. According to the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Consumer Rights and Interests (2013 Amendment) and the Consumer Policy Committee of the International Organization for Standardization, “consumer” refers to individuals who purchase or use various products and services for private purposes. Put differently, a necessary prerequisite for an individual in society to become a consumer is that there are (enough) products or services available for consumers to purchase or use. From the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 to 1978, the Chinese government implemented a planned economic system – the state regulates economic operations by administrative means, mobilizes and allocates resources by means of purely command-based planning, and excludes the dynamic effects of market mechanisms. Under this planned economic system, the production plans and sales prices of commodities were uniformly formulated by the state (supplier) to limit the production and exchange of commodities, resulting in a shortage of various life necessities that people (demander) need in daily life, hence there were no consumers in Chinese society at that time, let alone consumer issues and consumer rights protection laws (Yang, 2009).

Chinese people at that time did not realise that, their power as consumers could not only safeguard the rights and interests of themselves and other consumers but also urge the business to admit their faults and make corrections, affect the decisions of relevant government departments and promote the promulgation of relevant laws and regulations to protect the rights and interests of Chinese consumers. Today Chinese consumers are entitled to nine specific rights and interests<sup>1</sup> under the law, such as Section 7 – “consumers have the right to protect their personal and property safety from damage when purchasing, using goods and receiving services”; and Section 11 – “consumers who suffer personal or property damage due to purchasing, using goods or receiving services shall have the right to obtain compensation according to law”. To avoid ambiguity, the “rights and interests” of Chinese consumers in this thesis refer to the rights and interests covered in the law.

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the specific details of these nine rights, see the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Consumer Rights and Interests (2013 Amendment), [http://gkml.samr.gov.cn/nsjg/fgs/201906/t20190625\\_302783.html](http://gkml.samr.gov.cn/nsjg/fgs/201906/t20190625_302783.html) (accessed March 24, 2021).

I started this PhD thesis in 2018, when Chinese short video and short-video-based social media (SVB) platforms ushered in the beginning of its golden age. Many SVB platforms (Section 2.6) gradually started challenging the monopoly position of traditional social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat in China. The users of Douyin [named “TikTok” in Europe] (and other emerging SVB platforms such as Miaopai, Kuaishou etc.) can simply share the short videos they produce or record and even live-stream their lives in front of other users through their mobiles. This new “short video” function has helped these young Chinese Internet companies lure users from those Chinese Internet giants like Tencent, SINA<sup>2</sup>, etc. In response to the trend of short videos, Tencent, SINA, and other Chinese traditional Internet giants added the short video function to their social media platforms in 2018. As of 2019, almost every Chinese social media platform has this short video function. Hence, in this thesis, to avoid ambiguity, whether it is traditional social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo, or young SVB platforms, these social media platforms are collectively referred to as “SVB” platforms.

After all social media platforms completed the “short video” upgrade, short videos became an easy-to-access medium among SVB platform users. Users can easily share and forward short videos across different platforms by sharing the links or directly transferring short videos from one short video platform to another. Simultaneously, with the increasing popularity of short video media among users, the features and positioning of SVB platforms and the purposes of users using these platforms began to change. Douyin, for example, when Douyin first appeared in 2016 in China, its positioning was to create a 15-second short music video community for Chinese young people. After just two years, in 2018, Douyin launched its new slogan, “recording the good life”<sup>3</sup>, implying that its positioning was no longer limited to the short music video. Today, Chinese people not only use SVB platforms and short videos for entertainment, but also use them to learn cooking, English, financial investment and other knowledge, promote traditional cultures that are disappearing, watch news, sell and buy products, and even use these platforms and short videos to protect their consumer rights and interests (Subsection 5.3.1). The purposes of using these SVB platforms and short videos are rapidly shifting and increasing, which has aroused my interest in short videos and SVB platforms.

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<sup>2</sup> WeChat is owned by Tencent; Weibo is owned by SINA.

<sup>3</sup> See the Beijing News report on this, <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/invest/2018/03/19/479589.html> (accessed January 13, 2021).

Among so many ways of using short videos and SVB platforms, I am most interested in how users use these digital technologies to protect their consumer rights and interests. Before I started my academic research journey, I used to be a public relations manager in one of the biggest real estate companies in China, handling the relationship between the company and mainstream media/we-media<sup>4</sup> and maintaining a positive brand image of the company in front of the public. Around the beginning of 2018, I found that some consumers started uploading short video evidence to multiple SVB platforms to prove that the company violated their rights and interests. In this way, these consumers rapidly caught the attention of my and other colleagues. To maintain the company's brand image and prevent these short videos from spreading on different SVB platforms, we quickly contacted these consumers and asked the colleagues in the customer service department to solve their problems. These work experiences made me curious about consumers' rights and interests protection practices, why did our customers choose to use these short videos and SVB platforms to safeguard their rights and interests instead of contacting after-sales departments?<sup>5</sup>

To make this introduction clearer, I divided it into four parts: the first part introduces the research topic and why I chose it. The second part introduces the research orientation, explains the reason why I choose this topic and the practical significance of this research, including three perspectives: Chinese consumers and consumer activism; SVB platforms and short videos and media practice approach. The third part introduces the research questions and aims. The last part shows the outline of this thesis.

## **1.2 Chinese Consumers and Consumer Activism**

The questions mentioned above made me curious about Chinese consumers and their rights protection practices and promoted the birth of this thesis directly. As mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter, there were no real "consumers" during the first thirty years of the founding of the People's Republic of China, only "suppliers" and "demanders". People's rights at the time as consumers were not taken seriously by the government, and there were no special

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<sup>4</sup> The literature addressing the concept of "we-media" in the English context and the concept of "zimeiti" in the Chinese context are rich and often ambiguous. In the Chinese context, the concept of "we-media" is usually adopted by Chinese scholars to refer to the Chinese term "zimeiti" or "self-media" (Yu, 2018). "zimeiti" refers to the professional content generators (PGC) who use different Internet platforms (such as blogs, social media platforms, video-sharing platforms) to publish and broadcast their content and news. To reduce ambiguity, in this thesis, I continue to use the concept of "we-media" to refer to the concept of "zimeiti" or "self-media". To express more accurately, the concept of "we-media" in this article refers specifically to those who use SVB platforms to publish and broadcast their content and news.

<sup>5</sup> Please note that this is not a research question in this thesis. For more about the research questions and aims, please see Section 1.5.

laws to protect their “consumer” rights. Since China implemented the socialist market economy system in 1978, according to statistics released by the Ministry of Commerce of China in June 2021, the total retail sales of consumer goods nationwide at the time was 3.6 trillion yuan<sup>6</sup>, which was about 231 times the figure in 1978<sup>7</sup>. Considering the huge base of Chinese consumer groups, their growing purchasing power, and their increasing social status and importance (including their increasing influence on the domestic and international economy, culture, and even politics), research on Chinese consumers have increasingly emerged in different disciplines in recent years, including law and policy studies – such as research on the concept of consumers and the Consumer Protection Law (Wang, 2002); business and management studies – such as determinants of Chinese consumers’ green purchase behaviour (Chan, 2001); advertising and psychological studies – such as Chinese consumer readings of global and local advertising appeals (Zhou and Belk, 2004); historian studies – such as Gerth’s (2010, 2020) research on the history of Chinese consumer culture, just to name a few.

In recent years, an increasing number of consumers have started to adopt different alternative tactics – such as smashing inferior products in front of the public (see the case of Luo Yonghao in Chapter 2), gathering at the door of a business or government department (see the case of Chengdu homebuyers in Chapter 6), protesting against businesses online (see other three cases in Chapter 6), etc., – rather than methods that comply with laws and government regulations to safeguard their rights and interests in China. Facing this kind of social phenomenon that continues to occur and even intensifies, scholars have noticed the existence of these complicated issues and tried to offer their constructive suggestions from the perspective of perfecting relevant laws and regulations (e.g., Li, 2012; Li, 2015; Liu, Z., & Wu, X., 2016; Thomas, 2017, 2018; Chang, 2019), which provided valuable guidance to relevant government departments. However, few scholars and studies (e.g., Ding and Li, 2010; Han, Z., 2012; Huang, 2015) have paid attention to the essence of these issues, such as the origins, dynamics, and the impacts of Chinese consumers’ alternative self-protection tactics. Hence, to better understand the alternative rights protection tactics adopted by Chinese consumers today, to find out the answers to those questions I mentioned in the last section, and to fill in relevant research gaps, this thesis chooses to start from the perspective of consumer activism, and focus on the issue of how Chinese consumers safeguard their rights and interests through one of their

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<sup>6</sup> See [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-06/19/content\\_5619466.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-06/19/content_5619466.htm) (accessed 4, August, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> The total retail sales of consumer goods nationwide were 155.9 billion yuan in 1978, See [http://www.stats.gov.cn/zjtj/ztfx/ggkf40n/201809/t20180905\\_1621054.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/zjtj/ztfx/ggkf40n/201809/t20180905_1621054.html) (accessed 4, August, 2021).

innovative media activism tactics – protesting against businesses with short videos and SVB platforms.

The earliest boycott of slave-produced products in the US (Hawkins, 2010), the “Naderism” movement (Brimelow and Spencer, 1990; Gabriel and Lang, 2015), the Carrotmob movement (Kampf, 2018), and the online petition site “Change.org” (Minocher, 2019), are among the many waves of consumer activism that swept across the globe over the past decades. These instances of consumer activism have inspired a series of studies on consumer activism from various perspectives – such as reviewing the history of consumer activism, examining different (offline and online) forms of consumer activism strategies/tactics and investigating their causes (e.g., Bowen, 1996; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Hawkins, 2010; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Handelman, 2013; Lekakis, 2013; Gabriel and Lang, 2006, 2015; Eli et al., 2016; Heldman, 2017; Kampf, 2018; Minocher, 2019) – to bloom. However, most of these studies reveal the consumer activism in the global North in detail from political, economic, cultural and other aspects (Chapter 1 and Section 2.2), while neglecting the situation in other regions. In the context of China, consumer activism has received scant attention from scholars. Hence, this thesis first reviews the history of consumer activism in the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and other global northern countries, and the evolutionary path of online consumer activism in these countries and regions to provide valuable comparative examples for studying consumer activism in China. Next, it teases out the evolutionary path of Chinese consumer activism from the 1900s to the 2020s by reviewing a large number of relevant consumer activism cases in China, along with drawing lessons from the literature on media activism, digital activism and video activism (see next section and Section 2.3) in order to present a clear panorama of the development and changes of consumer activism in China (I tease out three key phases in the development of online consumer activism in China: online forums and online petitions; social media platforms; SVB platforms, see Chapter 2). Next, by empirically investigating the latest phase of online consumer activism – short video activism tactics (or can be called “consumer video activism tactics”, see Section 2.6) through semi-structured interviews and case studies, this thesis illustrates the latest manifestation of consumer activism in China (including its position and characteristics). In sum, from the perspective of consumer and consumer activism research, this thesis makes an effort to improve the understanding of consumer activism in China, and make connections between research on consumer activism in China and the global northern countries, which contribute to the study of Chinese consumer activism and the overall consumer activism research.

### 1.3 SVB Platforms and Short Videos

Under the influence of the new broadband cellular network technology, the competition among Chinese Internet companies, the domestic venture investment and different social reasons (Section 2.6), the new medium of short video has gradually become popular on various social platforms in China and the world since 2014. For example, “Douyin”, one of the most popular SVB platforms in China, as of 2020, had more than 600 million daily active users in China. As of July 2020, its international version (can be downloaded and used in regions and countries outside of China)<sup>8</sup>, known as “TikTok”, had more than 680 million monthly active users worldwide (regions and countries outside of China)<sup>9</sup>. With the popularity of SVB platforms and short videos, a series of research focusing on these new digital communication technologies have started to emerge in large numbers in recent years (e.g. Li, 2018; Lu & Lu, 2019; Xu et al., 2019; Kaye, Chen & Zeng, 2021; Savic, 2021; Song, et al, 2021), which further improves the understanding of SVB platforms and short videos. However, most of these studies focus solely on SVB platforms and short videos themselves, exploring their backgrounds, characteristics and affordances, such as the social reasons behind the popularity of SVB platforms and short videos in China (Xu et al., 2019); the co-evolution of Douyin and “TikTok” (Kaye, Chen & Zeng, 2021). Although recently scholars from different disciplines have begun to try to break out of the above-mentioned research framework and investigate SVB platforms and short videos from an interdisciplinary perspective, such as Du, Liechty, Santos and Park (2020)’s work on the Chinese Millennials’ production and sharing of short-form travel videos on TikTok or Douyin, and Simpson and Semaan’s work on everyday LGBTQ (Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer or Questioning) encounters with TikTok, the number of these studies is still insufficient.

In recent years, there is an increasing number of studies that pay attention to the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and consumer activism – online consumer activism (e.g., Heldman, 2017; Kampf, 2018; Minocher, 2019) and illustrating how consumers use different ICTs (such as traditional Internet technologies, social media platforms) to achieve the goal of their activism events (Subsection 2.2.3). However, as a trending ICTs today, short videos and SVB platforms have received scant attention from consumer activism scholars. It is necessary to bear in mind that this thesis adopts a media practice approach to overcome precarious technological determinism and one-medium fallacy (Treré, 2019;

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<sup>8</sup> See [http://www.xinhuanet.com/tech/2021-01/05/c\\_1126948875.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/tech/2021-01/05/c_1126948875.htm) (accessed August 9, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> See <https://finance.sina.com.cn/world/gjci/2020-08-25/doc-iivhvpwy2864551.shtml> (accessed August 9, 2021).

Stephansen and Treré, 2019) (see next section and Section 3.3). In the context of China, as mentioned above, research on consumer activism is very scarce, let alone research on consumer activism related to ICTs, especially the SVB platforms and short video. Hence, by focusing on the consumer video activism tactics based on SVB platforms and short videos adopted by Chinese consumers, this thesis on the one hand contributes to the discussion of online consumer activism, and especially fills the gaps in the study of online consumer activism in China. On the other hand, by exploring SVB platforms and short videos from the perspective of consumer activism, this thesis fertilizes the research field of SVB platforms and short videos. In the next three subsections, I further illustrate the reasons and practical significance of researching consumer video activism tactics based on SVB platforms and short videos from three perspectives.

### ***1.3.1 Media Activism, Digital Activism and Video Activism***

From the earliest Wang Hai case to the consumer video activism tactics based on SVB platforms and short videos that this thesis focuses on, most activism tactics adopted by Chinese consumers are essentially media activism or digital activism tactics that rely heavily on the power of media (Section 2.4). However, few scholars have explored consumer activism from the perspective of media activism or digital activism in social movement studies, even though consumer activism scholars mention media activism or digital activism tactics – such as online petition, activism through social media a lot in their research (e.g, Albinsson and Perera, 2012; Minocher, 2019). Hence, as mentioned in the last section, to better understand the Chinese consumer activism and the consumer video activism tactics based on SVB platforms and short videos, this thesis initiatively teases out the evolutionary path of Chinese consumer activism by drawing lessons from media activism and digital activism in social movement studies. By doing so, this thesis casts new analytic light on consumer activism research and improves the interdisciplinary understanding of consumer video activism tactics.

Moreover, this thesis investigates the consumer video activism tactics further from the perspective of video activism, one of the most influential subsets of media activism, to have a deeper understanding of these tactics that heavily relied on the SVB platforms and short videos (Section 2.5). In this thesis, according to different forms of expression and medium carriers, I outline four phases of video activism in China in a chronological order by reviewing literature related to Chinese social documentary film (e.g., Xinyu L, 2003; Yuezhi, Z, 2009; Han, 2005,



2008<sup>10</sup>, 2008<sup>11</sup>, 2016; Liu, 2013; Song, 2016): first phase, the “New Documentary Movement” (NDM); second phase, television programs made by mainstream media using public video footages; third phase, social documentaries and other videos made and led by social elites, public opinion leaders, and public welfare organisations that are disseminated by the video hosting websites; by combining the above three phases of video activism and focusing on the consumer video activism tactics empirically, I define and explore the fourth phase of video activism – short video activism based on SVB platforms. Among these four phases of video activism, the first three phases of video activism were led by media professionals, social elites and opinion leaders, while the general public’s participation was minimal. Unlike these previous phases, the overall findings of this thesis show that short video activism is low-threshold and public-dominated video activism. Examining the consumer video activism tactics based on SVB platforms and short videos through the lens of the historical contexts of video activism in China, we can better understand the cause of the present surge of these tactics and contribute to the research field of video activism in China.

### ***1.3.2 Grievance and Repertoire of Contention***

There is no uniform definition of “activist” in the study of social movements, scholars and participants of social movements define and understand this term differently (Bobel, 2007; Cortese, 2015). For example, according to Bobel (2007, p. 157)’s research, even though many theorists engaging in social movement study believe that participants in social movements are “activists” because they modify their identities through engaging in social movement work, she finds out that “social movement participants can do activism without self-identifying as activists”. Hence, to avoid ambiguity, inspired by Bobel’s work, I also draw lessons from Baumgardner and Richards’s (2000) definition on activism/activist – “everyday acts of defiance” (p. 283), defining the term “activist” in this thesis as individuals or groups that engage in daily defiant actions, as well as participants in social movements. As a common strategy adopted by activists in social movements (e.g., Lightfoot, 2019; Colli, 2020), many scholars studying social movements have provided detailed interpretations of consumer activism and its connection with social movements (e.g., Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2006; Wilkinson, 2007; Chen, 2020). However, neither these social

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<sup>10</sup> Han Hong. (2008). “媒介行动主义理论视野中的中国行动主义影像研究 [Media Activism: Chinese Video Activism Research].” 新闻大学[Journalism Bimonthly] 97(3), 89-95.

<sup>11</sup>Han Hong. (2008). “社会纪录片与影像行动主义: 审视中国纪录片的另一个维度 [Social Documentary and Video Activism: Chinese Documentary Research].” 电影艺术[Film Art] 322, 137-141.

movement scholars nor the researchers of consumer activism have drawn theories, concepts and other valuable experiences from the social movement research toolbox to study consumer activism. Hence, to bridge the two fields, this thesis studies the consumer video activism tactics under the social movement research framework, using the grievances generation theories and the concept of repertoires of contention to explore the underlying reasons for these tactics and their subsequent impact on Chinese consumers and society (Section 3.2). First, drawing lessons from grievances generation theories, this thesis explicates three essential factors (underlying reasons) that lead to consumers' grievances and consumer video activism: (1) businesses' inactions; (2) relevant government departments' negligence; (3) consumers' practices of posting short video evidence on SVB platforms. Second, by bringing in the concept of the repertoire of contention, this thesis concludes that the short video activism tactics become an innovative repertoire of contention for Chinese consumers, and SVB platforms become a real-time updated database of the repertoire of contention for Chinese people.

### ***1.3.3 Public Sphere***

The concept of the public sphere has always attracted the attention of scholars in the field of media and communication studies (e.g., Bowen, 1996; Shirky, 2011; Jiang, 2016; Fuchs, 2017). In China, discussions about the concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989a) did not appear until the Chinese translated version of "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" was published (Cao et al, 1999). For Chinese scholars in media and communication studies, most of them regarded the utopian concept of the public sphere as an ideal template for the development of Chinese civil society. They discussed the significance of the development of Chinese (social) media to the formation of the ideal public sphere in China (e.g., Xu and Zhao, 2009; Yuan, 2010; Guo, 2013; Qiu and Shen 2017; Liu, 2018). Since the 2010s, more and more Chinese scholars have started to question and disprove Habermas's public sphere theory like scholars outside of China (e.g., Xia and Huang, 2008, Zhang and Bai, 2017), claiming that the public sphere theory is not applicable to Chinese society. However, few scholars have moved beyond the above two different discussions and objectively combined the valuable studies on the public sphere with the reality of Chinese society to make deeper discussions. Hence, taking Habermas's public sphere and relevant studies as a starting point, and drawing lessons from Huang's "third realm" theory, Yang and Calhoun's and Sun et al's research on "green public sphere", and Guo's "environmental protection public sphere", this thesis illustrates a "consumer sphere" model by looking into the consumer video activism tactics based on SVB

platforms and short videos (Section 3.4), which contributes to the discussion of the public sphere in China. The accessibility of the “consumer sphere” and the role of all forms of media (we-media and mainstream media) played within the “consumer sphere” are also discussed in this thesis.

#### **1.4 Media Practice Approach**

Unlike traditional media research approaches that focus on media texts/content or media institutions, the media practice framework proposed by Couldry (2004, p. 118-119) in media studies focuses on the media practice – “to consider what people do with media”. Since this media practice method was proposed, a series of related studies have sprung up in different fields (e.g., Bräuchler and Postill, 2010; Helle-Valle, 2010; Christensen & Røpke, 2010; Kelty, 2010; Stephansen and Treré, 2019), especially in the social movement studies (e.g., Mccurdy, 2011; Mattoni, 2012; Mattoni and Treré, 2014; Askanius, 2019). In the context of China, although recent work shows that some scholars have realised the significance and value of the “media practice framework” (e.g., Huang, 2015; Zhou & Li, 2017) and even put forward specific media practice research paradigms based on the situation in China (e.g., Gu, 2018), it has not got enough attention and there is still lack of empirical evidence to underpin the value and practical significance of media practice approach. This thesis aims to fill these gaps and inspire more theoretical and empirical research related to the media practice approach in China.

As mentioned above, this thesis does not advocate technological determinism/technological-fascination or media centrism. To move away from the debate between the techno-optimists and techno-pessimists like Barassi (2015) says, my focus is not to highlight (or ignore) the short video’s technological affordance and the ceaselessly upgrading SVB platforms, nor is it trying to explore the short-video content consumer makes. In this thesis, I adopt a media practice approach in the study of consumer video activism in China, focusing on Chinese consumers’ short video activism tactics. Specifically, I draw lessons from the “activist media practices” approach (Mattoni, 2012; Mattoni & Treré, 2014), deconstructing the consumer video activism tactics into two observable interaction parts: interactions with media objects (mobile phone, short videos, SVB platforms) and media subjects (media professionals, public relations (PR) department officials, government officials). By doing so, the working principle of these tactics, the interrelationships between the four main actors involved in it, and the critical factors that limit its ability are clearly shown in front of us.

## **1.5 Research Questions and Aims**

As an interdisciplinary study, this thesis contributes to the following fields: consumer activism, media activism/video activism/digital activism, social movement, media practice, and the public sphere. Overall, whether it is from the perspective of theory informing empirical work or from the perspective of empirical work informing theory-building, this thesis aims to explore the dynamics of the short video activism tactics, examine the underlying reasons behind the prevalence of these tactics, gather and evaluate their subsequent impact on Chinese consumers and society.

By looking into the perceptions of the Chinese consumers, media practitioners, public relations department (PR) officials and relevant government department officials on these tactics, and four case studies – protest of Chengdu homebuyers, counterfeit goods on PinDuoDuo (PDD), tearful protest on Mercedes hood, and hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels, this thesis addresses the following questions:

### Key questions

- (1) How do the Chinese people involved in this study use short videos and SVB platforms to safeguard their rights and interests as consumers?
- (2) What motivates these consumers to adopt such tactics in their pursuit of compensation from businesses, rather than accepting more traditional forms of mitigation?
- (3) How do the study's respondents in the business, media and relevant government departments perceive the relative effectiveness (advantages and disadvantages) and significance of these tactics?

### Sub-questions

- (1) For Chinese consumers using short videos and SVB platforms to protect their interests against businesses, what are the key challenges?
- (2) How do these consumers evaluate the influence of their actions on businesses, as well as the wider impact on social change?

## **1.6 Overview of the Thesis**

This thesis unfolds eight chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 review relevant research and literature in the field of consumer activism, media activism, digital activism, video activism, social movement, media practice and public sphere studies. Chapter 4 illustrates the methods adopted in this thesis. Chapters 5 and 6 showcase the findings of fifty-six semi-structured interviews and four case studies. Chapter 7 conducts analytic discussions by combining the empirical findings with theoretical considerations examined in the literature review chapters. Chapter 8 wraps up this thesis by reflecting on the key findings learned through this thesis, demonstrating the implication of this thesis.

Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive background introduction to consumer activism and mainly contains the following sections. The first section illustrates the definition of consumer activism, as well as its historical evolution in the UK, the US, and other global North countries by explicating mainstream explanations and representative forms of consumer activism, reviewing four main waves of consumer activism and the situation of consumer activism after it encountered the Internet. The chapter continues by reviewing three important concepts – media activism, digital activism and video activism – that are closely related to the situation of Chinese consumer activism. Subsequently, in addition to expounding the history of consumer activism in China from 1905 to the early 2020s, the chapter further explores three key phases in the development of online consumer activism in China from the late 1990s to the early 2020s from the perspectives of media activism, digital activism and video activism research. The last part of this chapter introduces four background factors (the new broadband cellular network technology, the competition among Chinese Internet companies, the domestic venture investment and different social reasons) that led to the emergence and popularity of the SVB platform behind the consumer video activism, as well as four shortcomings (digital divide, the governmental intervention, the capital impact and short video rumours) of the SVB platform that Chinese consumers rely on. Chapter 3 centres on the core theories and concepts involved in this thesis. This chapter first focuses on the literature and research on grievances and repertoire of contentions and shows the purpose and significance of using these two concepts to study consumer video activism. Next, the chapter comprehensively introduces the media practice approach by reviewing the literature on the practice theory, the origin of the media practice shift, the use of media practice approach in social movement research and clarifies how to use activist media practices approach to study the consumer video activism and the significance of doing so. The last section of this chapter introduces relevant research and literature on the public sphere concept in general and pays particular attention to the studies

and discussions on the studies of the public sphere in China. Taking these studies as a starting point, this section proposes a pragmatic “consumer sphere” model in China.

Chapter 4 mainly presents the methodological rationale and research design. Specifically, the chapter explains why this thesis adopts semi-structured interview and case study as primary and secondary research methods by examining the aims of this thesis and the rationality of using these two methods, and details the categorization of four groups of interviewees – Chinese consumers, media practitioners, public relations department officials, and government department officials, and the selection criteria for the four cases – protest of Chengdu homebuyers, counterfeit goods on PDD, tearful protest on Mercedes hood, and hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels – examined in this thesis.

Chapters 5 and 6 detail the findings of semi-structured interviews and case studies, respectively. Chapter 5 analyses four groups of interviewees’ experiences and perceptions toward the consumer video activism tactics and the SVB platform and the short video behind it, which mainly contains three parts. The first part of the chapter explains the characteristics and underlying reasons of consumer activism in China, presenting in detail considerations of consumers before carrying out activism practices and how the inaction-led grievance caused by businesses and the negligence-led grievance caused by relevant government departments lead to the occurrence of consumer activism in China. Next, the chapter presents the functions of the SVB platform for Chinese consumers, media and businesses, and the strengths and weaknesses of the short video. The last part of the chapter explores the dynamics (or in other words, the working mechanisms) of the consumer video activism tactics from the four perspectives of Chinese consumers, media practitioners, PR officials of businesses, and government department officials. Chapter 6 introduces the four latest consumer video activism cases that happened in China, unpacks how short videos (and SVB platforms) play a key role in these cases, and demonstrates the lessons learned from these cases. Moreover, a detailed timeline for each case is provided. Among the four cases, the first three cases are initiated by ordinary consumers, and the latter is a special case caused by a we-media operator. This chapter further points out the differences in the dissemination paths of the short videos posted by influential we-media operators and ordinary consumers by comparing these two types of cases.

Corresponding to the five key focuses in this thesis mentioned above, Chapter 7 answers the research questions of this thesis by discussing the connections between the empirical findings and theoretical considerations explicated in the literature review chapters and demonstrates the contributions of these discussions in each section. The chapter first points out that from 1905 to the present 2020s, the “consumer video activism” tactics can be regarded

as the latest manifestation of consumer activism in China. Then, the chapter moves to the video activism research domain and defines the fourth phase of video activism in China. The next part of the chapter indicates that the unequal relationship between businesses and consumers, the psychological gap of consumers caused by the inaction of businesses and relevant government departments, and the practice of consumers posting short video evidence on SVB platforms are three essential factors that generate consumer grievance and lead to Chinese consumers' short video activism tactics. This part also defines these tactics as an inventive repertoire of contention for Chinese consumers. Then, the chapter explores the detailed working mechanisms of the consumer video activism tactics by deconstructing them into two observable interaction processes – interactions with “media objects” and “media subjects” under the “activist media practices” approach. The last part of the chapter discusses the “consumer sphere” in China.

As the concluding chapter, Chapter 8 summarises the key findings of this thesis concerning the research questions. This chapter also reflects online consumer activism studies and their correlations with the social movement, media practice and public sphere studies. In the end, this chapter presents the limitations and implications for future studies.

## **Chapter 2: The Origins of Consumer Activism and the Evolution of Consumer Activism in China**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Before 1978, the conceptions of “consumer” and “consumption” did not exist in Chinese society. With the development of the market economy, the Chinese public has gradually acquired the identity of “consumer” since then. In addition to this new identity, its corresponding legitimate rights and interests have also been given to the Chinese people, under the protection of the Chinese consumer rights and interests protection law<sup>12</sup> for the first time. Since then, cases of consumer rights violations and related activism incidents have appeared and continued to grow progressively. In the 2020s, Chinese consumers are more aware of their legitimate rights and interests and more willing to safeguard them than ever. Especially with the assistance of short videos and SVB platforms, it is much easier for them to make their voice heard.

In order to better understand the development progress of the consumer video activism tactics and the overall situation of consumer activism in China, in the following context chapter, I first looked into the development progress of consumer activism (four waves of consumer activism) and how consumers use different Internet technologies to achieve their goals in the global North countries. Compared with these consumers and their strategies/tactics, Chinese consumers are still newcomers and amateur players in the field. As mentioned above, the concept of the consumer in China has so far existed only for decades. Although China and most global North countries have different political, social and economic backgrounds, given that today China operates as a similar market economy (so-called socialist market economy) just like these countries, when studying the development progress of Chinese consumer activism, we can still draw lessons from the chequered history of consumer activism in the global North. For example, by reviewing the situations of consumer activism in these countries and comparing it with the situations in China, the particularities of Chinese consumer activism can be emphasised to a certain extent. Next, I reviewed the three important concepts – media activism, digital activism, and video activism – that can help us better understand the situations of consumer activism and consumer video activism tactics in China. Next, in addition to reviewing the concept of the “consumer” and the development process of consumer rights protection in China, I combined the literature mentioned in the last section and studies on media

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<sup>12</sup> The Chinese consumer rights and interests’ protection law was first enacted in 1993. See [http://gkml.samr.gov.cn/nsjg/fgs/201906/t20190625\\_302783.html](http://gkml.samr.gov.cn/nsjg/fgs/201906/t20190625_302783.html) (accessed 5 September 2020).



activism and video activism in China to sort out the evolutionary path of Chinese consumer activism. I also illustrated the emergence, growth and development of SVB platforms and consumer video activism tactics in detail. At the end of this chapter, I argued how factors such as governmental utilisation, capital intervention, and short video rumour influence the performance of the SVB platform (and short videos) behind the consumer video activism in China.

In general, the modern consumer activism studies are based on the national conditions of the UK and the US, two representative global North countries. In other words, the status quo of the studies across different disciplines related to consumer activism was dominated by the local definition of consumer activism of global North. However, on the other side of the earth, as the consumer activism cases start to flood in the Chinese market, the theoretical foundation of consumer activism studies dominated by the global North cannot explain the actual situation of consumer activism in China. In the perpetual struggle against businesses in China, Chinese consumers have gradually come across different practical activism strategies/tactics of defending their legitimate consumer rights and interests, from the online forum protest against Toshiba to the latest consumer video activism tactics this thesis is going to study. By reviewing the phenomena of consumer activism in China from the perspectives of media activism, digital activism and video activism, this chapter aims to interpret consumer activism in detail according to the actual conditions of Chinese society.

## **2.2 Introduction to Consumer Activism**

### ***2.2.1 The Definition of Consumer Activism***

“Activism is at the heart of everything that social and political movements do.” (Saunders, 2013, p. 2). From contacting elected party officials to boycotting companies, activism takes many forms. McAdam (1986) distinguishes different types of activism into “high risk and cost” and “low risk and cost” activism. More specifically, high cost and risk activism means that participants will be exposed to certain dangers, such as being arrested or personally injured, and participants need to invest a lot of time, energy and resources; on the contrary, low risk and cost activism means that participants will encounter less danger and require less time, energy and resources to invest (McAdam, 1986). Saunders (2013) also points out that scholars in the field have generally divided activism into two types, conventional activism (e.g., working with a political party or contacting a party official) and unconventional activism (e.g., boycotts, petitions, marches), even if this simple dichotomy between conventional and unconventional

activism is outdated and cannot be used to describe and distinguish the new forms of activism in this era. Recently, the manifestation of activism has become “less likely to mean radical and revolutionary action and more likely to mean moderate civil action” (Yang, 2016b, p. 2-3), especially with the assistance of the Internet and new means of communication. However, no matter how the form of activism and the way of distinguishing it change, the core of activism still refers to the challenging actions of individuals or their collections to change the status of society, politics, and economy (Cammaerts, 2007).

As a low-risk and low-cost activism form, consumer activism has increasingly appeared in social, economic and political issues in recent years, and it has also been highly valued by scholars in different research fields. The definition of consumer activism is not changeless and singular. As Heldman (2017, p. 2) puts it, “people who study consumer activism define it in different ways.” From the earliest boycott of slave-produced products in the US since the 1820s, and the co-operative enterprise set up in Rochdale in the UK in 1844, to the predominant political consumerism around the world in the last decades, consumer activism, as Hawkins (2010, p. 123) puts it, it provides “an opportunity for the relatively powerless individual consumer and workers to redress the imbalance in the marketplace.” Many scholars focusing on consumer activism prove that consumers worldwide widely adopt different strategies/tactics<sup>13</sup> of consumer activism for different objectives. However, at the same time, it should be noted that many studies also prove that the global North researchers have widely dominated the research related to consumer activism, and their studies are spontaneously related to the social context of global North countries. Hence, if we want to understand consumer activism in detail, it is necessary to look into consumer activism in the global North countries in the beginning.

Research focusing on the strategies and tactics used by consumers occupies an important part in the field of consumer activism, and “boycott” [consumers refuse to buy or

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<sup>13</sup> Studies in different subjects have pointed out the difference between strategy and tactics (e.g., Botan, 2006; Knox, 2012; Plowman, 2016; Olivant, 2016; Plowman & Wilson, 2018). According to these studies, generally speaking, “strategy” takes place at the planning level, aiming to achieve a long-term goal. “Tactics” take place at the operational level, aiming to achieve a short-term goal. In consumer activism, the question of whether the way consumers adopt should be defined as strategies or tactics should be made on a case-by-case basis. For example, “boycott” can be regarded as a consumer activism strategy if consumers use it as a general plan of their action in order to achieve a long-term goal. Or, “boycott” can be regarded as tactics, if consumers only use it as a single way of operation to achieve a short-term goal. In this thesis, I find that “consumer video activism” is only regarded as tactics by Chinese consumers so far. Moreover, in “The practice of everyday life”, de Certeau (1984) famously defines strategies and tactics. He indicates that strategies are worked out and implemented by subjects with will and power, and tactics are the practices of those who enact in the space governed by the powerful one. Hence, according to this logic, in consumer activism, tactics are normally adopted by consumers who are in the powerless position, in contrast, strategies are normally implemented by the powerful business.

use any product or service from a company or a country intentionally, to protest against the person's, company's or country's unfair actions on social, environmental, moral or political issues] and "boycott" [an intentional means of purchasing any product or service from a person, a company or a country, to support the company's or country's actions or policies on social, environmental, moral or political issues] (e.g., Friedman, 1986, 1999; Hawkins, 2010; Glickman, 2005, 2009, 2012; Heldman, 2017), are the two most representative consumer activism strategies/tactics among the consumer activism cases worldwide, especially in the global North countries.

In Hawkins's (2010) research on boycotts and buycotts in a global context, he further indicates that American scholars have dominated the literature of consumer activism, and it is not an exaggeration to say that most studies on consumer activism have focused on the experience of the US. Drawing on Hawkins's (2010) overview, there are three principle texts about consumer activism in the US suitable to be used to explain the definitions of boycott, buycott and other strategies and tactics of consumer activism. The first one, Leo Wolman's first research on boycotts in the US. He divided American trade unions boycotts into two categories in his doctoral thesis published in 1916: primary and secondary. Primary boycott refers to employees or workers encouraging other consumers to refuse to purchase any product from their employers (manufacturers); A secondary boycott usually happens in the conflict between the retailer and manufacturer (Wolman, 1916). In Wolman's thesis, he looked into the history and mechanism of the boycott and divided boycotts in American trade unions into direct and indirect categories: a list containing the names of offending employers makes a direct boycott; meanwhile, advertising the union employers with a union label or white and fair lists makes the boycotts indirect. Wolman's thesis approves the historical role of boycotts in the US. In other words, the boycott can be regarded as the earliest consumer activism in the US, as Hawkins (2010) indicates, the Wolman's indirect boycott could be regarded as the earliest form of "buycott".

The second one, Monroe Friedman (1999), specialising in the American consumer boycott, explores the different types of boycotts (including buycotts), mechanism and origins of the boycott, and factors affecting the boycott success in the American society by presenting historical examples that happened in the US. He indicates boycott as "an attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases in the marketplace." (Friedman, 1985, p. 97). As Friedman (1999) points out, three characteristics of this above-mentioned definition of boycotts should be noticed: first, it focuses on individual consumers instead of organisational entities, such as

professional associations; second, the goals of boycotts are not limited to seek for lower prices and high-quality goods in the marketplace, it also concerns problems external to the marketplace, such as environmental issues; third, the point of this definition is to call consumers to leave the marketplace selectively.

The third one, American researcher Lawrence B. Glickman (2005, 2009), explores the definitions or concepts of consumer activism from the American historical perspective. Although he did not add any specific definition to consumer activism, he uses examples in the US in different historical periods to clarify that the history of consumer activism could be regarded as the mirror image of American history. For example, he defines the American Revolution as a consumer movement, and he believes (2009, p. 60) it is “monumental importance... in the history of American consumer activism.”

In addition to drawing on the above-mentioned US scholars’ studies on consumer activism, I also draw on other existing literature (e.g., Bowen, 1996; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Hawkins, 2010; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Handelman, 2013; Lekakis, 2013; Gabriel and Lang, 2006, 2015; Eli et al., 2016; Heldman, 2017; Minocher, 2019) about consumer activism in the global North countries, and finally conclude that based on the social context of global North countries, the “consumer activism” refers to ad hoc or organised groups of consumers employ various strategies or tactics – boycott, buycott, protest on the scene or online, responsible investing and divestment, etc., to change the targets’ (such as interest groups, commercial companies, political parties, national or local governments) policies or actions directed towards social injustices; environment and animal protection issues; rights of minority groups such as ethnic minorities, LGBTQ people, etc. Moreover, it should be noticed that in a few instances, consumer activism cases in the global North are also related to economic issues such as high prices, poor quality of products and services and exaggerated advertisements. Behind this definition of consumer activism, there are three persisting problem areas concerning the consumer in the global North countries since the late 19th-century (Hermann, 1982, p. 31): “(1) ill-considered applications of new technology which result in dangerous or unreliable products, (2) changing conceptions of the social responsibilities of business, and (3) the operations of a dishonest fringe and the occasional lapses of others in the business community.” In sum, now the consumer activism in these regions has not only been used to urge companies to improve the overall quality of their products/services, but also been used to strengthen the company’s social responsibilities on many counts, such as the “transparent governance, the abolition of slavery, gender equality, better treatment of animals, racial

equality, LGBTQ rights, fair wages for immigrant workers, global economic justice, and environmental protection.” (Heldman, 2017, p. 217).

In addition to providing a brief introduction to the definition of consumer activism, this section also wants to show that the status quo of the studies across different disciplines related to consumer activism is dominated by the local definition of consumer activism of the global North. There are enough studies on the boycotts, buycotts, and other strategies/tactics of consumer activism can prove that the conceptual foundations of consumer activism in the global North underpin the political, media and other social science studies related to consumer activism in the global North countries (and even in the world). The similar social backgrounds of these global North countries have caused a certain degree of similar consumer activism issues in these countries. These studies of consumer activism based on the historical and social contexts of the global North (or mainly based on the social situation in the US) can only explain (part of) the consumer activism circumstances in the global North, but not the panorama of consumer activism worldwide. Although it is naïve to ignore the significance of these consumer activism experiences/research of global North consumers/scholars when studying consumer activism issues in other places, we should not also forget about that all previous and ongoing (even those that have not yet occurred) consumer activism cases are based on a country or region’s specific circumstances. Hence, this thesis calls on all scholars all over the world, especially those in the global South who are concerned with the topic of consumer activism, to put forward more understanding of consumer activism based on their local circumstances. Hence, to fill this gap, I shed light on consumer activism in China.

### ***2.2.2 The History of Consumer Activism: Four waves***

When studying the history of consumer activism in the global North, we should not ignore the book “*The Unmanageable Consumer*” done by Gabriel and Lang (2015). Four waves of consumer activism mentioned chronologically in this book exactly present the essential parts of the consumer activism of the UK, the US, and other global North countries: “the co-operative movement, which argued that consumers much take control of production; the value-for-money movement, which argued for scientific testing of products to provide information on best value; Naderism, which proposed that consumers must fight against corporate greed; and a new wave of alternative or political [consumer] activism, which seeks to completely restructure and redefine consumption on more ethical and ecological grounds” (p. 152). The following summarization will provide a general overview of consumer activism in different historical

periods in these countries, instead of elaborating the histories about the boycott, buycott and other representative forms of consumer activism strategies and tactics chronologically.

The first wave is the co-operative movement. As Gabriel and Lang (2015) mention, in 1844, at the height of the first industrial revolution process in Britain, the modern form of the “co-operative movement” took place in Rochdale in northwest England. A co-operative enterprise set up a shop there selling different goods (essential commodities, bread, etc.) with reasonable prices and good qualities to those who joined up and shared the profits with these members (Redfern, 2011). It should be noted that the enterprise in Rochdale was not the first co-operative practice in the UK. There were many successful and failed co-operative trials before it, such as the co-operative corn mills established and operated by skilled artisans in the UK (Gabriel and Lang, 2015). However, due to its ground-breaking achievements, the “Rochdale” model is synonymous with the co-operative movement for the forthcoming co-operative participants and organisations. These co-operative movements were in opposition to local monopolies selling essential commodities at very high prices (Birchall, 1994), and the principle of these movements can be summarised as “self-help by the people” (Gabriel and Lang, 2015, p. 157). Following the “self-help by the people” principle, the co-operative movement grew progressively. In the nineteenth century, there were hundreds of co-operative societies in the UK alone. After a century and a half, the co-operative movement has gone global. More than 700 million consumers joined the co-ops in over 100 countries as of 2015 (Gabriel and Lang, 2015).

The “value for money movement” is the second wave of consumer activism. The second wave of consumer activism formally emerged in the 1930s in the US and built on the initial initiative of American consumers in the late 19th- and early 20th- centuries (Gabriel and Lang, 2015). This wave of movement was backed up by various “value-for-money” organisations such as consumer leagues, consumer unions, and consumer research organisations around the world, such as the Consumer Research Inc. (US), Consumers Union (USA), Consumers’ Association (UK), Test Achats (Belgium), and different consumer magazines in many other global North countries such as Germany, Denmark, Australia, New Zealand (Gabriel and Lang, 2015). These organisations spent money on testing products and provided detailed test results to consumers via the magazines and newsletters they published. The principle of these organisations is almost the same, which is to enable consumers to know more about one product before they make decisions, consumers are “informed about the ‘best buy’ and warned about the cons and bad guys” (Gabriel and Lang, 2006, p. 161). Unlike the first wave of consumer activism, as Gabriel and Lang define, these consumer organisations in

the second wave of consumer activism have no intentions to oppose local monopolies and society. Their only goal was to inform the consumer about the features of products in detail and help them get the best value for money (John,1994).

“Naderism”, the third wave of consumer activism, precisely as Gabriel and Lang (2015) explain, its original background was in the “phenomenally affluent US society of the 1960s”. The Naderism was named after Ralph Nader, famous for his protests against the automotive giant in the US. In his book “*Unsafe at any speed*” published in 1965, Nader exposed that the poor design of one particular automobile model, the Chevrolet Corvair, would threaten the safety of drivers, and the automobile industry did not pay attention to the safety of drivers and passengers when producing and designing their cars. This book made Nader a well-known activist worldwide and became a symbol of the forthcoming Naderism. With his influence, Nader decided to recruit many young professional lawyers and set up a research centre to study responsive Law and corporate responsibility in 1969. By the end of the 1970s, there were 29 research organisations under the management of Nader (Brimelow and Spencer, 1990). As Gabriel and Lang (2006, p. 163) summarise, the common themes of these organisations were the same: “a distrust of corporations, a defence of the individual against the giants, a demand that the state protects its citizens<sup>14</sup> and above all, an appeal for Americans to be citizens, not just consumers.” Whereas the second wave of consumer organisations was trying to getting the best deal for consumers, Naderism believed that these organisations and consumers should stand up for public rights and interests, and stand out and fight against the corporate giants’ wrong actions, such as companies seek to maximise their interests but ignore the interests of consumers, and they use wasteful and deceptive advertisements to lure consumers into buying their products.

The fourth wave of consumer activism is “alternative or political (consumer) activism”. Between the 1970s and 1980s, a new wave of consumer organisations appeared and grew. Gabriel and Lang indicate that these organisations pay more attention to the following elements — green, ethical, Third World solidarity and fair-trade orientations. They termed it “alternative

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<sup>14</sup> Marshall ([1950], 2013, p.53) divided citizenship into three parts – civil, political and social citizenship. The civil element “is composed of the rights necessary for individual freedom – liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice, [...] the institutions most directly associated with civil rights are the courts of justice”; the political element means “the right to participate in the exercise of political power, as a member of a body invested with political authority or as an elector of the members such a body, [...] the corresponding institutions are Parliament and councils of local government”; the social element means “the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society, [...] the institutions most closely connected with it are the educational system and the social services”.

consumerism” because they found sufficient commonalities for these organisations. Because the consumption level of the mass public increased at that time, or in other words, because consumers became more “affluent” at that time, Gabriel and Lang believe that consumers who lived in the global North countries started to have more room to think about social and ecological issues such as environmental protection, animal welfare, health, fair trade and labour rights related to their consuming behaviours. For instance, ethical and green consumerism were two representative categories in the fourth wave of consumer activism. Green consumerism aims to educate consumers about environmental consciousness and encourage them to purchase environmentally friendly products or resist environmentally damaging products. Ethical consumerism (or the so-called fair-trade movement) pays more attention to the vulnerable groups (human beings and animals), such as those workers who work under unsafe conditions in the global South coffee plantation, or those animals that are treated inhumanely by the farm, it calls on consumers to purchase fair-trade products for helping and protecting these vulnerable groups.

As Gabriel and Lang mention, it should be noted that there was no overall coherence in the fourth wave of consumer activism. It means the core of the fourth wave of consumer activism was not unchanging in the very beginning. Conversely, it varied in different periods of history. For instance, as Gabriel and Lang (2015) argue, “green consumerism” (safeguard the environment in consumer’s purchase behaviour) was the most influential topic at the end of the 1990s in the global North countries. However, in the early 2000s, ethical concerns replaced the former’s position and became the top priority of consumers and companies in these countries. Since the late 1990s, the new “political activism” or so-called “political consumerism” has emerged. Consumers have started to purchase specific products for ethical reasons and political reasons (Micheletti 2003, Micheletti et al. 2003). Gabriel and Lang (2015) believe that it proved the emergence of the coherence of alternative consumerism.

In sum, these four waves of consumer activism can be divided into two categories, which are modern and contemporary waves. The first three waves of consumer activism belong to the modern wave of consumer activism. In particular, consumers’ activism strategies/tactics such as boycotts or buycotts within the modern wave of consumer activism are consumer-centred. For instance, in the value-for-money movement, consumers in the 1950s valued their money, so they wanted to understand more of the product before purchasing it. Whereas the modern wave of consumer activism was more personal-interest-oriented, the contemporary wave of it – the alternative and political consumer activism is more public interest-oriented. Gabriel and Lang believe that the consumers care more about ethical, green, animal welfare,



health, and other similar issues, which are beyond the commodity's primary factor within this period. From the earliest co-operative enterprise in Rochdale to the latest alternative or political activism, these four waves of consumer activism grouped by Gabriel and Lang present the expression forms of, main initiators of and causes of the consumer activism in the global North from the early 19th century to the early 21st century in chronological order. These four waves of consumer activism can be regarded as the history of consumer activism in the global North before the advent of the Internet era. Next, more stories about consumer activism in the Internet era will be presented.

### ***2.2.3 When Consumer Activism Meets the Internet: Online Consumer Activism***

Gabriel and Lang's works on consumer activism illustrate an impressive picture of the development process of consumer activism in the UK, the US and other global North countries in front of us. However, these four waves of consumer activism do not represent the whole picture of consumer activism in these countries, especially in the Internet era. Since the birth of the Internet, it has changed the way people participate in social action (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2006). As Bowen (1996) defines, Internet users can fight for their consumer rights online. For researchers who focus on consumer activism, how consumers use different online communication technologies to achieve the goal of their activism events has gradually become a trending topic. By further reviewing relevant literature on online consumer activism in these countries (e.g., Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Handelman, 2013; Lekakis, 2013; Eli et al., 2016; Heldman, 2017; Kampf, 2018; Minocher, 2019), I summarise that the technologies adopted by global North consumers can be divided into three broad categories: traditional Internet technologies (emails, online communities, websites, etc.), social media platforms and a combination of the above technologies and different offline actions.

First, traditional online technologies such as emails, online communities and websites are still adopted by many consumers in the global North in their activism protests. For example, in 2001, Nike launched its Nike iD website, a website for online customisation and personalisation. Consumers can customise certain Nike products such as shoes, clothes according to their personal preferences (size, colour, material). Moreover, consumers can also add any word to their customised Nike products. Jonah Peretti, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology student and an anti-sweatshop sympathiser, ordered a pair of customised Nike shoes with the word "sweatshop" on them via the Nike iD website, but Nike did not accept his order. As a result, Peretti wrote an email back to Nike to satirise Nike's iD website and expose

Nike's sweatshop conditions in their factories worldwide: "Your web site advertises that the Nike iD program is 'about freedom to choose and freedom to express who you are.' I share Nike's love of freedom and personal expression. [...] My iD was offered as a small token of appreciation for the sweatshop workers poised to help me realise my vision. I hope that you will value my freedom of expression and reconsider your decision to reject my order." Peretti initially sent this email to a few friends and did not expect their friends to repost it to others. In only a few months, Peretti's email reached about 11.4 million people globally, and Peretti received 3655 emails about it personally (Peretti with Micheletti 2003, p. 131). Peretti became a public figure because of this email, and he even created a virtual community for consumers like him via the email network. As a result, in 2001, Nike issued its first Corporate Responsibility Report adopting the Global Reporting Initiative Guidelines. This report was opened by the Fair Labour Association for independent supervision (Micheletti and Stolle, 2008).

Another example, Minocher (2019) presents how the consumers in North American use the online petition site "Change.org" to resist and challenge corporate business wrong moves successfully. By looking into the website "Change.org", Minocher (2019) discovers that the aggregation of individual negative comments on a particular brand within this website can successfully challenge company misbehaviour, only if it can "attract and engage a large number of participants," and the mainstream media attention (p. 15). In sum, Minocher states (p. 16) that "Once an activist public begins to receive media attention, the subsequent coverage helps to create and spread the doppelganger brand image into popular culture, pressuring the company to change its behaviour in line with the demands made within the activist public, allowing the cause to achieve success and create market change." However, it should be noted that this thesis only dissects the superficial connections between the online collective actions of consumers, mainstream media reports and the company's behaviour changes and neglects the internal operation mechanism of this online consumer activism system.

In addition to the traditional online websites used by consumers in their actions, social media platforms have been gradually integrated into the repertoires of contention of consumers. Many researchers have demonstrated the positive relationship between consumer activism and different social media platforms. Some studies have stated that different social media platforms have an empowering impact on consumer activism (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Handelman, 2013): Lekakis (2013, p. 141) demonstrates that the Internet and other digital media strategies and tactics (only) operate as an "idealised information portal" among fair trade participants in the UK in her research about coffee activism globally North; Eli et al. (2016)

researched a free social media app named “Buycott” and found out that this app was “providing a means of consumer activism, but also a tool to help consumers care for their health in their everyday shopping decisions.” (p. 68); as the first researcher to empirically shed light on the consumer activism in the social media age, Heldman (2017) summarises that since the emergences of different social media platforms like Facebook (launched in 2004), YouTube (launched in 2005), and Twitter (launched in 2006), social media have “taken consumer activism to a new level in the past decade by making it easier for organised marketplace campaigns to reach more people.” (p. 9).

Although different online communication technologies help consumers achieve their goals, it does not mean that consumers can succeed by adopting these technologies alone, nor does it mean that offline activities are not required. In contrast, more and more consumer activism events have proven that some consumers will adopt a combination strategy of online (including traditional Internet technologies and social media platforms) and offline tactics. For example, the Carrotmob movement<sup>15</sup>: by disseminating the idea of Carrotmob (and previous successful stories) and pending campaigns on different their websites and different social media platforms, the organisers of Carrotmob encourage consumers to purchase in a predefined offline store collectively and at a predetermined time (according to the specific requirements of each campaign, for example, buy vouchers online then use it in one designated restaurant). By doing so, Carrotmob believes that consumers can use their buying power to induce this store to adopt the “suggestions” these consumers offer — to fulfil its corporate social responsibilities. The Carrotmob movement was initiated by its founder Brent Schulkin, who made a video showcasing the origins of the Carrotmob idea and his initial successful engagement with different stores in his neighbourhood on March 29, 2008— Schulkin assured these stores that he would bring a “mob” of consumers to the stores to spend money. In exchange, these stores must use a certain percentage of their profits earned from this “mob” of consumers to reduce their ecological footprint. Schulkin’s video caught the attention of environmental activists in different cities in the US. As a result, more and more videos documenting offline Carrotmob events in different cities were uploaded to YouTube. As more and more local Carrotmob were established in different cities in the US, Europe, and Australia, the Carrotmob movement was no longer restricted to the YouTube platform for dissemination. Different local Carrotmob started to promote the Carrotmob movement by setting up their local websites, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts. At the same time, they linked the Carrotmob

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<sup>15</sup> Although the Carrotmob movement’s official website is not currently active, it is still a significant case.

to other issues, such as employee rights and fair-trade products, “to fit different cultural and contextual understandings of consumer and corporate responsibility.” (Kampf, 2018, p. 7). Further, as Kampf (2018) indicates, online platforms and social media networks enabled the global dispersion of the Carrotmob by propagating on different social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter and the official Carrotmob.org website.

As described in the above examples, different online communication technologies are assisting the global North consumers in achieving the objectives of their activism. For example, consumers can use social media platforms and websites to spread their ideas of consumer activism to farther areas and more people, and recruit more consumers to join their actions, like Carrotmob; scattered consumers can be gathered together through a website and form a united force to challenge certain companies’ misbehaviours, like the users of the “Change.org”. From the earliest cases of consumer activism happened in the US in the 1820s to a wide variety of attempts of online consumer activism of consumers recently, we can see that consumer activism in the global North has undergone a long process of evolution along with the changes of its actual social, economic, cultural and even political contexts of these countries. The objectives and manifestations of consumer activism and strategies/tactics employed by consumers are constantly changing. Meanwhile, studies on consumer activism have been continuously focusing on these changes of consumer activism in the global North while ignoring what is happening in other countries and regions worldwide. Next, drawing lessons from the literature on consumer activism in the global North mentioned above, I illustrate consumer activism and its evolutionary path in China. But before that, it is necessary to review the three important concepts involved in the discussion and analysis of Chinese consumer activism – media activism, digital media activism and video activism.

## **2.3 Three Overlapping Concepts: Media Activism, Digital Activism and Video Activism**

### ***2.3.1 Introduction to Media Activism***

With the development of media and communication technology, Bennett (2017) accounts that media activism focuses on how activists use media and communication strategies and tactics to press forward social movements or advance various causes (including media access and media rights policies). There is no unified definition for media activism so far, while media activism research has gained wide attention in recent years. Discussions about media activism are usually related to large events or processes related to mobilisation, and social movement

theories have significantly been adopted by media scholars in their media activism research (Pickard and Yang, 2017).

The research on media activism is generally based on two analytical frameworks (Carroll and Hackett, 2006) – “Resources Mobilization Theory” (RMT) and “New Social Movements” (NSM) in social movement studies. In the framework of RMT, social movements are assembled by social movement organisations (SMOs). Meanwhile, the media plays a vital role in initiating collective action in social movements for these organisations (Gitlin, 2003). As Tarrow (2011, p. 134) puts it: “If movements can transmit their messages to millions of people across the airwaves – encouraging some to follow their example and larger numbers to take notice of their claims – it becomes possible to create a social movement without incurring the costs of building and maintaining a mass organisation.” However, the traditional mass medium (radio, newspaper, television station, etc.) is controlled and dominated by mainstream commercial media, news and stories about social movements are often neglected or even distorted by them (Han, 2008a, 2008b), as Tarrow (1994, p. 126) puts it, these media “give priority to violent or bizarre aspects of a protest”, but ignore the nonviolent parts in a protest. As a result, different SMOs have developed four primary forms of “media activism” actions to democratise media and communication and to achieve their goals: “influencing content and practices of mainstream media”, “advocating reform of government policy/regulation of media”, “building independent, democratic and participatory media” and “changing the relationship between audiences and media” (Carroll and Hackett, 2006, p. 88).

The NSMs appeared around the mid-1960s in many European countries and the US. Unlike the social movement that regarded the working class as the core and focused on the economic redistribution during the industrial era, NSMs focus on questioning “the wealth-oriented materialistic goals of industrial societies” and “the structures of representative democracies that limit citizen input and participation in governance, instead advocating direct democracy, self-help groups, and cooperative styles of social organisation” (Pichardo, 2003, p. 414). For example, social movements with the themes of anti-war, civil rights, feminism, environmental protection, etc., are all essential components of the NSM. In the NSM framework, media activism is one of the primary forms of NSMs (Han, 2008a). As Pichardo (2003) points out, the participants of NSMs tend to use disruptive (media activism) tactics and mobilise public opinion to gain political influence from the perspective of tactics. Although there are some scholars like Carroll and Hackett (2006) who prefer to regard media activism as a pro-democracy movement (or a “movement-nexus” mentioned in another book of Hackett and Carroll’s, 2006, p. 199), it can only prosper along with other democratic social movements

and vice versa, instead of considering the media activism as an independent new social movement.

In general, Mattoni (2013) categories media activism in three different manners: The first one is activism through media – Activists have obtained new tools to “organise, promote, and account for social movement activities” (Mattoni, 2013, p. 1), such as Gillett (2003) indicates media activism is a form of the progressive social movement that promotes the formation of the alternative public sphere with the help of citizens’ media-related strategies/tactics (from the perspective of consumer activism, for instance, two cases of the Change.org and Carrotmob fall into this category); The second one is activism in the media – Culture jamming is a representative means of it. Specifically, culture jamming aims to subvert the dominant cultural codes; The last one is activism about the media – This form of media activism aims to change or reform the media policies or media practices at the domestic and transnational level, for example, Wikipedia.

### ***2.3.2 The Histories of Digital Activism***

Regarding digital activism, many scholars have defined it in their ways. Joyce (2010) defines that digital activism means citizens use different digital technologies such as mobiles and any other fixed and mobile device connected to the Internet in their campaigns for social and political changes. Karatzogianni (2015) indicates that digital activism refers to the political conducts of social movements, protest organisations and individual activists empowered by digital technologies and networks aiming for reform or revolution. As Gerbaudo (2017) defines, digital activism is often used to describe activists using digital media to achieve their political purposes. In sum, it is necessary to keep in mind that digital activism is ambiguous (Yang, 2016a) and hard to be defined or summarised in a few words.

The histories of digital activism are also complicated. Few scholars have attempted to historicize digital activism (Kaun and Uldam, 2018). Athina Karatzogianni and Paolo Gerbaudo are the few scholars who periodized digital activism. Karatzogianni (2015) explores four waves of digital activism. The first wave started in 1994 with the Zapatista movement in Mexico and the anti-globalization movement and ended with the Genoa protest in 2001. During this period, there were several remarkable digital activism cases: such as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) used FloodNet (an effective program for blocking websites) to attack official websites of the Mexican government and the US pentagon in 1994 (Carty, 2013) and called for an alternative communication network in 1996 (Wolfson, 2014); the birth of the

“Indymedia” during the anti-globalization movement in 1999 in Seattle, Wolfson (2014) finds that the origins of it can be traced back to the call of EZLN. The second wave of digital activism is from 2001 to 2007, and it mainly comprises the increased digital activism related to anti-war (Afghanistan and Iraq war) mobilizations. As Karatzogianni (2015, p. 2) puts it, “the digital revolution ensured that independent voices and new media actors can challenge the official narrative of the war on terror and offer an alternative.” In the third phase, from 2007 to 2010, digital activism spreads to Brazil, Russia, India and China (the BRICS), and other countries beyond the birthplace of digital activism – Europe and the US. The fourth wave stretches from 2010 to 2013. Digital activism phenomena such as WikiLeaks, the Arab Spring uprisings, and the Snowden affair signify that digital activism becomes the mainstream of political conflicts.

After Karatzogianni, Gerbaudo (2017) defines two main waves of digital activism. The first wave around the millennium was constituted by a series of anti-globalization protests against global economic organizations such as the World Bank, the Group Eight (G8) meetings, the World Trade Unions. These movements were characterized by cyber-autonomism (Gerbaudo, *ibid*). During the first wave, tech and alternative media activists of the anti-globalization movement adopted the “cyber-autonomist” strategy that regarded the Internet as a space to create “islands of resistance outside of the control of state and capital” and “an alternative Internet — a free, self-managed and non-commercial space of communication” to “break the monopoly of corporate news media responsible for channelling neoliberal propaganda and shutting down all alternative points of view” (Gerbaudo, *ibid*, p. 485-486). Indymedia was the most noticeable manifestation of this strategy. By deeply embedding in Indymedia as a researcher and activist, Kidd (2002, p. 64) discloses that the advent of Indymedia broke the monopoly of corporate media on information, enabling independent journalists and media producers to produce and distribute stories, photos, and videos from the perspectives of the anti-globalization movement, and it made visible a “multiplicity of social movements and actions”. The second wave of digital activism in the late 2000s and 2010s was characterized by cyber-populism within the movement of the squares (Gerbaudo, *ibid*). Compared with the first wave of digital activism, Gerbaudo (*ibid*) believes that the second wave of digital activists inclined to use commercial social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to mobilize the masses, rather than building their platforms like their predecessors. The 2011 Egyptian Revolution is a representative example of the second wave of digital activism. Activists adopted a Facebook homepage named “We are all Khaled Said”, which was initially used to commemorate Khaled Said and to call and mobilize Egyptian people to take to the streets to protest.

### ***2.3.3 Digital Activism: Media Activism in the Digital Age***

The above histories of digital activism show genres and specific tactics of activists in digital activism. For example, hacktivism, email spamming and virtual attacks on websites (like the FloodNet mentioned above) are two representative forms (Carty, 2013). From the perspective of the technologies used by activists, digital activism or so-called new media activism, can be regarded as a significant subset or a new frontier of media activism in the digital age, which focuses on digital communication technology.

Lievrouw (2011) summarises five genres of new media activism in her book *“Alternative and Activist New Media”*: culture jamming, alternative computing, participatory journalism, mediated mobilisation, and commons knowledge. Culture jamming, is a traditional media activism means that has long history before the birth of the Internet (also see Subsection 2.3.2), since the advent of the Internet, activists have adopted it as a strategy again, such as the “memes” created by them; alternative computing activities include hacktivism, development and dissemination of open-source software, as well as programs that can evade state and corporate surveillance, encrypt communications, and crack genuine software, usually initiated by professional and skilled programmers and engineers; the example of participatory journalism is Indymedia; mediated mobilisation refers to activists use various Internet communicative technologies like blogs, social media networks to mobilise social, cultural and political movements; commons knowledge, refers to open-source collaborations like Wikipedia and Digg.com, which poses challenges to the expert disciplinary taxonomies, institutionalised knowledge and the traditional, conventional and privileged expert authorities (Lievrouw, 2011). These five genres of new media activism have many overlaps with the above-mentioned concepts of media activism and digital activism. Moreover, it should be noted that these genres mentioned above cannot cover the ever-changing digital activism tactics used by activists in the world. As Lievrouw (2011, p. 22) puts it, “genres are not fixed or static, but active, dynamic modes of communication and expression that change with their users’ circumstances and interests”. With the continuous development of digital communication technology, more digital activism strategies and tactics will emerge, resulting in more genres of digital activism.

When reviewing the history and research related to digital activism, many scholars are prone to a “focus shift” when studying digital activism. Gerbaudo (2017) argues that many contemporary studies of digital activism are discussed from technological determinism. To



overcome this techno-deterministic bias, Gerbaudo (2017, p. 481) suggests that we should pay more attention to the complex “imbrication” between politics, culture and technology: “the relative autonomy of politics from technology; the symbolic and not only material character of technological processes; the role of technology as a mediator of social relationships and ways of life that cannot be reduced to technology alone.”

Kaun and Uldam (2018) also indicate, many researchers either pay too much attention to the “digital” – the digital technology in activism actions, or focus too much on “activism” and neglect the specificities of digital technologies in protests. They suggest that when examining digital activism, scholars should also consider political, economic, and societal norms that condition activists use of digital media.

In terms of the relationship between social movements and media technologies, Treré (2019) indicates that communicative reductionism still appears in social movement scholarship. He presents three spectres —technological instrumentalism, functionalism and determinism. To overcome these biases and emphasise the communicative complexity of contemporary activism, based on his past ten years of research on the interrelations between social movements and media technologies within the social movements and political phenomena in Italy, Mexico and Spain, Treré (2019, p. 204) expounds that social movements and communication technologies are “co-constitutive” – media have a bearing on the determination, development and diffusion of the predetermined goals of social movements, not just a tool to achieve the set goals. Moreover, Treré reemphasises the agency of social movement actors that have been neglected by scholars who tend to pay more attention to the media and the roles that social, cultural, and political conditions and historical contexts play in digital activism, by adopting the approaches of media practice approach and media ecology in his research.

#### ***2.3.4 Video Activism: A Subset of Media Activism***

As one of the most influential subsets of media activism, video activism suggests that video production can be regarded as a primary tool for advancing social justice and social reform (Han, 2008a, 2008b). Or in other words, video activism can be regarded as “the use of video as an essential tool in social justice activism” (Harding, 2001, p. 1). The profound effects of video activism have become a focal point within social movement studies in recent years, and the active role of video, or called moving images, have been recognised by researchers in the field (Eder & Klonk, 2016). In the hands of a video activist, a camera and other video-recording tools can become “important resources for self-expression, collective identities, framing and

diffusion of protest and social movements, and for attracting audiences and target groups” (Askanius, 2020, p. 137). According to Askanius (2020, p. 138), the term “video” in video activism can be “analogue, digital, moving image, or still images compiled into a stream of moving images”, it can “take on the shape of raw unedited footage, carefully crafted documentaries, or mash-up/remixes”.

Reviewing the development of video activism from the historical perspective in the global North context, it is evident that the previous video activism was positively related to the video technologies and the social contexts in the past. In the 1950s and early 1960s in America, activists started to build their media outlets to bypass mainstream media suppression. In October 1965, Korean American artist Nam June Paik taped the visiting scene of Paul VI in New York with a video camera and showed it in a coffee house on Greenwich Avenue on the same day. Boyle (1997) argues that this videotape could be considered the starting point of video activism in the global North. Juhasz (1995) also indicates that the American underground cinema during this period can be treated as a predecessor to the radical protest cinema (videos including political activism of civil rights, anti-war protests, etc.) of the 1960s and 1970s. According to Askanius (2013), as one of the alternative public access television projects – the guerrilla television movement (Boyle, 1997), better and cheaper camera devices and editing tools offered more possibilities to the anti-systematic critical voices throughout the 1980s and 1990s. During this period in the global North, massive video activism organisations emerged, such as the Undercurrent in the UK; Paper tiger TV, Deep dish and Indymedia video in the US, etc. These organisations and groups offered independent and critical media analyses to society, launched filmmaking technologies workshops, screened independent films in communities, cultivated civil literacy, etc. They furthered the social change in the ways of media and video activism (Han, 2008a). As Juhasz (1995) states, rapid changes in politics, theory, and technology stimulate the significant productions of political filmmaking.

In one of Askanius’s (2020) research on video activism, by reviewing the literature on video activism systematically, she identifies and unpacks tendencies in how activist video has been defined and examined as either technology, text or testimony. From the point of positioning video as technology, scholars have focused on specific video technology and specific platforms (e.g. Fish, 2016), “often with an interest in techno-political aspects of video activism, or in video as a form of hacktivism” (Askanius, 2020, p.140). From the point of positioning video as text, scholars have shed light on the types, taxonomies, genres, and subgenres of video activism (Askanius, 2013, 2020), and their aesthetics and artistic dimensions (Juhasz, 2006). The last point, as Askanius points out, videos are often regarded

by scholars as testimony – a means of “bearing witness and providing visual evidence” in the literature. Based on these three dominant tendencies of conceptualizing video activism, Askanius (2020) advocates a more open-ended understanding of video activism stemmed from Couldry’s practice theory, defining video activism as “the things activists do, think and say in relation to video for social and political change – all of which are organized by common understandings, teleology, and rules specific to this field” (p.145). In sum, the practice approach helps scholars keep off a one-sided focus on the video content only, or a focus exclusively on the technology behind the video (Askanius, 2020). Inspired by Askanius, this thesis also draws lessons from the practice approach when exploring the consumer video activism tactics (Subsection 3.3.4).

## **2.4 Chinese Consumer’s Resistance Consciousness Awakening**

### ***2.4.1 The Rebirth of the Chinese Consumer: From the “Anti-American Boycott” to the Economic Reform***

Like consumer activism in the global North, the definition, manifestation and objective of consumer activism in China are constantly changing. On May 6, 1882, US President Chester A. Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act, prohibiting all Chinese labourers from entering the US for the next ten years. Under the “protection” of this act, US immigration administrators indiscriminately harassed and humiliated all Chinese who legally lived and worked in the US at that time, including legal residents, businessmen, students and even privileged Chinese officials (McKee, 1977). In 1904, when the bill was about to expire, the business leaders of the Chinese American community thought it was time to abolish this act, while the US government firmly believed that the Chinese Exclusion Act needed to be renewed. As a result, on the one hand, those Chinese business leaders in the US began lobbying the Qing government to negotiate with the US to abolish the act; on the other hand, they began to call on the Chinese people in China to boycott American goods, thereby exerting pressure on the US government. In May 1905, the Chinese people were irritated by the unfair treatment suffered by their Chinese compatriots in the United States. They began to voluntarily boycott American goods in solidarity with their compatriots in the United States, as Wang (2001, p. 1) puts it, “merchants, students, women, children, doctors, boatmen, and even beggars in more than twenty cities and small towns throughout China launched a boycott against American products....”

This Chinese anti-American boycott succeeded in bringing substantial damage to American business. It made the then US president Theodore Roosevelt order all US governments to treat the Chinese people politely (Wang, 2001). It can be regarded as one of the earliest and largest consumer activism movements in modern Chinese history. For the first time, Chinese consumers at that time realised that their buying power matters. According to Remer's (1979) research on Chinese boycotts, between the end of this incident and 1931, the rights and interests of the Chinese people and the country continued to be bullied and violated by Japan and Britain, which directly led to seven patriotic boycotts of Japanese and British goods by the Chinese people. Before the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, another incident of consumer activism was worth mentioning: the 1931-1933 Anti-Japanese Boycott (it was the last large-scale activism movement enacted by Chinese consumers before the founding of the PRC). On September 18, 1931, Japan invaded north-eastern China, and one year after the invasion, on January 28, 1932, Japan attacked and invaded Shanghai and its surrounding areas. As a result, from 1933-1935, under the call of local business and other associations in Shanghai, the Chinese people began to boycott Japanese goods and support China-made goods to help the Chinese national industry to grow and develop and save the country (Zhou, 2007; Zhu, 2009). By reviewing these cases mentioned above, we can summarise that between 1905 and the foundation of the New China in 1949, the consumer activism cases in China had almost the same cause – patriotic and national sentiments that resulted from witnessing their compatriots or country being bullied by other countries or businesses. I call it “patriotic consumer activism”, and boycotts and buycotts were the main tactics of Chinese consumers. In other words, consumer activism at the time in China was a manifestation of patriotism. The objectives of Chinese consumers participating in these cases was to show their patriotism, to express their spiritual and economic support for their compatriots (domestic businesses) or country bullied by foreign nations or businesses, and to protest against countries or businesses that bully their own country through their boycott or buycott tactics.

Although the above-mentioned consumer activism cases occurred in a completely different socio-political and economic context from today's China (PRC) (Zhu, 2009), these stories show us the origin of Chinese consumer activism and its characteristics before the founding of the PRC from a historical perspective, allowing us to better understand today's consumer activism happening in China.

On October 1, 1949, the chairman of the communist party of China, Mao Zedong, proclaimed the foundation of the PRC in Beijing. From then until 1978, Chinese people

temporarily abandoned their identity as consumers. According to the detailed introduction about the “Chinese ticketing system” on the official webpage of the Chinese Commerce Ministry<sup>16</sup>, since the 1950s, due to the shortage of food and other daily necessities, China implemented a limited supply policy for food (e.g., rice, plain flour), some non-staple foods (e.g., peanut, salt, soy sauce), and other commodities in short supply for a long period. In short, the “ticketing system” means that when buying commodities, in addition to paying for the price of the goods, Chinese people also need to provide corresponding “tickets”, such as “rice ticket”, “sault ticket”, “pork ticket” and so on. In sum, there was no “consumer” in China back then, only “supplier” and “demander”, so let alone consumer activism.

The concept of “consumer” was reborn in China in 1978, when the Chinese economic reform began. With the Chinese economic reform in 1978, productivity and imports increased, more domestic and foreign commodities appeared on the market, and Chinese people had more choices when purchasing products. In May 1993, the food tickets in Beijing was abolished, as Sun (2019, p. 367) puts it: “This month [May 1993], Beijing residents finally no longer needed to use the food coupons that have accompanied them for many years when buying food.” The abolition of Beijing food tickets can be regarded as a sign that the “ticketing system” was phased out in China (Sun, 2019).

According to the investigation of Ho (1997), mainland China would enjoy the world’s fastest-growing consumer market for the decade from 1994 to 2003. Ho’s prediction is correct. In the decades after the national economic reform, the purchasing power of the Chinese consumer progressively increased, and the commodity economy did bring huge convenience to the daily lives of Chinese people. On December 11 2001, China successfully became a member of the World Trade Organisation. As Overby (2006) indicates, this historical event pushed forward the Chinese economic development and awakened the consumer consciousness of Chinese people. At the same time, as the consumption power of the Chinese people improved, corresponding laws and regulations to protect consumers also began to be introduced by the Chinese government. As Overby puts it in his research: “In a few decades [since 1978], the country has transitioned from having no consumer economy to being the largest consumer market in the world...China’s consumer protection regime was largely established just within the last two decades.” (2001, p. 347).

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<sup>16</sup> I accessed this webpage in August 2020 to obtain relevant information, but now (February 18, 2021), I could not access this website.

When discussing the development process of consumer rights protection in China, the story of the Chinese Consumers Association (CCA, or CA) should not be overlooked. To protect consumers' legitimate rights and interests, the CCA was founded (by the government) in late 1984 (as of May 2020, every city has a branch of the China consumers association, according to the introduction on the CCA website, as of September 2016, there were 31 provincial, 351 prefecture-level and 2,852 county consumers associations). The original intention of the CCA is to help consumers protect their legitimate rights and interests since its establishment. According to the latest version of the People's Republic of China Consumer Protection Law (first released in 1993, first revised in 2009, and then revised again in 2013), the CCA performs the following seven functions: (1) Providing consumers with consumer information and consultation services; (2) Assisting relevant administrative departments in supervising and checking commodities and services; (3) Reporting consumer affairs to relevant administrative departments; (4) Accepting complaints from consumers and conducting investigations into such complaints; (5) Submitting faulty commodity to relevant appraisal organisations and gaining the result of quality appraisal; (6) Providing legal aid to consumers if it is a necessity; (7) Exposing unscrupulous companies that violate the consumer protection law through mass media.

Unlike consumer groups or organisations mentioned above in those global North countries, CCA (and its branches in every city) is not an independent organisation. Like any other non-governmental organisation in China, the CCA is supported and regulated by the Chinese government. As Overby (2006) claims, the government can exert significant control over consumer issues and policy via the CCA<sup>17</sup>. This feature of the CCA determines that they cannot confront the government or initiate a collective boycott or protest, like some consumer organisations in the global North. Despite this situation, the CCAs have still solved countless problems for Chinese consumers with the government's help in a lawful way. According to the CCA official figure presented on its website, throughout 2019, the CCA retrieved a total of 1.17722 billion Yuan (according to the exchange rate in June 2020, about 0.13 billion Pounds) of compensation for Chinese consumers. Since the 2010s, Chinese people have gradually begun to assert their legitimate consumer rights and interests through various legal approaches, including suing in the people's courts, asking for help from the government department of industry and commerce, and the CCA.

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<sup>17</sup> In this thesis, the CCA is regarded as a government department in China rather than an independent social organisation.

With the gradual establishment and continuous improvement of consumer associations in every Chinese city and the continuous development of China's market economy, Chinese consumers' self-interest-protection awareness has increased. As Overby (2006, p. 372) puts it, "the CCA's complaint caseload has steadily increased each year as consumers' awareness of their rights has risen". Throughout 2016, the general administration of consumer protection in Beijing announced that all industrial and commercial administrative departments received and solved 653,505 consumer complaints. Furthermore, three years later, the complaint case number exploded to 821,377, up about 25.7%. There is no doubt that the establishment of CCA (and the legislation of the Consumer Protection Law) has empowered Chinese consumers to protect their rights and interests. However, this is far from enough to meet the needs of the expanding Chinese consumer population. In the World Bank's official pages (2018), China was described as a developing country, and its "market reforms are incomplete". From the perspective of consumer protection in the market, this judgement is still fair up to now. Chinese consumers today live in an ever-changing consumer society where consumers associations and consumer protection laws and regulations are still in the early stages of development. Their demands for protecting the rights and interests themselves still cannot be effectively satisfied. These realities have constantly pushed Chinese consumers to find more alternative ways to fulfil their demands.

## ***2.4.2 Media Activism and Chinese Consumers' Resistances***

### ***2.4.2.1 Media and Digital Activism in China***

The resistances of Chinese consumers to businesses after 1978 are closely related to media activism. To better understand the early consumer activism in China, it is necessary to review relevant literature on media activism and digital activism in the context of China first.

Hong Han, as one of the few scholars in China that focuses on the field of media activism, (2008) sheds light on the reasons behind the occurrence of media activism in China, the differences between Chinese and Western (European countries and the US) media activism, and the main tactics used by Chinese people in media activism issues. Han stresses that the rise of media activism in China was promoted by the following three factors: first, from the perspective of the macro social environment, in the process of China's economic and social transformation (from the planned economic system before 1978 to the socialist market economy system today), conflicts of interest and adjustments constantly trigger new social problems and contradictions, such as the environment pollution, property rights disputes, laid-

offs, public health, etc.; second, the Chinese people's education level, knowledge of the law, civil awareness, and their enthusiasm for political and social participation continue to increase; third, with the popularity of the Internet, digital camcorders, and mobiles, Chinese people have acquired more convenient tools and media for media activism.

Unlike the organised and long-term western media activism that emphasises political intervention, anti-hegemonic, public and group interests, Han (2008a) stresses that media activism in China is a means of social resistance or a tool of action in a specific field and often intentionally avoids or downplays political confrontation with the government; it is often initiated by individuals because of their interests; it is a disorganised, occasional, amateur short-term action. Together with China's political ecology, social environment, and media management policies and systems, these characteristics have influenced the specific tactics of Chinese media activism. Summarising Han's (2008a) research on the tactics of media activism in China, as of 2008, there were several media activism tactics adopted by Chinese people: first, use different camera equipment to record social injustices and reveal them to domestic and international media; second, use Internet technologies such as social media to disseminate information about specific issues, and express views on it, to provoke media attention; third, use different offline performance protests to attract the attention of the public and the media; fourth, establish cooperation with mainstream media and its journalists to influence their news reports on specific topics; fifth, create alternative media to disseminate their messages, challenge the hegemony of Chinese mainstream media and achieve their goals. In addition to these media activism tactics mentioned by Han, new media activism tactics have been continuously discovered by scholars in the field in recent years, such as "digital masquerading" (Tan, 2017) and "online translation activism" (Yang, 2017).

In recent years, media activism supported by ICTs, so-called "digital activism" (Zhang, 2021), "online activism" (Yang, 2009a; Yang, 2015; Chen, 2020a), or "Internet activism" (Yang, 2014), has become one of the hot and trending research topics in China. To avoid ambiguity, I use the term "digital activism" to include all these overlapping concepts mentioned above. According to the above-mentioned Han's research on Chinese media activism, digital activism in China can be specifically referred to as digital media activism, which is a new form of expression in Chinese media activism. According to Yang (2009a, 2014), digital activism can be regarded as an important form of citizen activism and popular contention enabled by ICTs in China, and the main issues focus on "corruption, social injustices against vulnerable persons, and abuse of power by government officials" (Yang, 2014, p. 111).



The history of digital activism in China can be traced back to the late 1990s. According to Yang, “*Internet mass incidents (wangluo quntixing shijian)*” – “large-scale protest activities that take place online” initiated by netizens or activists in China first took place in BBS, then expanded to blogs, and finally moved to microblogs and social media platforms such as Weibo; among these digital activism incidents, Chinese mainstream media (such as Television stations, newspapers) and international media play an important role in magnifying the impact of these incidents (Yang, 2014). In 2009, as one of the few scholars focusing on digital activism in China, Yang (2009a) demonstrates that online activism in China depends on three specific conditions: firstly, the existence of grassroots civic groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and online communities; secondly, the existence of commercial Internet companies that provide Chinese netizens/activists with digital platforms in pursuit of traffic and interest; thirdly, the creativity of Chinese netizens.

Today the scholarship in digital activism in China is growing. As Fang and Replikova (2017) indicate, studies on digital activism in China mainly emphasise and reveal how civil society and social media can change and influence governance practices and present the complicated dynamics of control and resistance between regulators and social media activists. For example, Chen (2020a, p. 5) indicates that Chinese people’s involvement in political [or social] contention today, “is often an urban phenomenon that involves mass discussion on Chinese social media”. By looking into the 2013 *Southern Weekly* incident<sup>18</sup> and resistance in China, Chen argues that Chinese resisters today are relying on new digital networks, like Weibo for spreading information and political contention, “digital social networks have changed the dynamics of control of collective action on certain topics” (2020a, p. 6). By comparing with digital activism incidents that have occurred in other countries (e.g., Earl and Kimport, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012), Chen (2020) points out that most Chinese digital activism incidents remain merely online. Following this research, Chen (2020b) further explore the digital activism from the perspective of LGBTQ+ activism in China, showing that the young LGBTQ activists are promoting LGBTQ+ discourses that challenge the gender norms in the Chinese society and constructing the collective queer identity on Chinese digital networks. Huang and Sun (2016) demonstrate that anti-nuclear protestors in Jiangmen were using Weibo to mobilise others to join their online and offline protests; using Weibo to disseminate information questioning the

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<sup>18</sup> According to Chen (2020), the 2013 *Southern Weekly* incident was first sparked on Weibo after Southern media journalists accused provincial censors of brutally revising a planned Southern Weekly New Year’s editorial calling for constitutionalism. Those Weibo posts quickly sparked online discussion, further sparking a flurry of statements, open letters and online petitions by Chinese journalists and citizens. Following the online incident, citizens and activists launched offline protests against media censorship outside the Southern Media Group office building.

safety of nuclear power plants and express personal views on this matter; even using Weibo to coordinate and schedule offline protests. Liu (2016) argues that digital media like WeChat, Weibo, and QQ in China enables environmental activists to disseminate contention broadly and rapidly and learn from previous experiences.

From Mattoni's (2013) so-called "activism through media", "activism in media" to "activism about media", the above-mentioned tactics show that Chinese media activism, especially digital activism in China, is as dynamic as western media and digital activism. However, even though Chinese people today prefer to adopt various "rightful tactics" to "make demands within the regime's framework and maintain an obedient relationship with the state", (Chen, 2020, p. 9), keyword filtering, site blocking, mass self-regulation initiated by Internet companies, and other means of censoring and controlling what people do online constant pose challenges for them (Yang, 2009a, 2014). Moreover, it should be noted that most media activism tactics, including digital activism tactics used by activists in China rely on mainstream media, they need to be reported by them to gain more significant influence so that government departments and judicial departments will intervene, and the goals of those using these tactics will be achieved. As Han (2008a) states, this is the critical activism mechanism in China (Subsection 5.4.2).

#### *2.4.2.2 The Rebirth of Consumer Activism in China*

As mentioned above, since the rebirth of the consumer in China in 1978, the status of Chinese consumers has been continuously improved as their purchasing power has increased. At the same time, consumer activism has reappeared in Chinese society. Han's substantial work on media activism can be used to explain consumer activism in China from the perspective tactics used in the representative cases of consumer activism (see below) to a large extent. Moreover, by reviewing these cases, I classify two main forms of consumer activism in China based on the different objectives of these cases.

By looking into the consumer activism cases in China, we can see that Chinese consumers have frequently used the five media activism tactics mentioned by Han to protect their own (or others) rights and interests. These consumer activism cases can be regarded as the first type of consumer activism in China, a form of consumer activism that occurs to safeguard the rights and interests of the initiator or/and the general public. I call it "interest-oriented consumer activism" (this form of consumer activism is the main focus of this thesis). For example, as the best-known consumer rights activist in China, Wang Hai, was the first

person to know how to use the media to protect his rights and interests. In 1995, inspired by the Consumer Protection Law that was implemented two years ago, Wang Hai embarked on the road of safeguarding consumer rights protected by the Consumer Protection Law (although some people believed that Wang Hai was making profits by using his consumer rights). Article 49 of the Law stipulates that if a company is found to be fraudulent in providing goods or services to a consumer, the latter is entitled to compensation equal to twice the price they paid. From September to November in 1995, Wang Hai bought counterfeit goods in different stores in Beijing and claimed compensation from these businesses according to Article 49. By cooperating with mainstream media in China, Wang Hai successfully won 8000 Yuan (then around 647 Pounds) (Sun, 2019). Specifically, Wang Hai informed the media of the fakes he had found and allowed the media to report on these incidents, forcing those merchants who sold the fakes to compensate him more actively.

Before the Internet was accessible to the public in China, Chinese consumers could only protect themselves by complaining to the CCA and other relevant official administrations, directly taking legal actions, seeking help from the mainstream media, or even protesting offline in front of the government or shopping mall. After entering the 21st century, with the help of the Internet, civil society can expose corporate misconduct to the public (Bennett, 2005). Chinese consumers further realised that their buying power could impact this society and even this world. As the Internet penetration rate continued to increase in China in the late 1990s<sup>19</sup>, the cyberspace created by Internet technologies and personal computers asymptotically became a new theatre for Chinese consumers to enact their activism strategies/tactics. For example, the well-known “Toshiba Incident” case was initially caused by the evidence provided by an anonymous consumer to the Qianlong news.

In March 1999, two consumers who had bought Toshiba Laptops in the US accused that the floppy disk controllers (FDC) in their laptops were defective (Loss of data or even system failure could happen in these Toshiba Laptops). They alleged that the faultiness of Toshiba violated the federal US Computer Fraud and Abuse Act and breached national express warranties of the Uniform Commercial Code. As a result, Toshiba paid 2.1 billion US dollars in mostly non-cash compensation to the plaintiffs. Moreover, according to the finding of facts of the “Toshiba Incident”, “Toshiba also agreed to pay 147.5 million US dollars in attorneys’ fee and 3 million US dollars in class counsel’s litigation expenses, plus other costs, to manufacture all future computers without the FDC boundary error problem, and to make

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<sup>19</sup> See Guo mentions in chapter 2 of her book “*The Evolution of The Chinese Internet*” (2021, p. 23).

available a free software patch for existing computers” (Overby, 2006, p. 378). On the other side of the earth, this unprecedented settlement of Toshiba in the US had a significant impact on Chinese consumers. A Chinese consumer who purchased the same Toshiba laptop as the Americans also asked for compensation after hearing that Toshiba had chosen to settle with consumers in the US. After failing to negotiate with Toshiba’s Chinese agency, this consumer chose to provide all recordings of her/his conversation with Toshiba to the new “Qianlong News”, a news website launched by Beijing official propaganda department (Peng, 2005) in May 2000.

On May 22, 2000, the then vice president of Toshiba Japan came to China to hold an emergency press conference on whether Toshiba computers had quality problems. At the press conference, Toshiba explained that its laptop products manufactured in China had no quality problems, so there was no need to compensate Chinese consumers (Luo, 2000). Grievances of the Chinese Toshiba consumers had been quickly spread on different news websites and online forums. It even caused a massive boycott of the Japanese commodities movement in China at the time. Given that Chinese consumers could only express their voices on the message board of the official news portal back then, as Yang (2009b) concludes, the online bulletin board system (BBS) was the central space for online collective actions in the first few years of Internet development in mainland China. For instance, an anonymous reader (2000) remarked on the Toshiba incident: “The Toshiba company did not pay enough attention to the Chinese market.” The “Toshiba Incident” kept drawing the attention of other mainstream television stations, radios and newspapers.

On May 25, 2000, the news named “When will Toshiba tell the truth to Chinese consumers”, written based on the audio evidence provided by an anonymous consumer, was published on Qianlong. This news article soon attracted the attention of many mainstream media. As Chen (2000) reported, Beijing TV, China Youth Daily and many other mainstream media began to report the incident one after another, questioning why Toshiba treated consumers in China and the US differently— such as the China Youth Daily (2000), published a news review named “Uncover Secrets of the Toshiba Incident” on May 29, criticizing the Toshiba sharply. These reports quickly received a strong response from Chinese consumers. However, the pressure from Chinese media and Chinese consumers did not make Toshiba submissive. Toshiba still did not provide any compensation to the Chinese consumers at the end of this incident. Although Chinese consumers failed in getting the compensation in this case, their boycott of Japanese goods successfully caused Toshiba’s sales to plummet at the

time. The Toshiba incident also proves that the consciousness of Chinese consumers and their willingness to defend their legitimate interests were increasing (Overby, 2006).

In general, we can use Han's (2008) definition of Chinese media activism strategies and tactics to explain the "Toshiba Incident". By cooperating with the media – such as the anonymous consumer revealed the recordings to Qianlong news, and discussing information about specific issues on online forums – such as discussing the Toshiba incident on online forums to attract media attention, Chinese consumers successfully achieved their goals – boycotted Toshiba and other Japanese goods and got compensation. In the following years after the incident, Chinese consumers gradually realised the power of media. They became familiar with using the Internet and the mainstream media to speak for themselves and achieve their activism goals. As Reilly (2014) describes, in 2003 and 2005, Chinese consumers launched two online petitions to boycott Japanese companies and products. In 2003, a website named "Patriot League" launched an online petition to oppose letting Japanese companies build the Chinese new high-speed railway line in Shanghai. In the spring of 2005, Chinese consumers protested Japan's efforts to gain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council through online petitions and street demonstrations, calling on everyone to boycott Japanese goods. Thousands of Chinese consumers joined these two boycotts. Through online petitions, they successfully attracted the attention of mainstream media at home and abroad to their boycott of Japanese companies and goods.

From 1994 to 2010, the early stage of social media development in China, the main manifestations of social media were BBS, blog, social networking site (SNS), and instant messaging. At the time, Chinese consumers began to use these early social media technologies in their activism actions, like the above-mentioned Toshiba incident and other two boycotts of Japanese companies and products. Since the 2010s, with the emergence of mobile social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo, Chinese social media has entered a prosperous era (Lai, 2019). The emergence and popularity of this new wave of social media platforms have also responded to the activism needs of Chinese consumers. For example, in September 2011, Luo Yonghao (Weibo celebrity) kept posting comments on Weibo, accusing Siemens of quality problems in refrigerators. His criticism of Siemens quickly gained the support of many Siemens users on Weibo, which eventually led to Siemens users' collective consumer activism actions across the country.

In December 2011, Siemens officially apologised to Luo Yonghao and other Chinese users for the quality problems of Siemens refrigerators. In the same month, another similar consumer activism case happened. The Chinese General Administration of Quality Supervision,

Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ) found that the aflatoxin M1 in Mengniu's milk products did not meet national standards (aflatoxin can cause damage to the human liver). Wang Xiaoshan, a well-known columnist in China, began using Weibo to criticise Mengniu and called on consumers to boycott Mengniu after AQSIQ announced the above results. Following his appeal, many well-known Weibo users like Luo Yonghao mentioned above, Ning Caishen (renowned screenwriter), also started to call on the public to boycott Mengniu by reposting Wang's boycott declaration or posting comments on Weibo, many mainstream media (including websites and newspapers) reported and commented on this boycott incident (Huang, 2015). The cases of Luo and Wang in 2011 were only the beginning. After them, more and more Chinese consumers began to defend their rights and interests through social media platforms such as Weibo:

In February 2014, Weibo user "Caijinning" posted a message on Weibo to boycott Baihe Net (match-making website), saying that a promotion advertisement of Baihe Net seriously hurt the feelings of married and unmarried people in China and kidnapped users with outdated ethical rules. Her appeal successfully attracted the attention of mainstream media and thousands of Weibo users; In January 2017, Weibo user "Lin da shi wo" posted pictures and texts on Weibo, claiming that when she was eating in a restaurant in Lijiang, she was severely disfigured by several local men. She complained about the local police's improper handling of the incident in Lijiang through her posts on Weibo. This incident was quickly spread on Weibo, which aroused the attention of the people and the media (including mainstream media and We-media), as well as the Lijiang government; In June 2020, Chinese consumers across the country started boycotting Fengchao's hub locker service on Weibo because they were not satisfied with the service fees charged by Fengchao.

It can be seen from the consumer activism cases illustrated above that "interest-oriented consumer activism" is the mainstream form of consumer activism in today's Chinese society. Moreover, the core of this research, consumer video activism, also belongs to this form of consumer activism (Subsection 5.2.1). Hence it becomes the focus of this thesis undoubtedly. Specifically, "interest-oriented consumer activism" refers to Chinese consumers (individual or group) using alternative<sup>20</sup> strategies/tactics to safeguard the rights and interests of the initiator or/and the general public. Besides this form of consumer activism, I find another form of consumer activism in Chinese society when I was looking into the consumer activism cases in

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<sup>20</sup> "Alternative" here refers to those consumer rights protection strategies and tactics that are not officially provided and encouraged by relevant government departments in China.

China, which is the “patriotic consumer activism” that occurred between 1905 and 1949 mentioned above, such as those two boycotts of Japanese companies and products in 2003 and 2005 mentioned above. After Chinese people entered the age of social media, this form of consumer activism has occasionally appeared on social media platforms. On Weibo, for example, in May 2016, Weibo users collectively boycotted Hong Kong actor Du Wenzhe because the latter made insulting remarks against the people of mainland China; In March 2017, because the government of South Korea accepted assistance from the United States and deployed the Sade Anti-Missile System (Sade System) in South Korea, Chinese consumers then collectively initiated a boycott against the Korea Lotte Group and other Korean products on Weibo; In March 2021, Chinese consumers boycotted H&M, Nike and other brands over Xinjiang human rights statements on Weibo. Although “interest-oriented consumer activism” and “patriotic consumer activism” are two main forms of consumer activism I have found so far, they do not represent all forms of consumer activism in China. There will be more forms of consumer activism worthy of our attention in the future.

## **2.5 From Video Activism to Short Video Activism**

### ***2.5.1 The Earliest Form of Video Activism in China: Social Documentary Film***

In the cases of “interest-oriented consumer activism” mentioned above, from the Toshiba incident to the case of Luo Yonghao, Wang Xiaoshan and others defending their consumer rights on Weibo, the online rights protection platforms and methods adopted by Chinese consumers are constantly upgrading. Today, with the emergence of the SVB platform, the way consumers protect their rights online has once again evolved. Chinese consumers’ latest short video activism tactics in their daily protest are situated in the intersection between consumer activism, media activism, digital activism and video activism. In the last section, I have already discussed consumer activism in China from a historical perspective, and analysed the evolution of Chinese consumer activism based on the literature on Chinese media activism and digital activism. Next, to further understand the consumer video activism tactics that this thesis focuses on, it is necessary to explore it from the perspective of video activism in the context of China.

According to Han (2008a), as an indispensable part of Chinese media activism, video activism in China first appeared in the late 1980s in the form of social documentary film. However, in China, researchers have rarely engaged in video activism research. The only research of video activism has always been connected with the Chinese social documentary

film studies in their academic fields (e.g., Han, 2008a, 2008b, 2016; Song, 2016; Liu, 2013). More precisely, most researchers merely borrowed the western concept of video activism to analyse the development progress of Chinese documentaries rather than investigate the Chinese evolution process of video activism itself. These researchers only agree that the early Chinese social documentary film can be considered the earliest form (and the most representative form) of video activism in China. However, several questions remain to be answered, such as how these social documentary films work as a form of video activism and what is the latest expression of video activism in China after the age of social documentary film. Before answering these questions, I start by offering more background about Chinese social documentary films. When we discuss the social documentary film in China, it is necessary to mention the rise of NDM (New Documentary Movement) in the late 1980s. My purpose is not to represent the comprehensive information about the NDM here but to explain why these social documentary films are viewed as early video activism in China.

To answer this question, we should understand what is “专题片(Zhuan ti pian)” (special film) first. In the early 1980s, Chinese state-run media such as China Central Television (CCTV) was keen on producing “Zhuan ti pian”, and most of the themes of these special films were about the Chinese natural scenery or political commentary (Xinyu L, 2003), and the production team of these films usually needed to prepare the whole script before shooting. These films formed a new kind of state propaganda form collectively in front of the public. Under these circumstances, the NDM was born around the late 1980s as resistance to the “专题片(Zhuan ti pian)”, which coincides with the historical stage of the reform and opening-up of China. Xinyu L (2003) suggested that “truthfulness” and “individualization” are two main features of NDM, hence during this period, many documentary films that focus on the people at the bottom of society were beginning to be produced in abundance. “The recorders paid more attention to the subaltern emotional appeals and demand of interests, and they closely concerned the Chinese social realities from the top down. All of these were blind spots of the Chinese mainstream media [and their feature films] at that time.” (Xinyu L, 2003, p. 336).

Chinese researchers such as Han and Xinyu L believe that the NDM represents the starting point of video activism in China. According to Xinyu L (2003), the NDM was initiated by media professionals from two different parties in the television and film industry simultaneously: media workers working within the state-affiliated media and independent media professionals working outside the state-affiliated media. However, it should be noted that, even if those independent media professionals did not work within the state-affiliated



media, they had been seeking opportunities to cooperate with the state-affiliated media, such as the state-owned media was the largest investor in some social documentary films made by independent professionals (Xinyu L, 2003).

“These representative filmmakers come from the bottom, and they try their best to let subaltern act and speak in these social documentary films.” (Xinyu L and Yuezhi Z, 2009, p. 299). The implication of the NDM is clear: the emergence of these new social documentary films promoted social justice and social reforms at that time by “show[ing] the survival demands of people of different social classes and their ways of feeling under the Chinese social, political, and economic landscape [at that time] ...” (Xinyu L, 2003, p. 23), “... it is the embodiment of social democracy.” However, it should be noted that these “new” social documentary films still only expressed the subjective feelings of these filmmakers to the society, or in other words, these films were still produced by the documentary filmmakers instead of the people themselves. Therefore, these “new” social documentary filmmakers cannot replace the people from the bottom to speak because they cannot fully understand or experience the latter’s life, emotional feeling and appeal. Chinese people need to speak out their stories by themselves.

The underlying causes of the gradual rise of these Chinese social documentary films were as follows: first, on a micro-level, the popularization of the digital video camera, editing tools and the emergence of the Internet offered practical media activism tools for those radical filmmakers at large; second, from the perspective of macro-social environment level, during the Chinese social and economic transformation process, the conflict of interests between different groups or individuals continuously trigger new social conflicts, these public issues boosted the awakening of citizenship<sup>21</sup> and the expansions of non-governmental organisations in China (Han, 2016). In light of the above, in China, the early history of video activism is equivalent to the historical development process of the Chinese social documentary film to a certain extent. Moreover, according to Xinyu L (2003; and Yuezhi, Z, 2009), it is incorrect to say that Chinese documentary and western documentary concepts are the same. This part aims to provide an essential historical context of video activism in the Chinese context and interpret interrelationships between social-political backgrounds, video-related technologies, and agents’ video activism tactics. The historical contexts of video activism in China can help us better understand the cause of the present surge of consumer video activism in China.

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<sup>21</sup> To be more specific, according to Nathan (1985) and Hooper (2005), the official Chinese concept of rights (citizenship) is different from the West (e.g., the three elements of citizenship defined by Marshall in 1950), it emphasizes on “social citizenship” rather than “political citizenship”.

### ***2.5.2 Short Video Activism: The Public-dominated Video Activism in China***

If we treat the NDM as the first phase of video activism in China, back to the question I proposed above, it is necessary to find out the next phase of video activism in China, especially in this social media age. Since the mid-1990s, the social documentary films progressively “came down” in the street, different categories of civil-documentary groups began to appear (Han, 2005). However, this situation did not last long. Xinyu L (2003) emphasises that after the mid to late 1990s in China, the NDM began to wane in the wave of consumerism, especially the Chinese television industrialization and commercialization compelled the social documentary film industry to cater the popular taste and audience rating. The enthusiasm for video activism was laid aside by those social documentary filmmakers and audiences. The passion for video activism returned until the late 20th century. Since 1998, TV programs like “BaiXingGuShi” (The Story of People) produced by Beijing Television Station and “ShengHuo” (Life) produced by CCTV Channel 2 started to gradually use factual video footage provided by the public as their primary program. As Han (2005, p. 75) points out, such public video footages were adopted by the Chinese mainstream as their news materials, “it is commendable that the ordinary people can tell their own actual stories (emotional appeals and demand of interests) through their lens.” These television programs successfully exposed many social injustices and promoted social reform. By contributing news materials to the mainstream television stations in the form of videos, ordinary people successfully found a path for expressing their voices and safeguarding their rights. Therefore, these mainstream-made video television programs can be viewed as the second phase of video activism in China. However, these mainstream media were still the gatekeepers. Even today, media professionals still need to edit footage filmed by ordinary people before broadcasting it in China.

Since the beginning of 2000, the third phase of video activism in China began. At that time, the collective actions of ordinary citizens against the local government departments or commercial companies have occurred frequently in different cities (Han, 2016), such as the landmark event of the “Anti-Paraxylene Movement” in Xiamen. Meanwhile, some non-governmental organisations of video activism emerged, for instance, the Chengdu “IYoushe” public service advertisement group, etc. By looking into these video activism cases, Han (2016) indicates that the motivations of individual and NGOs groups to use video to advocate social justice and social reform was increasing. Moreover, the emergence of SINA, Youku, Liujianfang, Tudou.com and other video websites were offering the necessary space for the

individual and NGOs to share their self-made documentary films during that time (Han, 2008b). At the same time, the spirits of NDM came back to a certain extent, social elites and opinion leaders started to make their independent (or self-funded) social documentary films once again for exposing the social ills, drawing the public attention to these issues, and urging the government to do more to cure these ills. For example, one of the most well-known documentary films – “ChaiJing Investigation: Under the Dome”, is a self-funded social documentary film exposing the smog problem in China produced by Chai Jing, a famous CCTV former journalist and an influential opinion leader in China. The film was released on February 28, 2015, and it was viewed over 300 million times in total on the website of Tencent Video (but only four days later, this film was blocked and taken offline by Tencent). Han (2016) states that the film “Under the Dome” successfully aroused the public, mainstream media, and government’s concerns about China’s smog problem. By using the impact of social media platforms and Chai’s influence, Chai created an ecological chain of video activism in China to a certain extent.

As mentioned above, the social documentary film has been regarded as one of the most representative forms of video activism in China. However, because of the high costs of production and distribution, social documentary film production has been dominated by social elites or professional media organisations rather than ordinary people. It should not be ignored that the third phase of video activism in China was inseparable from the emergence of online video websites such as SINA, Youku, Liujianfang, Tudou.com and other video websites. The evolution of the Internet has further decreased the production cost and popularised video editing tools for everyone (Askanius, 2013). By reviewing these three previous video activism phases in China, I have the chance to confirm the existence of several research gaps: almost no researchers pay attention to the field of public-dominated video activism; the operation process of video activism; the latest form of public-dominated video activism in the last five years in China, especially in the SVB platform age. To fill these research gaps, I study the latest consumer video activism tactics based on SVB platforms and short videos in China empirically. These tactics have provided a new way for Chinese consumers to speak out about their dissatisfactions with certain products/services, and it could be regarded as the fourth phase of video activism in China – short video activism. Hence, to further explore this fourth phase of video activism, I study consumer video activism as a starting point to further explore the short video activism based on SVB platforms. By doing so, video activism studies in China will be pushed forward to a larger extent. Moreover, by looking into the historical contexts of video

activism in China, we can better understand the cause of the present surge of consumer video activism from the historical development of Chinese video activism.

## **2.6 The Emergence of SVB platforms and Consumer Video Activism Tactics**

In April 2014, the “ice bucket challenge” (an activity in which a person pours a bucket of ice water on herself/himself or others to promote awareness of the disease amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) was introduced into Weibo, and celebrities posted their “ice bucket challenge” short videos on Weibo in succession. Chinese actor Wu Qilong, on August 21st, 2014, declared to join this activity and posted an “ice bucket challenge” short video on his Weibo homepage. This 51 seconds short video racked up 132151 comments and 68676 thumbs-up in a short time. After Wu’s short video of “ice bucket challenge”, more and more celebrities and normal Weibo users started to carry out their own “ice bucket challenge” and upload their challenge short videos to Weibo. According to Weibo’s real-time displaying data, the topic of the “ice bucket challenge” has racked up 4.96 billion hits as of September 2014. The “ice bucket challenge” activity on Weibo marked the beginning of the short video’s popularity surge in China. Since then, more and more Chinese people have started registering their accounts on Douyin, Kuaishou, Miaopai, and other SVB platforms.

The emergence, growth and development of the SVB platform in China are closely related to the following factors: the new broadband cellular network technology, the competition among Chinese Internet companies, the domestic venture investment and different social reasons. First, the emergence of SVB platforms is inseparable from the development and popularization of new broadband cellular network technology in China (e.g., Li, 2019). In December 2013, China United Network Communications Group (China Unicom), China Telecommunications Corporation (China Telecom) and China Mobile Communications Corporation (CMCC) obtained the business license of 4G (the fourth generation of broadband cellular network technology) issued by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) (Wang, 2013). It marked the beginning of the 4G era in China. According to the latest data from MIIT, As of January 2018, 4G users in China exceeded 1 billion<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, without exception, all Chinese SVB platforms are smartphone-based apps. Therefore, the growth in this area is inseparable from the increasing number of smartphone users in China. According to Zenith’s Mobile Advertising Forecasts of 2017, the country with the highest number of mobile phone users would be China, with 1.3 billion users. On this basis, there were 817 million

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<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.chinanews.com/it/2018/01-30/8436726.shtml> (accessed 8 September 2020).

“mobile netizens” (people who use smartphones to access the Internet) and 648 million SVB platform users by the end of 2018<sup>23</sup>. These data indicate that the popularity of smartphones in China has contributed to the development of SVB platforms. In sum, 4G technology and the increasing number of smartphone users have stimulated the prosperity of SVB apps such as Kuaishou (released in 2013), Miaopai (released in 2014), Douyin (released in 2016), and others.

Secondly, competition among Internet companies contributed to the development and growth of SVB platforms in China. As Van Dijck (2013) states, “all social media platforms combined constitute the ecosystem of connective media (social media).” Within this ecosystem, Van Dijck explains that every collective media (social media) platform is sensitive to the changes of other competitive platforms: “if Facebook changes its interface settings, Google reacts by tweaking its artillery of platforms; if participation in Wikipedia should wane, Google’s algorithmic remedies could work wonders.” (p. 21). This statement applies equally to the development of the SVB platform in China as well. The new-born SVB platforms like Kuaishou and Douyin gradually have challenged the monopoly position of the traditional social media platforms like Weibo and WeChat in China (Chen, 2018).

“Douyin”, for instance, one of the most popular Chinese SVB platforms, was founded in 2016. In the beginning, “Douyin” positioned itself as an online SVB music community, but only a few years later, the content on “Douyin” was no longer limited to music-related short videos, and many creative short videos emerged. As a result, “Douyin” changed their slogan to “make your day, real people real videos”, and they redefined “Douyin” as a general SVB platform for everyone, but not a music community for music fans only. According to Chen (2018), Douyin has more than 300 million domestic monthly active users and more than 150 million daily active users as of June 2018. To catch the trend of the short video, on 30th December 2018, Tencent launched version 7 of WeChat (the leading social media platform in China). Tencent added a new feature named “Time Capsule” to WeChat in this version, and WeChat users can post 15-seconds-long short videos on their homepages. This new functionality is similar to Instagram’s and Facebook’s “stories”. Up to now, most social media platforms in China have been equipped with short video features by their mother companies, such as Weibo (the new “video” function allows users to upload, browse, repost short videos freely to Weibo). The SVB platforms in China today can be divided into two categories: the first category, “pure” SVB platforms, like Douyin, Miaopai, Kuaishou, etc. In these pure platforms, the short video is the sole content, interactions among different users are almost

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<sup>23</sup> See [http://www.cac.gov.cn/2019-08/30/c\\_1124938750.htm](http://www.cac.gov.cn/2019-08/30/c_1124938750.htm) (accessed 8 September 2020).

clinging to the short video; the second category is the “hybrid” SVB platform, such as Weibo, WeChat, etc. The hybrid platform is the upgraded version of the traditional social media platform. In these hybrid platforms, users could share their pictures, text, audio and short videos on the same platform.

Thirdly, a large amount of capital investment from the market has directly promoted the development of the SVB platform. As Li (2019) points out, online video in China is an “expensive business”, as the overall Internet companies, most online video companies in China have heavily relied on outside investment to maintain their servers, build their distribution network system, pay for the bandwidth prices, etc. Conversely, with investments from different sectors, online video businesses boomed at the time in China. Following the same logic, Chinese SVB social media companies also need to raise funds for expansion. Due to the vast earnings potential of the short video industry, investments have continuously flooded into it. The statistical result of the Daily Economic News in 2018 shows that as of January 2018, Kuaishou received a total of nearly 1.4 billion US dollars of investment; the parent company of Douyin — “Byte dance”, received nearly 1.2 billion US dollars in five years (2013-2018); the parent firm of Miaopai — “Yixia” and as of 2016 (2014-2016), received a total of nearly 800 million US dollars investment. Supported by a steady stream of funds, these SVB platforms are constantly expanding, taking Douyin as an example, the statistical result of Sensor Tower Store Intelligence estimates that as of the first quarter of 2020, the total downloads of Douyin (and TikTok) in the global App Store and Google Play have exceeded 2 billion times.

Fourthly, recent studies have shown that the social reasons behind the popularity of SVB platforms and short videos in contemporary Chinese society are complex. For instance, with the accelerated pace of work and life, people hope to make full use of fragmented time to obtain information; short videos and short video platforms can better meet their needs in this regard (Li, 2018). Equally, some have adopted SVB platforms to maintain a “fashionable” lifestyle and to avoid the disdain of their friends and of those who already use SVB platforms (Lu & Lu, 2019). For others, the various marketing strategies of the parent companies of different SVB platforms, such as celebrity endorsements, have promoted the popularity of short videos and short video platforms in China (Xu et al., 2019).

Today, with the upgrade of social media platforms and the emergence of new SVB platforms, Chinese consumers have acquired a new means (the consumer video activism tactics) to protect their rights and interests. Unlike the regular hours-long video produced by media experts with their professional experience and filming equipment, the short video is usually calculated in seconds or minutes and recorded by the public with their mobiles. By using SVB

social media applications on their mobiles, ordinary users no longer need to learn complex video editing software and edit videos on their computers. They can easily edit short videos on their mobiles and upload them to the SVB platform anytime, anywhere. Moreover, short videos can be spread easily and instantly across different platforms because of their small size. They can even be transmitted from online social media platforms to offline television stations. Today, by posting and disseminating short videos containing the fact that their rights and interests have been violated by businesses on SVB platforms, Chinese consumers can draw the attention of the public, media and relevant government departments to bear on their experiences and demands. Thus, with the aid of media coverage and government intervention, businesses are forced to admit their faults and compensate consumers accordingly.

## **2.7 The Challenges of the Consumer Video Activism Tactics**

Although for now, short video activism tactics are popular and effective in Chinese society, we should not treat these tactics as a panacea for everyone. Before discussing the methodologies, research findings and implications of this thesis, it is indispensable to review more critical literature on the challenges of the SVB platforms that the consumer video activism tactics depend on. This reflection process also helps me pay more attention to the weakness of these tactics during the research (Chapter 5 and 6).

### ***2.7.1 Digital Divide***

According to the basic meaning of the digital divide concept, the so-called latest digital technologies mean different things for different people. The term “digital divide”, according to Jan van Dijk (2020), was first mentioned by Los Angeles Times Journalists Jonathan Webber and Amy Harmon in a July 1995 article. According to Van Dijk (2020), there are three levels of the digital divide: connectivity, skills and usage, and outcomes of the digital divide. Before Van Dijk, Norris (2001) distinguishes three types of digital divides: firstly, the global divide, which means the inequalities of Internet access between countries; secondly, the social divide, which means divides between groups within societies; thirdly, the democratic divide, it means divides between those online who do, and do not, use political resources on the Internet.

In 2018, Elliott and Earl divide the digital divide concept into two categories: traditional divides and second-level divides. From the perspective of traditional divides, the former one is closely related to essential socio-demographic factors. Massive works have shown that the inequalities of income and educational level among different individuals are the root causes of

the digital divide (unequal Internet access) (Van Dijck and Hacker, 2003). For instance, Jen Schradie (2018) conducts a field-level approach to capture variation across 34 political, labour and social movement groups involved with the issue of collective bargaining rights for public employees in North Carolina. By using in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation qualitative methods, her research proves that “groups with middle/upper-class members have much higher levels of digital engagement than those with working-class members (p. 52)”. Jen also indicates that “digital activist inequality was due to the costs of online participation in the form of organisational resources and individual access, skills, entitlement, and time, (p. 69).” From the perspective of second-level divides, it includes “differences in levels of access [e.g., network speed]; different ways of using the Internet (e.g., capital-enhancing uses vs recreational uses); and differences in skills; and usage (distinct from access).” (Elliott and Earl, 2018, p. 702).

In the context of China, despite numerous studies showing that the Chinese government has been investing heavily in bridging the digital divide between the eastern and western regions and has achieved impressive results in overall telecommunications development during the past decades (e.g., Harwit, 2004; Fong, 2009), the phenomenon of the digital divide still exists. Wang, Zhou, and Wang’s (2021) research demonstrate that the regional divergence combined with technological disparities between areas has led to the digital divide in prefecture-level cities in China. Yuan and Jia (2021) point out that elderly people in China today are facing the digital divide problem, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Wang et al (2021) also indicate that the age-based mobile digital divide in China has grown over the past decade, and older people encountered difficulties when using mobile phones to access the internet to seek help during the pandemic.

Drawing lessons from the social divide (Norris, 2001) and Elliott and Earl’s (2018) two categories of digital divides, in this thesis, we should pay more attention to the impact of the digital divide on Chinese consumers’ use of short video activism tactics. For example, not all consumers can understand the power of the SVB platform and use it to make comments on commercial products or services. Some consumers only use these SVB platforms for recreation and pastime (Subsection 5.3.1). Therefore, it is difficult for these consumers to form a resultant force to influence the company. Moreover, given the age-based mobile digital divide problem in China, we should be more concerned about whether such new rights protection tactics, and the new digital technologies behind them (Short videos and SVB platform), can be accessed by the elderly group in China.



### ***2.7.2 The Governmental Intervention***

“Imagine a world of total surveillance.” Christian Fuchs (2017, p. 241) describes an imaginary and creepy picture for us: “the predictive algorithms could analyse what citizens think, and if there are indications that they could become criminals, they could immediately be put behind bars or executed by firing squad or by electrocution.” As a double-edged sword, the enormous potentials of SVB platforms have not only been discovered by the consumers in China. The Chinese government has also noticed its potential for manipulating and monitoring public discourse. It is well-known that the keywords filtering mechanism and the “separation strategy” have been adopted by the Chinese government to maintain the stability of public opinion.

Treré (2016) stresses that governments and parties have already deployed digital tools to sabotage and surveillance public dissent, through algorithmic strategies, such as orchestrated bot attacks (by setting up social media bot accounts to preventing information from spreading), in his critical analysis of the contemporary Mexican social and political phenomena and the #YoSoy132 networked movement. The Chinese government has also employed similar digital tools to suppress the grievances of the consumer and the public. Under the collaboration between Internet companies and the Chinese government, they have developed exclusive algorithms to surveillance and control the content in SVB platforms. Yang (2009b) stresses in his book “*The Power of the Internet in China*” that Internet companies in China mainly use specific software for filtering keywords, and the lists of keywords for filtering are created by the News Office of the State Council. The following example can prove this point.

From the last week of July 2018, news about the faulty vaccine started to spread in Weibo, WeChat and other popular SVB platforms in China: “Chinese state media reported that 250,000 doses of the DPT vaccine in question had been sold to the province of Shandong, all of these faulty vaccines were produced by one Chinese medicine company named Changsheng.” Millions of Chinese parents (they could be regarded as the consumers of the Changsheng vaccine) expressed their anger with the hashtag #长生疫苗事件# (Changsheng vaccine case) on Weibo, and this hashtag was viewed 470 million times just in one day. However, as Kuo (2018), the Guardian reporter, stresses, the Chinese government deleted critical articles on WeChat and other SVB platforms a short while later (as mentioned above, the government asked the Internet companies to delete these articles and relevant posts via exclusive algorithms).

As soon as this case happened, the government took the first step to adopt the keywords filtering mechanism, and then they chose to upgrade this means by constructing an atmosphere

of free discussion on the Changsheng vaccine case. Here, in this case, the Chinese government employed the “separation strategy”, which was recorded by Yang (2009b): The separation strategy means that when an Internet protest happens, the local governments should separate the central government public image from the local administrations. Many intentional artificial neutral, superficial articles and comments created by the Chinese mainstream media (mainstream media in China served as the role of loyalty gatekeeper for the Chinese government) are the key components of this separation strategy. So, this is why in the Changsheng vaccine case, Chinese mainstream media occupied the commanding elevation of public opinion by publishing critical articles on Changsheng and the local administrations’ supervision loopholes. For example, People Daily rapidly published a news review named “Where did the 250,000 doses of the DPT vaccine go?” on the 22nd of July. This report sharply denounced the misbehaviours of the local food and medicine administration and Changsheng.

The SVB platform has indeed empowered consumers to a certain extent. Just as in the Changsheng vaccine case mentioned above, the SVB platform amplified the appeals of those parents, helping them attract media attention, which caused government intervention. However, at the same time, the Chinese government was able to restrict these parents from enacting other strategies by employing the keywords filtering mechanism and the separation strategy (Chapters 5 and 6).

### ***2.7.3 The Capital Impact***

*Firstly*, from the perspective of giant companies from different sectors, the asymmetrical power of visibility is ubiquity online (Fuchs, 2017). Giant companies can gain more influence through SVB platforms with ease. For example, the influence of ordinary people is minimal on Twitter (Murthy, 2013). In China, most large businesses have their own public relationships departments to maintain a positive image in front of the consumer and investor and eliminate any company-related harmful content at the same time (e.g, Liu and Chu, 2021). For example, one of the companies in China I used to work for has set up its public relationships department (more than 100 employees) in recent years for propaganda. Most giant companies commonly adopt two online propaganda strategies in China: strategic cooperation and the “online water army” (also known as the term “Shui jun” in Chinese, a group of writers are hired by one company for posting positive or negative comments with specific purposes on SVB platforms). It should be noted that strategic cooperation means that these companies choose to sign an advertising cooperation contract in the name of the strategic cooperation agreement with

Internet portal companies, famous we-media operators and even mainstream media organisations/journalists. According to Qin (2015), if Chinese media want to seize more market share, they need to expand the influence of their brands to attract more advertisers, and this premise determines that the media needs to fully cooperate with companies and build a good cooperative relationship with them to seek a win-win situation. Following this logic, the media have to cooperate with companies (their current advertisers), and build up a positive public image for the latter, and attract more potential advertisers (Chapter 5). By offering colossal advertising expenditures to these media, on the one hand, these companies will receive positive reports from the media. On the other hand, they will get the opportunity to let these media recall any negative reportage related to their companies (for more about these two strategies, see Chapter 5).

*Secondly*, the business nature of the SVB platform in China determines the asymmetrical visibility among different users in the same platform. There are two different types of content on every single social media platform: the professionally generated content (PGC) and the user-generated content (UGC), which means that there are also two types of correspondent users among those social media platforms: the professional user (PU) and the non-professional (ordinary) user (NPU). It should be noted that most large companies in China can be regarded as PU on the SVB platform. “Although the details of how algorithms discriminate are largely kept confidential, it is no secret that – given the advertising-based revenue model of corporate social media platforms – value is associated with, and algorithms programmed in accordance with, what content is expected to gain attention and stimulate interaction, including what is seen as popular and fresh.” (Bucher, 2012, pp. 1167–1168). For the PU, they will have higher visibility in the SVB platform compared with the NPU, because in the eyes of the Internet companies, as a universal rule, PGCs are directly related to the advertising revenue, and that is the reason why all profit-driven Internet companies purposely highlight the PGCs on their platforms. Therefore, there is no doubt that not all video consumer activism online cases in China can obtain high visibility on SVB platforms because most short videos about consumer activism are recorded and uploaded by the NPU. As Fuchs (2017) states, the “highly visible users determine what gets amplified and what does not”, and “those who have a lot of reputation, fame, money or power tend to have many more followers than everyday people.” As a result, NPU’s voices will be easily drowned out by the posts of giant companies and other professional users. Moreover, various verification systems created by SVB platforms also lead to asymmetrical visibility among different users (Chapter 6, Section 6.5). For example, Wang (2011) defines that the user verification system created by Weibo

form an inequality between Weibo users. However, following this research, Wang, She, and Chen (2014) present that a minority of verified users are largely considered as influential. Put differently, the verification scheme does not guarantee that verification users have higher visibility than common users.

#### ***2.7.4 Short Video Rumours***

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of rumours, misinformation, and conspiracy theories on social platforms in China and around the world has skyrocketed. Hence the COVID-19 pandemic has been named the first “infodemic” in human history (Zarocostas, 2020). Rumours, misinformation or fake news are rampant around the world, especially among social media platforms (Kaligotla, Yücesan, and Chick, 2020; Guo and Vargo, 2020). In the context of China, rumours concerning politics, healthcare, food safety, environment and other topics are also rampant and continue to permeate China’s Internet, and even though the Chinese government has launched a series of anti-rumour campaigns to stop the spread of online rumours (Creemers 2017; Repnikova 2018; Guo, 2020). Bai (2012) shows that the “Guanxi” (a Chinese verb, meaning “connections, personal ties”) network expanded by social media plays an important part in the process of rumour spreading in China.

When studying online rumours, scholars have found that, compared with rumours of plain text, rumours containing videos can arouse the interest and attention of rumour receivers and convey more meaning and emotions (Liu, Burton-Jones and Xu, 2014). Put differently, video rumours are more “attractive” to the public. But at the same time, some studies have also found that because of the vivid, straightforward and viewer-friendly features of videos, they can be used to refute rumours, especially when the rumours are complicated (Li et al, 2021). Today, Chinese consumers can use their mobiles to record short video evidence, then post it on different SVB platforms for drawing the attention of the media and relevant government departments. However, SVB platforms (and short videos) should not be regarded as a flawless weapon for Chinese consumers, because in addition to the three shortcomings mentioned above, the SVB platform (and short videos) has another shortcoming, that is, it will speed up the spread of rumours to a certain extent.

On July 26 of 2018, one of the building sites of Country Garden in Anhui Liuan city collapsed, six workers died, and more than 16 construction workers were seriously injured there. This incident was only the tip of the iceberg. As a fortune 500 and one of the biggest real estate companies in China, the construction quality of Country Garden has been continuously

questioned by the public. The scene of homebuyers of Country Garden protesting in front of the sales department frequently happens across the country. According to the latest report of “iCEO” magazine in July 2018, including this “Liuan” accident, more than seven construction workers died in 3 different building sites of Country Garden between the end of May and July in 2018. After the Liuan incident happened, short videos about the Liuan incident scene were reposted rapidly by many homebuyers of the Country Garden and the public on WeChat and other SVB platforms. However, in this case, according to the official declaration of Country Garden posted on their Weibo on July 27 of 2018, most of these short videos shared and reposted on SVB platforms were irrelevant to the Liuan incident at all, and some of them were even rumours: “Short videos that had nothing to do with the Liuan incident were widely spread online. We want to clarify that most of these incorrect videos were recorded in 2007, and the incident in these videos was caused by a company that was completely unrelated to Country Garden.”

Although short videos and SVB platforms can be regarded as a powerful weapon for the consumer to strive for their rights and interests, we still cannot ignore the fact that they can accelerate the spread of rumours to a certain extent, thereby reducing the effectiveness and reliability of short video activism tactics (Chapter 6, Section 6.3). It should be noted that this thesis does not explore this point in-depth, and future studies can pay more attention to the impact of short rumours on the short video activism tactics.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

Chinese consumers have gradually begun to use different Internet technologies, especially short videos and SVB platforms, to safeguard their rights and interests since the 2010s. However, compared with the four waves of activism movements (Gabriel and Lang, 2015) and the essential role that traditional online websites and social media platforms play in consumers’ collective activism in the global North countries (e.g., Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2006; Micheletti and Stolle, 2008; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Handelman, 2013, 2017; Lekakis, 2013; Copeland, 2014; Eli et al., 2016; Kampf, 2018; Minocher, 2019), the overall Chinese consumer activism is still fragmented and unformed up to now.

Given the status quo of consumer activism studies across different disciplines, the definitions of consumer activism are dominated by the global North. These definitions or studies can only explain the consumer activism circumstances in the global North, but not the actual situations of consumer activism in China and other countries. However, there have been

few discussions of consumer activism in the context of China. Hence, by looking into the evolutionary path of consumer activism in China, and the latest online consumer activism tactics – short video activism tactics, this thesis can fill the gap, and offer empirical evidence for future research on Chinese consumer activism. Before 1978, Chinese people could not choose the clothes they like or the food they want to eat freely. With the continuous development of the market economy, Chinese people have gradually obtained the right to buy any product they want. Meanwhile, with the emergence of the first consumer protection law and the CCA, they have become increasingly aware of their power as a consumer. The case of Wang Hai and the “Toshiba incident” are two valuable examples. Moreover, with the advent of the Internet in China in the late 1990s, more and more consumers such as Luo Yonghao and Wang Xiaoshan, etc., found out that with the assistance of the Internet, including traditional websites, etc., their online media activism tactics were able to draw the attention of the media and relevant government departments to a certain extent. By doing so, they were easier to protect their rights and interests than they used to be.

Since the emergence of social media platforms such as Weibo in China, consumers have treated them as their new weapons for winning in their “consumer war” against certain companies. It can be regarded as a form of digital media activism in China. As broadband cellular network technology and mobile phone technology were upgraded in China, the SVB platform came into being. With the continuous influx of capital into the SVB platform and various social reasons, SVB platforms flourished and became popular at that time in China. For Chinese consumers, it meant that their “weapons” obtained a significant upgrade. From the perspective of video activism, the short video activism tactics adopted by Chinese consumers can be regarded as the next phase of video activism in China. Today, Chinese consumers can use their mobiles to record short video evidence, upload them to various SVB platforms, and spread them around more efficiently than before. In other words, these SVB platforms are providing Chinese consumers with new possibilities so that their experiences can be seen by more people, media and government departments (Chapter 5 and Chapter 6). Such as the Chengdu homebuyers (see this case in Chapter 6) used SVB platforms as a loudspeaker to amplify their dissatisfaction, draw the attention of the businesses, mainstream media/we-media and relevant government departments.

However, we should not ignore the challenges of these new weapons of Chinese consumers. Digital divide, government utilization, capital impact, and the short-video rumour are four practical problems limiting the effectiveness of the consumer video activism tactics adopted by Chinese consumers based on SVB platforms (and short videos).

## **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework**

### **3.1 Introduction**

During the Beijing metro's daily rush hour, many passengers choose to put on their headphones and watch short videos on their phones. In recent years, short videos about heated social issues, such as consumer activism, are spread among different SVB platforms in China fleetly. For example, on the evening of June 10, 2017, thousands of homeowners gathered around the Nanjing Road in Shanghai, protesting against the latest policies on the commercial and residential apartments released by the local government. The cause of this protest was that the Shanghai local government prevented homeowners from selling apartments converted from office or commercial space. The government claimed that these apartments would be treated as illegal buildings, and people should not live in them. On that night, thousands of short videos from the scene spread among different SVB platforms instantly, and what happened on NanJingLu road became a hot topic online. After watching these short videos, many people started to support those protestors in the Nanjing road on SVB platforms, and they also disagreed with the latest policies issued by the local government.

Grievances and the repertoire of contention are two significant concepts within the social movement research. These two concepts and related theories are generally used to study and analyse the causes of social movements and the means of resistance used by participants in social movements. To better understand the underlying reasons of Chinese consumers' short video activism tactics and the use of these tactics, I bring these two concepts into the discussion. By adopting a range of grievance theories in this thesis, this thesis can discover the underlying reasons of Chinese consumers' short video activism tactics holistically. Consumer activism strategies/tactics are not unchanged. Today's consumer video activism tactics adopted by Chinese consumers will not become the fixed repertoire of contention for Chinese consumers in the future. Therefore, to better understand these tactics, inspired by another concept within the social movement research framework, the repertoire of contention, I draw a detailed landscape of consumer video activism in China by examining four consumer video activism cases in a broader social context and different circumstances, rather than only focusing on one contentious consumer video activism event solely.

As Couldry (2004) theorises the media as practice, he advocated that scholars shift their attention from the single text-oriented or institution-oriented to what people are doing with media. Inspired by practice-oriented studies, I focus on the activism practices of Chinese consumers related to short videos and SVB platforms instead of on the short-video content and

the SVB platforms solely in this thesis. As Asknaius (2020) indicates, the media practice approach can help us avoid: falling into the dilemma of media-centrism or focusing only on the video content or focusing on the video technologies only. By researching the consumer video activism within the framework of “activist media practices” (Mattoni, 2012; Mattoni and Treré (2014), I uncover the interaction process among the Chinese consumer, media objects (SVB platforms) and media subjects (other Chinese consumers, public relations department officials, and media practitioners, government department officials). In other words, I can explain the present situation of Chinese consumer activism in detail, such as the operative mechanism of consumer video activism in China.

As Tatarchevskiy (2011) concludes, “recent technological advances in mobile and picture-taking technologies [these technologies evolve into video-making today] make it even easier for one to enter the virtual public sphere and to make claims through symbolic representations.” (p. 300). Many studies have tried to demonstrate the positive or dubious connections between the Habermas public sphere theory and the social media globally. In China, researchers preferred to regard the Habermas public sphere as an ideal model to assess the role of social media in China before the 2010s. After that, few Chinese researchers have argued that the bourgeois public sphere is just one variety among various types of public spheres during the age of Habermas, and it does not apply to Chinese society. Inspired by Huang’s “third realm” concept (1993), Yang and Calhoun’s (2007) and Sun et al’s (2018, 2020) research on “green public sphere”, and Guo’s “environmental protection public sphere” (2013), in this thesis, I propose and illustrate a “consumer sphere” model that is more in line with China’s national conditions based on short video technologies (SVB platforms and short videos). Moreover, to better elaborate the “consumer sphere”, inspired by the discussions on the accessibility of the public sphere and the role played by the media in the public sphere, this thesis also considers the accessibility of the “consumer sphere” and the role of all forms of media (we-media and mainstream media) played in it.

The outline of this literature chapter is as follows: I begin this chapter by exploring how we can learn more about Chinese consumers’ short video activism tactics through the grievances generation theories and the concept of repertoires of contention in social movement research. Next, based on practice theories, the research framework of theorizing media as practice, and the “activist media practices” concept, I examine the Chinese consumer video activism tactics as a kind of creative media practice and separate it into two observable interaction processes – interactions with “media objects” and “media subjects”. Finally, I



review relevant controversial public sphere studies in China and abroad, then conclude with a discussion of the “consumer sphere” model.

## **3.2 Grievances and Repertoires of Contention**

### ***3.2.1 Grievances in Social Movements***

Social movements, conceptualised by Snow and Soule (2010, p. 6), “are collectivities acting with some degree of organisation and community, partly outside institutional or organisational channels, for the purpose of challenging extant systems of authority, or resisting change in such systems, in the organisation, society, culture, or world system in which they are embedded.” In Sidney Tarrow’s (1994) words, a social movement is constructed by a group of people with common purposes and solidarity who are challenging elites, opponents and authorities.

Scholars are increasingly discussing that consumer activism is a relatively common strategy adopted by actors in different social movements. As Lightfoot (2019) indicates, consumer activism is a common method that has been used by social movements of political orientations in the US. As one of the main tactics of consumer activism, the boycott is widely adopted by individual consumers or consumer associations to challenge the government policy or commercial company’s action for achieving the goals of their activism movements. Colli (2020) shows that the social movement organisations such as “Grab Your Wallet” and “Sleeping Giants” in the US, and “Stop Funding Hate” in the UK have adopted the indirect boycott as one of their tactics to mobilise public pressure and cause economic or reputational damage to their target. Existing literature observes and acknowledges the connection between consumer activism and social movement and often put them together for discussion and research (e.g., Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2006; Wilkinson, 2007; Chen, 2020). In addition to being seen as a common strategy in social movements, indeed, some consumer activism cases are eligible to be regarded as a low-intensity form of the social movement to a certain extent, especially with the help of different online communication technologies, such as the “Nike iD” and “Carrotmob” cases mentioned in Chapter 2. Whether it is seen as a strategy used by actors in a proper social movement or as a low-intensity social movement, the topic of consumer activism has been largely exploited within the scope of social movement research. However, from the perspective of consumer activism research, few scholars in the field around the world have drawn lessons from the social movement research toolbox and take the initiative to make any connection between consumer activism and social movement, such as using the theories and experiences in social movement research to explain

consumer activism. After examining ample consumer activism cases that happened in China, I realise that the grievances generation theories in social movement research are suitable to be used in explaining the underlying reasons of consumer activism cases in China: Chinese consumers and protestors in social movements have a certain degree of similarity: their actions are caused by various grievances. For Chinese consumers, their dissatisfaction with giant companies' and governments' misdeeds and misconduct in public concerning issues are pushing them to come forward and fight against giant companies and relevant government departments. If we draw lessons from the grievances generation theories, we can comprehensively determine the underlying reasons of a consumer activism event. Hence, in this thesis, I employ grievances generation theories in social movement research to better understand the complex underlying reasons of consumer video activism in the context of China. Next, I shed light on the grievances generation theories and find out the connections between them with consumer activism cases in China.

In the study of social movements, the causes of social movements are complex. Initial studies on the causes of social movements are called strain and breakdown theories, which can be traced back to Émile Durkheim's concepts of "anomie" and "egoism" (Olsen, 1965). As Buechler (2013) indicates, structural strain or social breakdown causes collective action contained by social controls and moral imperatives. After European theorists of crowd behaviour linked social breakdown to collective behaviour (Buechler, 2013), Blumer (1951) further emphasised that the collective behaviour is triggered by some disruption in normal routines of daily life. Smelser's (1962) functionalist theory regarded collective behaviour as a result of structural strain, and his "value-added" model argued that six factors were necessary to cause a collective behaviour: structural conduciveness, structural strain, generalised beliefs, precipitating factors, mobilisation for action, and the building of social networks of protesters and authorities' responses. After Smelser, there was an obvious turn in social movement research, scholars in the field increasingly turned to rational choice theories – RMT and "political process model" (PPM) (also known as "political opportunity structure"). To put it simply, RMT stressed that a successful social movement requires necessary resources, which include "finance, campaigning expertise, members and supporters or influential social networks" (Giddens and Sutton, 2018, p. 214); PPM was proposed and continuously improved by Tilly (1978), McAdam (1982), Tarrow (1989) and other sociologists. PPM indicated that social movements are catalysed by three necessary factors: political opportunities, mobilising structures, and framing process.

A social movement generally emerges from the confluence and interaction of various sets of conditions, including: “shared, mobilising grievances; some degree of political opportunity; resource mobilization; and a favourable ecological context” (Cross and Snow, 2012, p. 523). Among those factors that lead to the emergence of social movements, mobilising grievances constitute the most necessary condition for the emergence of social movements. According to Klandermans (1997), grievance refers to an expression of outrage at the way the authorities handle social or political issues, and it is the main driving force for protest participants to participate in social movements or protests. Simmons also (2014) states that grievances are essential factors in protest mobilization, besides political opportunities and resource mobilization. Moreover, as Snow and Soule put it, “none of the various of social movements is more important than the generation of deeply felt shared grievances” (2010, p. 23). However, arguments describing grievances as ubiquitous and irrelevant to the occurrence of social movements were also all the rage. As some of those resource mobilization theorists mentioned above (McCarthy and Zald 1977, p. 1214-1215; McAdam, 1999) stress, “there is always enough discontent in any society to supply the grassroots support for a movement.” These criticisms and satires believe that grievances are ubiquitous in society, causing “grievances” to fall into an embarrassing position with no analytic value, not to mention the origins of mobilising grievances and their relationship to social movements (Snow and Soule, 2010).

Even if grievance-related studies are not the jewel in the crown of social movement research, “scholars need not have thrown the proverbial baby out with the bathwater, grievances have much to add to our understandings of social movement origins, dynamics, and trajectories.” (Simmons, 2014, p. 516). On the contrary, the role of grievances should not be overlooked in the formation of social movements, and scholars should continue to understand and optimise it. Moreover, it is necessary to distinguish the difference between individual and mobilising grievances. As Snow (2013) further indicates that individual grievances are ubiquitous in the common world and experienced individually but not collectively, thus they are rarely condensed into collectively shared grievances that catalyse the emergence of social movements; the characteristics of mobilising grievances are just the opposite of individual grievances, which provide a motivational incentive for social movements. Thus, the focal point is mobilising grievances.

### ***3.2.2 The Generation of Mobilising Grievances***

Regarding the generation of mobilising grievances, Snow and Soule (2010) jointly summarise and define a range of grievances generation theories, which claim that the generation of grievances (or “mobilising grievances”) can be understood as “a function of the confluence and interaction of structural or material conditions, social-psychological factors, and interpretive framing processes.” (Snow and Soule, 2010, p. 63). By reviewing these grievances generation theories below, I screened out the parts suitable for analysing complex underlying reasons of short video activism tactics adopted by Chinese consumers and attempted to establish connections between them.

Firstly, grievances as a function of structural or material conditions. Snow and Soule (2010) summarise that there are two sets of social structural or material conditions relating to the origins of mobilising grievances: “group conflict and/or inequality” and “strain theory”. From the perspective of “group conflict and/or inequality”, the cause of mobilising grievances is the uneven distribution of rewards (money, status, and power) and opportunities or life chances in society. In other words, they are “rooted in conflicts over claims to status, power, and other scarce resources among groups (social classes and racial, ethnic, and religious groups) differentially situated within a social system” (p. 28). By analysing the research of Karl Marx and Engels (1948, 1963), Ralf Dahrendorf (1959), and Klandermans and his colleagues (2001), Snow and Soule (2010, p31) argue that the existence of conflict “whether rooted in class, organisational, or group antagonisms”, is not sufficient for causing the emergence of mobilising grievances and consequent social movements. However, to a certain extent, these conflicts may cause mobilising grievances together with other factors, such as the social-psychological factors, which I will mention shortly.

From the perspective of “strain theory”, Snow and Soule (2010, p. 33) introduce and review three different arguments – the “disintegration” or “breakdown” thesis, the absolute deprivation or immiseration thesis, and the “quotidian disruption” thesis: firstly, as an obsolete thesis, the core argument of disintegration thesis is that war, unfavourable economic trends, disasters, and so on, weaken and destroy the traditional sources of social cohesion and integration, leading to the breakdown or tension in the socio-political order that triggers grievances, thereby stimulating the occurrence of social movements; secondly, the absolute deprivation or immiseration thesis argues that the poor social living environment, such as lack of affordable housing, widespread unemployment, unavailable health care, extreme poverty, epidemic health problems, and disability discrimination, are sources of grievances that mobilises suffering people; thirdly, the “quotidian disruption” thesis (Snow, Cress, Downey and Jones, 1998) argues that actual disruption of taken-for-granted routines of people’s

everyday life (or called “the quotidian”) is the root cause of mobilising grievances, “(...) routinised means that its practitioners have become accustomed to it and, therefore, are likely to be particularly aggrieved when it is disrupted in the sense that it is no longer sustainable or reproducible” (Snow and Soule, 2010, p. 36). Although there is no determinant relationship between these three sets of theories and the emergence of mobilising grievances that cause social movements, Snow and Soule (2010, p. 37-39) prefer the “quotidian disruption” one, believing it provides a more determinative connection between causal social conditions and grievances than others. They also identify four categories of disruptive events that more likely than others to spur the disruption of the quotidian: (1) accidents and disasters; (2) invasions or violations of culturally defined privacy and control areas; (3) dramatic changes in subsistence routines because of changes in the ration of resources to claimants or demand; (4) dramatic changes in social organisation and control structures.

If we analyse the underlying reasons of Chinese consumers’ short video activism tactics from the perspective of grievances as a function of structural or material conditions, some theories mentioned above might be useful. In terms of the “group conflict and/or inequality”, the money, status and power between Chinese consumers and businesses are different in many cases in contemporary society. The reasons for this situation are complicated, but it has laid the foundation for the conflict between consumers and businesses. It might lead to the formation of consumers’ grievances, which further trigger consumer activism issues. For example, in consumer video activism, businesses can use deceptive advertising, imparity clauses and other means to “bully” consumers because of the information asymmetry and the inequality of various resources (e.g., manpower, material, financial) between them and consumers. From the perspective of the “quotidian disruption” thesis, different disruptive variations caused by businesses and other related actors may lead to the disruption of the consumer’s quotidian routines, leading to the generation of grievances of consumers (Chapter 5 and Chapter 6).

Secondly, from the perspective of social psychology study, mobilising grievances can be understood as a function of social-psychological factors. In the eyes of Snow and Soule (2010), the emergence of social movements will not occur without the assistance of social-psychological factors, no matter what the underlying structural or material conditions are. In other words, these factors are the sine qua non of mobilising grievances. There are three theories used to explain grievances as a function of social-psychological factors: frustration-aggression thesis (Dollard et al., 1939), relative deprivation thesis (Gurr, 1970) and status dissonance or inconsistency thesis (Lanski, 1954; Geschwender, 1967). These theories have

explained the formation processes of grievances from the subjective perspective of the social movement participant: the “frustration-aggression thesis” indicates that a certain level of frustration generates grievances; the “relative deprivation thesis” points out that grievances are generated by a widening gap between psychological expectation and actual achievement, or in other words, the contrast between what people want in their minds and what they get in their hands cause their grievances; the “dissonance or inconsistency thesis” indicates that grievances are caused by a disconnect between two salient statuses, such as education and wages. All these social psychological factors can generate mounting frustrations that can be condensed into mobilising grievances. These theories can explain the causes of partial consumer video activism issues happening in China. For example, the relative deprivation thesis (Gurr, 1970) is suitable for examining the underlying reasons of consumer video activism. As Gurr’s (1970) mentioned in his book “*Why men rebel*”, the relative deprivation thesis refers to frustrations and grievances are nurtured in the expanding gap between the people’s expectations and achievements; between their desires for something and the actual results they have. In some consumer video activism cases in China, consumers’ frustrations are caused by the increasing gap between the price they pay to businesses and the unexpected service or goods they get from them (Chapter 5 and Chapter 6).

Thirdly, drawing on the frame analysis from Erving Goffman (1974), Snow and Soule (2010) state that the mobilising grievances are neither arising from the structural or material conditions nor emerging from the personal psychological sentiments separately, but as the consequence of the interaction among these two above-mentioned preconditions and the framing process. Framing, “is one of the activities that social movement adherents (leaders, activists, and participants) and other actors (adversaries, institutional elites, media, counter-movements) perform on a regular basis.” (Snow and Soule, 2010, p. 51). How does the framing progress function in the formation process of grievances? Snow and Soule (2010) refine the concept of framing further by introducing the term diagnostic framing (they also mention “prognostic framing” and “motivational framing” in their work, but here I only shed light on the diagnostic framing): it involves two steps, “problematization” and framing debates over such “problematization” issues. In the “problematization” process, a social event should be defined as unacceptable or intolerable and it needs repair or a change urgently; then, after a series of framing debates over this problematic issue (attributing the fault and responsibility to the party that caused the problem), people’s grievance for a movement begin pouring out. Moreover, the diagnostic framing activities usually take place in a disputed discursive field including at least three groups of actors: protagonists, such as activists, advocates, social

movement participants; antagonists, such as social movement targets; and one or more groups of bystanders who may be unmoved or swayed and influenced, as Snow and Soule (2010, p. 56) indicate, such discursive fields prove that the “construction of mobilising grievances and the associated framing activities occur in a dynamic, interactive context.”

The diagnostic framing concept might explain well some of the reasons why the consumer video activism issue occurs. For example, in a consumer video activism case, consumers are regarded as protagonists who first problematize an unacceptable social event caused by the antagonist – businesses (such as merchants cause financial losses to consumers due to defects in their products or services). Next, by posting short video evidence that proves the businesses’ problems on SVB platforms, consumers may attract the attention of more bystanders (the public, the media, government departments, etc.). By doing so, consumers initiate a series of framing discussions and/or debates over such issues, attributing the blame to businesses. At this point, if consumers’ demands cannot be resolved, their grievances will rise further, and it may cause a new round of activism.

In general, as Snow and Soule (2010) insist, none of the above-mentioned theories or theories can be listed separately to indicate that they have a determinant impact on the formation processes of mobilising grievances and occurrence of social movements. Conversely, these factors must be put together to produce the corresponding chemical reaction. Borrowing a range of grievances generation theories mentioned above from the social movement research, we can better understand the underlying reasons of the latest Chinese consumer’s creative activism tactics – consumer video activism (Section 7.4). By re-examining Chinese consumer’s short video activism tactics under the social movement research framework, I bring the Chinese consumer activism studies into a broader research frame. Moreover, this attempt can prove that theories and experiences in social movement research are valuable for the study of consumer activism. Scholars in the field of consumer activism may shed light on it. Next, I bring another concept from social movement research – the repertoires of contention into this thesis.

### ***3.2.3 Bringing the Concept of Repertoires of Contention in***

“A repertoire of contention comprises what people know they can do when they want to oppose a public decision they consider unjust or threatening.” (della Porta, 2013). In his historical study of the protest in Europe, Tilly (1976) summarised three forms of collective action based on the claims the collective actors are asserting in their action: competitive, reactive and proactive. The first phase was a competitive collective action, collective actors competed for

limited resources, such as the seizure of grains (food riots), collective invasion of fields (also see Tilly, 1986, p. 395-396), which flourished in the 15th to 16th centuries; The second phase was the reactive collective action in the 17th and 19th centuries, with the rise of capitalism and nation-states, collective action manifests itself as resistance to this process, such as smashing machines in factories and tax rebellion; The third phase was the active collective action in the 19th and 20th centuries, collective actors increasingly took the initiative to take collective actions such as strikes, demonstrations, and assemblies to fight for their own interests (Tilly, 1978). By connecting the characteristics of contention with historical processes, such as industrialization and the formation of the nation-state, Tilly shows how there was a shift in the forms of contention.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Tilly abandoned this classification of collective action and its implicit modernization and gradually replaced it with the concept of repertoires of contention (Wang, 2016). As Tilly (1995) puts it, “I myself once wrote about the ‘modernization’ of ‘protest’, distinguishing ‘reactionary’ from ‘primitive’ and ‘modern’ forms of collective action. I soon abandoned those labels and the ideas behind them; I realised that they entailed an unjustified and unverified teleology.” Thus, the concept of “repertoires of contention” was first developed by himself in his studies of popular political contention in Great Britain. Tilly (1995, p. 42) indicates that a “repertoire of contention” is “a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice.” As Liu (2019, p. 333) summarises, this term reminds us that “contentious claim-making and performance are always situated in prior societal experience.”

Tilly further systematically examined the repertoires of contention in the history of Western Europe and North America, and distinguished the old and new repertoires of contention according to the two dimensions of “scope of action” and “tendency towards power holders” (Wang, 2016): the older repertoire of contentions, such as “seizures of grain, collective invasions of forbidden fields, forests and streams, destruction of tollgates and other barriers, attacks on machines, charivaris, serenades, turnouts”, was parochial in scope, and it regarded local actors or the local representatives of national actors as targets of protests, and relied on patronage “appealing to immediately available powerholders to convey grievances or settle disputes, temporarily acting in the place of unworthy or inactive powerholders only to abandon power after the action”; the new repertoire of protests includes “actions such as strikes, demonstrations, electoral rallies, public meetings, petition marches, planned insurrections, invasion of official assemblies, social movements and electoral campaigns”, it is national and autonomous, “instead of staying in the shadow of existing powerholders and adapting routines



sanctioned by them, [and] people using the new repertoire tend to initiate their own statements of grievances and demands” (Tilly 1986: p. 391-392).

Tilly (2006, p. 35) continued to define that the repertoires of contention “vary from place to place, time to time, and pair to pair”. It means that the current repertoires emerge from specific cultural and historical contexts but not inherit the prior experience indiscriminately and randomly, or merely repetitive. In the discussion of the development of the repertoires of contention, Tilly states that “most innovations [of repertoires] fail and disappear; only a rare few fashion long-term changes in a form of contention. Only very rarely does one whole repertoire give way to another.” (2006, p. 44). In short, Tilly (2006, p. 41) indicates that activists are involved in “unceasing small-scale innovation...within the script”:

Any population has a limited repertoire of collective action: alternative means of acting together on shared interests. In our time, for example, most people know how to participate in an electoral campaign, join or form a special-interest association, or organise a letter-writing drive, demonstrate, strike, hold a meeting, and build an influence network. (Tilly, 1986, p. 390)

Sidney Tarrow has further elucidated the notion of repertoires of contention of Tilly. Beyond looking at the limitation of specific context to the public’s choices of repertoires of contention, Tarrow (2011, p. 29) indicates that a repertoire of contention “is culturally inscribed and socially communicated”. To take a step further, Tarrow also demonstrates that the “enduring cultural expectations that resist transformation”, “economic or regime change,” and “people’s personal knowledge and resources” constrain the changes of the repertoire of contention. Hence, researchers should pay more attention to activists’ knowledge and perceptions of a certain repertoire (for example, social media) as a means of struggle in broader society in the long term, but not only focus on the irregular use of repertoires for contention.

Moreover, McAdam and Rucht’s research on the model of the cross-national diffusion of movement ideas also further elucidates the spirit of Tilly’s “repertoire of contention”. As the former stated, most activists in a social movement normally do not invent their protest tactics and adopt localised protest tactics. McAdam and Rucht (1993) argue that “[activists and movement participants] often find inspiration elsewhere in the ideas and tactics espoused and practiced by other activists. In short, they play the role of adopters in the cross-national diffusion of movement ideas and tactics.” (p. 58). McAdam and Rucht’s research model shows the movement idea and tactics can be learned or shared from one country to another, rather

than replaying in a localised area only. Research and analyses of the concept of the repertoire of contention, such as mentioned above, have inspired research and thoughts on the evolvement of repertoire from offline to online, especially with the assistance of the latest ICTs, within specific contexts, such as “repertoire of electronic contention” (e.g., Costanza-Chock, 2003; Rolfe, 2005) and “digital repertoires” (Earl and Kimport, 2013). The contentious repertoire concept and related studies have also impacted a few media researchers who study Chinese social movement or activism events, such as Liu (2016; 2019; 2020a; 2020b) and Yang (2008).

For example, Liu (2019) employs the concept of “repertoires of contention” to explore how anti-petrochemical (PX) protesters in China perceive and use digital media (such as mobiles, the Internet, and social media) to make political claims and fight against powerful authorities – resist against the decision of the local government to build the PX project, and how digital media has become an indispensable part of various forms of contentious collective actions in China today. By bringing the concept of repertoires of contention in, Liu (2019, p. 333) argues that this approach can overcome two limitations: first, the “technological-fascination bias” mentioned by Mattoni and Treré (2014, p. 255), which regards the use of media technologies as a “movement in itself”, thus leading researchers “to collapse the complexity of social movement practices in the use of technologies during mobilizations and to overestimate the role played by the media”; second, the myopic effect of ICTs in some studies that utilise an event-based-approach (Liu, 2016; 2020a) to examine the “use of digital technologies in discrete and isolated contentious events”, which unable to recognise the historicity of digitally mediated political contention. Thus, Liu suggests that we should pay more attention to activists’ personal “knowledge and perception” of ICTs as means of protest under various circumstances and take a long-term perspective, rather than looking at the sporadic use of digital media for contention. By examining seven anti-PX protests in six cities in China from 2007 to 2014 through 54 interviews, Liu (2019) shows how ICTs were used as a means to disseminate information, mobilise and legitimise protest.

The concept of “repertoires of contention” and relevant research (especially Liu’s research) mentioned above inspire me to draw lessons from the concept of repertoires of contention when studying the consumer video activism tactics. People can directly or indirectly learn various methods of resistance from the history and experience of resistance and use these learned methods of resistance to their struggles in the future (McAdam and Rucht, 1993; Tilly, 1995; Tarrow, 2011). As Tarrow (1993, p. 70) stresses, “the repertoire is not only what people do when they are engaged in conflictual relations with others; it is what they know how to do and what others expect them to do.” Therefore, as Liu (2019) mentioned, in addition to focusing

on the random use of various digital media technologies for contention, we should pay attention to the knowledge and perception of ICTs of activists as a means of struggle in broader society, and by doing so, it lowers the risk of “technological-fascination bias”. In this research, the spotlight is on the new repertoires themselves – the consumer video activism tactics – and the consumers’ experiences and perceptions of short videos and SVB platforms as tactics for them to protect their rights. At the same time, as mentioned above, repertoires are created, innovated, evolved under the co-action of people and other external influences such as cultural, economic and other factors (Tarrow, 2011). We need to understand it with a long-term perspective to better understand the potential long-term effect of ICTs on contention and society (Liu, 2016; 2019; 2020a). In this sense, I should study the consumer video activism tactics in the broader society in the long run and take into account the influence of other factors on this issue, such as prior societal experience, specific cultural and historical contexts, instead of focusing on one contentious consumer video activism event solely. Thus, beyond looking at consumers’ experiences and perceptions of the consumer video activism tactics, we should also pay attention to the experiences and perceptions of other key actors involved (Section 4.4). Moreover, as another indispensable research method, this thesis looks beyond a single case, examining four consumer video activism cases that occurred between July 2018 and April 2019.

### **3.3 Adopting the Media Practice Approach**

#### ***3.3.1 Introducing Practices Theories and Practices***

Before looking into the media practice approach, it is necessary to comprehend the practice theory at the very beginning. Many scholars (e.g., Postill, 2010; Gu, 2018; Stephansen and Treré, 2020; Lunt, 2020) believe that there are two generations of practice theories in the field of practice theory research. The first generation of practice theories (but is not limited to), such as Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Heidegger’s “praxis” and “dasein” (1962), Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990) theory of “habitus” and field, and Giddens’s (1984) “structuration theory”, and Foucault’s (1977) concept of “discipline”. As Postill (2010, p. 7) indicates, these scholars and their theories hoped to “liberate agency – the human ability to act upon and change the world – from the constrictions of structuralist and systemic models while avoiding the trap of methodological individualism”. Or, as Seidl and Whittington (2014) summarise, these scholars all regard practices as the constitutive element of social life. Among them, Bourdieu was widely known and “influential in bringing concepts of practice into the social theoretical debates of the 1980s” (Shove et al., 2012, p. 5). Based on the first generation

of practice theories, the second generation of influential theorists such as Ortner (1984), Schatzki (1996, 2001), Reckwitz (2002) and Warde (2005), have examined the previous practice theories, redefined definitions of practice, and applied these previous practice theories to various research areas and made new extensions upon it, which directly led to a new practice turn and underpinned the subsequent media practice research (Gu, 2018; Stephansen and Treré, 2020). In general, the first generation of practice theorists was concerned with human practices themselves and the connections between those practices and the societies in which those people live. Following these studies, the second-generation theorists have further studied the practice from more diverse, nuanced and more specific perspectives. To sum up, as Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012, p. 3) put it, the overall practice theory attempts to surpass the “dualism of structure and agency, determinism and voluntarism” in the social sciences.

For the first generation of practice theories, more specifically, Postill (2010, p. 6) indicates that the first generation of practice theorists “sought a virtuous middle path between the excesses of methodological individualism, and those of its logical opposite, methodological holism” in the social science research, or as Stephansen and Treré (2019; 2020) indicate, they aimed to reconcile the structure and agency dualism in social theory. For example, in Giddens’ “structuration theory”, he defines the “structure” as “rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems” (1984, p. 377). To overcome the defective dualism, he unifies the structure and agency through the concept of “duality of structure” – “structure as the medium and outcome of the conduct it recursively organises; the structural properties of social systems do not exist outside of action but are chronically implicated in its production and reproduction” (ibid, p. 374). Giddens (1984) stresses that because of the duality of structure, social relations are structured across time and space, and this is what he calls “structuration”. According to this “structuration theory”, the basic domain of social sciences study is “neither the existence of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered across space and time” (Giddens, 1984, p. 2). “Habitus”, “field” and “capital” are core concepts in Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990) practice theory. For example, the concept of “habitus” emphasises that the “objective structures, such as institutions, social relations and resources, become embodied and internalised in the cognitive structure of agents, and that this is further realised in practice” (Husu, 2013, p. 266) whilst recognizing “the agent’s practice, his or her capacity for invention and improvisation” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 13). By introducing these concepts and the logic of practice, Bourdieu resolves the most fundamental and ruinous contradictions between subjectivism and objectivism that artificially divide social science.

Berard (2005) stresses that the first generation of practice theories are more like a reference point for the “practice turn” in the social sciences. For the second generation of practice theories, most second-generation practice theorists agree that practices are constituted by embodied activities, shared understanding, and material or cultural objects (Stephansen and Treré, 2020) or regard practices as an assemblage of subjective and objective elements (e.g., Scharzki, 2001; Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al. 2012). Theodor Schatzki, as a key figure in the “practice turn” and the second generation of practice theorists, defines the concept of practice as “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organised around shared practical understanding” (2001, p. 11), and “a temporally evolving, open-ended set of doings and sayings linked by practical understandings, rules, teleoaffective structure and general understandings” (2002, p. 87). Schatzki’s own version of practice theory – *Site Ontology* (2002) proves that he also agrees with the “anti-dualism” consensus mentioned above. He indicates that practices should be constituted by subjective and objective elements, including “understandings, rules, ends, beliefs, projects, emotions, moods, materials, technology, competence, institution” (1996, p. 105). Schatzki is also known for his “total field of practices” (1996, 2001), and he believes that the whole world is filled with diverse and complex human practice, researchers have to narrow down their research scopes to a subfield of the “total field”, if they want to conduct their practice research properly, and this idea directly proves the necessity of Couldry’s “media practice”. As Loscher et al. (2019, p. 115) indicate, the practice theory of Schatzki offers us a “general theoretical apparatus for examining the relationship between human activity and the social”.

Andreas Reckwitz, another significant second-generation practice theorist, by blending the ideas of Giddens, Bourdieu, Schatzki mentioned above and other practice theorists, in the sense of the theory of social practices, he proposes a more detailed definition of “practice” – “a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge”, in simple terms, practices are routinized bodily performances that are related to mental activities, material and cultural objects (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249). Similar to Reckwitz, Shove et al. (2012, p. 14) disassemble practices into three simple elements: “materials (things, technologies, tangible physical entities), competences (skill, know-how and technique), and meanings (symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations), and stress that practices emerge, persist, shift and disappear when connections between these three types of elements are built, maintained or broken.” Taking the practice of “driving” as an example, Shove et al

(ibid, p. 25) demonstrate that “driving a car depend on specific combinations of materials, meanings and competence that driving evolves as these ingredients change; and that such changes are in part a consequence of the integrative work involved”. In sum, as Stephansen and Treré (2019) summarise, a practice can be regarded as a block – “whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements [proposed by Shove et al (2012)]” that mentioned by Reckwitz (2002, p. 249-250), and these blocks connect together and form a “nexus” – “wider complexes and constellations” mentioned by Hui et al (2016, p. 1), making up the “basic domain of study of the social sciences” (Giddens, 1984, p. 2).

Moreover, practice is “thus a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood” (ibid, p. 250). To maintain the inherent processual nature of the practice approach, Nicolini (2017, p. 21) defines practices as “regimes of a mediated object-oriented performance of organised set of sayings and doings”. He also indicates that these “performances” can be called “practices” only if “they have a history, social constituency and hence, a perceivable normative dimension”, like “teaching a class, cooking a meal, telesales, telemedicine, investigating accidents, trading online and driving” are examples of practices. In sum, for practice theory and the idea of “practice turn”, as Nicolini (ibid, p. 22) indicates, it does not only solve a number of problems left by “the tendency of describing the world in terms of irreducible dualisms between actor/system, social/material, body/mind and theory/action”, but also allow us to use this “basic building block [practice] understand large and complex phenomena including concern organisations, institutions and society”.

There is a common criticism of the practice approach – although it is helpful for studying the micro-level of social interaction, it cannot fully explain the large-scale political process (Mattoni & Treré, 2014; Stephansen and Treré, 2019). Moreover, Schatzki (2016, p. 31) conceptualises the practice theory as a “flat ontology” – all social phenomena and all human activity are constituted by practices, and there is just one level of social reality, which concerns scholars in different fields. For example, as Bakardjieva (2020, p. 2932-2933) mentions, this idea declares “entities of a higher level – such as system, institution, social structure, culture, collective conscience, and fields to be ‘metaphysical’ and ‘mysterious’”, which “contravene the proper way of conceptualizing the social as a sprawling plenum of practices interlinked in bundles, configurations, constellations, social phenomena.” Stephansen and Treré (2019, p. 17-18) also indicate that the “flat ontology” is also complicating scholars of activist and citizen media, because “explaining social change (and reproduction) is therefore not a matter of

understanding how agents succeed (or not) in changing social structures – it is rather a case of understanding how practices change (or persist) overtime and how changes in some practices may lead to changes in others (or not)”.

### ***3.3.2 “Theorising Media as Practice”***

By placing materiality, embodiment, knowledgeability, and process at the centre of social analysis, the above-mentioned practice theories indeed offer a holistic framework for studying the social significance of media (Stephansen and Treré, 2020). As Nick Couldry (2012, p. 99) puts it, “A practice-based approach has opened up broad questions about the sorts of things people are regularly doing with media amid the proliferating complexity of the digital media era.” Based on the “anti-dualism” consensus among the practice theorists, and starting from practices, Couldry proposed a brand-new framework in media research in his significant article “Theorising media as practice” in 2004. It was the first time that practice theory was introduced into media studies. Couldry regards “media as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media.” (2004, p. 117). In 2012, Couldry further illustrates media practices by further distinguishing between “acts aimed specifically at media, acts performed through media, and acts whose preconditions are media” (p. 57), and insisting it refers to what people are “doing in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts” (p. 37). His media practice framework has blazed a new path for media research that focuses on the media practice – “to consider what people do with media” (2004, p. 118-119), instead of “media texts or media institutions”.

So, what are media practices? Couldry illustrates it with two vivid examples in the article: the first example is his famous example of “watching football on television”: “Watching a football game on television might for one person be best analysed as part of their intensely emotional practice as a football fan, or fan of a particular football team; for another, perhaps that person’s partner or child, it may be an obligation or pleasure of their relationship together to share the first person’s passion; for someone watching in a public space, it may be part of a practice of group solidarity; for a fourth, it may be something done to fill in time, ... as soon as a friend rings the doorbell or the person gets the energy to go back to some work.” (Couldry, 2004, p. 125). Couldry (2004) uses this scenario to demonstrate that in media research how people read the text of this television game or other text-related issues should not be the main priorities, because it is impossible to understand what people are doing with media if we are focusing on the text or text-related issues. Couldry urges media researchers to pay attention to

“the range of practices in which the act of watching this football game occurs and the consequences of that common features for the relationships between those practices.” (2004, p. 125).

The second example Couldry (2004) criticises the previous media studies of talk shows regarding talk shows as text only, rather than studying them as an actual practice. Couldry argues that media researchers should pay more attention to what will happen when a group of people are assembled and present themselves in the show, or in other words, focus on what people do and why they do it, rather than words they say. Once again, practice theory offers researchers a new perspective in media studies. Couldry (2004) summarises that his media practice framework starts with all the possible “media-oriented” practice, but not the audiences’ or performers’ practices only. Couldry’s media practice framework disenchant the media text or media institutions and offers a new framework for media researchers in the whole world to review previous text-oriented media studies. By the mid-2000s, Couldry (2012, p. 118) stresses that more media studies have started to cast off the constraint of the text and shed light on various “media-oriented practices”.

Before Couldry theorised the media as practice, the turn to practice has antecedents within two main aspects of media research: audience studies and media anthropology (e.g., Cammaerts and Couldry, 2016; Stephansen and Treré, 2020). Couldry (2012, p. 116) indicates that the basic question of what people do with media led to the following Uses and Gratifications approach that paid attention to “individual usage of bounded objects called ‘media’”. Because the uses and gratifications approach remained focused on people’s interactions with specific media technologies or texts (Cammaerts and Couldry, 2016), it became more and more unsound given the “growing ubiquity and embeddedness of media in everyday life” (Stephansen and Treré, 2019, p. 5). Therefore, the shift to practice theory can be seen as a solution to the crisis in audience research (Couldry 2012, citing Ang 1996). In media anthropology, Ginsburg (1994, p. 13) presciently defined an anthropological approach to mass media, which focused on people and their social relations in the analysis of media as a social form, rather than media texts or technology. Standing in front of the situation where practice theory had been widely used by media anthropologists, Postill (2010) critically points out that these scholars had tended to use media practices as connectors to research other objects rather than directly regarding media practices as study objects. Moreover, the notion of “media practices” had rarely been defined and problematized in their research, and there had been little explicit involvement with practice theory (Postill, 2010). To overcome this problem, inspired by Couldry’s notion of “media practices” (2004), Bräuchler and Postill (2010) made an effort



to bring media anthropology into explicit conversation with practice theory in their edited volume *“Theorising Media and Practice”* (Stephansen and Treré, 2019), exploring a wide range of practices, such as uses of information and communication technologies by Norwegian and Danish families (Helle-Valle, 2010; Christensen & Røpke, 2010), practices of newspaper readers and news journalists in India (Peterson, 2010; Rao, 2010), and free software activism (Kelty, 2010).

Generally speaking, as Couldry (p. 117) indicates, the aim of “theorising media as practices” was to “decentre media research from the study of media texts or production structures and to redirect it onto the study of the open-ended range of practices focused directly or indirectly on media”, in other words, the “media practice” offers a more open research framework in media studies than previous media text or production structure approach. However, like the practice approach, the media practice has also encountered similar criticisms in the field. Similar to this criticism of the practice approach, Postill (2010) indicates that media practices should not become a panacea in media studies, especially it is not suitable for the studies of global media events, media dramas or epidemics. Moreover, as Bakardjieva (2020, p. 2938-2939) insists, focusing on media practices is problematic because “although a medium (communication device) could be a material element of a certain practice, it is only rarely that it would define the meaning and the teleo-affective structure of that practice”. To illustrate her point, Bakardjieva gives an example: “in terms of meaning and telos, the people who are emailing or phoning [...] are always doing something that goes beyond the medium itself”, hence, it is inaccurate to label them email practices or phone practices (p. 2939). These criticisms and doubts on media practices need to be carefully considered in future research.

### ***3.3.3 Media Practice Approach in Social Movement Research***

More recently, given the development of the Web 2.0 technologies and its power in social movements, the practice approach to media research has been also adopted significantly by social movements and media activism research recently to better understand activists’ media practices; develop more nuanced analyses of the media role in movements for social and political change, and detailed research on the interrelationships between protest and media (Stephansen and Treré, 2019). More precisely, the media practice approach has been proved to be an effective way to help researchers out of the dilemmas of media centrism – “a tendency to take media platforms, rather than broader social practices and relationships, as a starting point for enquiry”, communicative reductionism – “the brief that media technologies’ role

within social movement dynamics is either not relevant or merely instrumental”, technological determinism – “it overemphasises the role of media technologies in driving social forces, cultural processes, and revolutions”, and one-medium fallacy – “the tendency to focus on the use of single technologies without disentangling the whole media spectrum with which activists interact” in social movements and media activism research (Treré, 2019, p. 1, 6, 9; Stephansen and Treré, 2019, p. 6). Moreover, as Stephansen and Treré (2019, p. 6) point out, adopting the practice approach in social movement research refers to a reaction against digital positivism (Fuchs, 2017): many studies aim to use big data/computational techniques to find out collective action dynamics (Treré, 2019), but doing so they often “neglect the importance of social and political contexts and gloss over cultural nuances and specificities”.

For example, Mccurdy (2011, p. 622) adopts the media practice approach in his research on how “lay theories of media” – “theories or understandings expressed and/or enacted by social movement actors concerning the functions and motivations of news media; how news media operate, what drives them, and theories concerning how the logic of news influences the representation of reality” informed and influenced the Disst! activists’ activism practices directly and indirectly at the 2005 Gleneagles G8 Summit. By emphasizing the specific practice of activism of Dissent! activists – understanding of media, Mccurdy (ibid) stresses that it “provides a means to combine the theoretically bifurcated positions of activists as audiences of news and actors in the news...”. The research of Mattoni (2012) on the media practices of the precarious workers’ movement in Italy was also a relatively comprehensive study that should not be overlooked in the early days of the media practice approach. In her research, Mattoni defined “activist media practices” as “routinized and creative social practices in which activists engage and which include, first, interactions with media objects – such as mobiles, laptops, pieces of paper – through which activists can generate and/or appropriate media messages, therefore acting either as media producers or media consumers; and, second, interactions with media subjects – such as journalists, public relations managers, but also activist media practitioners who are connected to the media realm.” (Mattoni, 2012, p. 159; Mattoni and Treré, 2014, p. 259). By adopting the media practice approach and dividing activist media practices into two tangible interactions, Mattoni’s (2012) research shows a panorama of precarious workers’ media-related practices during their movement activities. More specifically, she explores how activists can find the right way to deal with the complex media environment in their protests. As (Stephansen and Treré, 2020, p. 247) comments, Mattoni’s approach overcomes “the limitations of most social movement studies that either focus on how mainstream media cover protests and neglect the role of citizen media produced by protesters,

or isolate the diverse media produced by activists from their multiple interactions with the press and mainstream media”.

To challenge the techno-deterministic arguments and move away from the debate between the techno-optimists and techno-pessimists and transcend the scholarship on how new technologies promote the emergence of new models of political and social organisation, Barassi (2015, p. 10) analyses the “tension between activists’ democratic needs on the one hand and structures of digital capitalism on the other”, through the lens of media practice, focusing on three different organisations in Europe (Cuba Solidary Campaign, Ecologistas en Acción and Corsari) reacted to the web developments and the continued commercialization of the Internet. Barassi (2015) shows that even if these three groups have different political cultures and social, economic and cultural backgrounds, they all have to deal with similar techno-social transformations caused by digital capitalism. For example, the web has become a space of corporate surveillance and exploration, and it has changed the activists’ activism practices. Askanius (2019, p. 137) also proposes a practice-based framework for “further developing a holistic understanding of video activism as the things activists do, think and say in relation to video for social and political change.” As Askanius indicates, the practice approach can help her research avoid falling into the above-mentioned dilemma of media-centrism and one-medium fallacy. More specifically, Askanius can avoid focusing on video contexts or video technologies only in her research by adopting the practice approach.

More recently, the edited collection “*Citizen Media and Practice: Currents, Connections, Challenges*” introduced us extensively about the concerns and applications of the media practice approach across various backgrounds and experiences related to research on citizen and activist media, from the research and discussion on “practice” by Latin American scholars who “shifted to practice” earlier than Couldry’s article in 2004, to the application of media practice approach in various research fields related to activist and citizen media, including exploring the complex interactions between activist agency and the media technologies’ technological affordances; examining video activism and video practices; highlighting various “acting on media” practices; and understanding process of datafication and their consequences (Stephansen and Treré, 2019). As Couldry’s (2019) foreword to this book, the “media as practice” paradigm has taken an important step with this book.

In media studies related to China, recent work shows that scholars have noticed and recognised the significance and value of the “media practice framework” (e.g., Huang, 2015; Zhou & Li, 2017), and some of them have even put forward specific media practice research paradigms based on the situation in China (e.g., Gu, 2018). Nevertheless, there remain few

empirical studies on media practices and activist media practices in China. This thesis fills this gap, aiming to inspire more studies of activist media practices in the future.

### ***3.3.4 Understanding Consumer Video Activism from a Media Practice Perspective***

The idea of adopting the media practice approach in this consumer video activism research was mainly inspired by Mattoni (2012), Mattoni and Treré (2014), Stephansen and Treré (2019; 2020), Askanius (2019), and practice theorists such as Couldry, Postill, Reckwitz, Scharzki, Shove et al and other media practice thoughts mentioned above. First of all, the short video activism tactics of the Chinese consumer can be regarded as a concrete “practice”. For example, using the three elements of practices of Shove et al. (2012) to examine the tactics briefly, we can see that the short video activism tactics (practices) is constituted of: mobiles, mobile-phone-based apps, tangible products or intangible services purchased by consumers (materials); the skills to shoot short videos via mobiles and use SVB platforms to share the short videos with the public, mainstream media journalists and we-operators (competences); recording, uploading, sharing and reposting short videos about unsatisfied consumption experiences or any practice related to these experiences signifies grievances, intention to protest against businesses involved, and seek compensation (meanings). Then, following Couldry’s (2004) concept of “media practices”, the short video activism tactics of the Chinese consumer is a genuine media practice. Moreover, this thesis focuses on the short video activism tactics of Chinese consumers instead of the short-video content consumers make or the SVB platform behind it, which is also in line with the objective of Couldry’s media practice framework. In sum, in this thesis, I regard the latest short video activism tactics as an emerging and creative media practice of the Chinese consumer.

To elaborate on Chinese consumer’s short video activism tactics further, here, I draw lessons from the essential concept of “activist media practices” (Mattoni, 2012; Mattoni and Treré (2014). Comparing the “activist media practices” with Chinese consumers’ short video activism tactics, I have found that these two have much in common. In a consumer video activism case, its overall process can be deconstructed into two similar interactions parts of “activist media practice”. First, interactions with “media objects” – the Chinese consumers use their mobile phone to record short videos about their unsatisfied consumption experiences or any practice related to these experiences, then upload them to SVB platforms. During this step, Chinese consumers are transformed into media producers through generating rights protection

short videos. These short videos usually concern the product quality problem or poor service attitude, or conflict between the consumer and business, or any other spectacle that can emphasise the vulnerable status of consumers.

Second, interactions with “media subjects” – consumers attract the attention of and interact with media practitioners, public relations department officials, government department officials and the mass public (who are consumers as well), by using those short videos they recorded. These four groups of the audience are all “connected to the media realm” (Mattoni and Treré, 2014): For the public/other Chinese consumers, they can use their mobiles to generate similar short videos as other consumers do, or simply share the short videos they see on SVB platforms; for media practitioners – mainstream media journalists, we-media operators, they are the core news producers. By interviewing the original producer of a certain short video and the business involved in that video, and reporting it via different media such as newspapers, radios, newspapers and different online websites or SVB platforms, journalists present a panorama of this consumer video activism case in front of everyone; for public relations managers who work for the business involved, as soon as they find out the emergence of a certain influential short video, they will use different methods to reduce the impact of this consumer video activism case on the brand image of the business, such as negotiating with the consumer to solve the problem (and ask her/him to delete the short video), releasing their official announcements, and requesting media that have good relations with them not to report this incident or even ask them delete the reported news; for government department officials, they normally tolerate the consumer video activism cases, only if these cases “have not challenged authoritarian rule” (Liu, 2019), and follow media reports on these cases. During this process, the government officials will intervene to get consumers out of the trouble by regulating the businesses involved according to the actual circumstances and requiring them to solve the problems for consumers. It should be noticed that all interactions mentioned above are based on the premise that businesses indeed violate the legitimate rights of consumers.

Taken together, the concept of “activist media practices” (Mattoni and Treré 2014) offers an “anti-dualism” practicable paradigm to this thesis as other practice theories mentioned above have done, it deconstructs activists’ media practices into two observable and significant interaction processes – interactions with “media objects” and “media subjects”. According to the discussion above, Chinese consumers’ short video activism tactics can be deconstructed into these two similar interaction processes as well. Specifically, it can be mainly defined as the elastic mutual interaction processes between the Chinese consumers, media objects (short videos and SVB platforms), and media subjects (the public, public relations department

officials, mainstream media journalists/we-media operators, and government department officials). However, unlike the “activist media practices”, Chinese consumers do not engage with the media subjects directly with their physical bodies but engage with the media subjects via the bridge of media objects. In other words, the media objects – short videos and SVB platforms become the intermediary between Chinese consumers and media subjects.

### **3.4 Public Sphere: A Point of Departure**

#### ***3.4.1 Controversial Public Sphere***

Jürgen Habermas was not the first to discuss the idea of the public sphere, before him, Hannah Arendt had already talked about the public sphere idea in her book “*Human Condition*” where she (1958, p. 52) stated that the public sphere is a “common world” and it can “gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other.” However, Arendt did not give us a precise model of the public sphere in her book. Habermas (1989a) also did not offer us a clear definition of the public sphere, even if the public sphere was illustrated profoundly by him in his masterpiece “*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*”. According to Habermas, the public sphere is a mediated area between the civil society and political state. In this space, individuals can gather around to debate about social issues, and the discussion there can influence political decisions. A significant number of researchers from different research fields in the world have interpreted Habermas’s public sphere in different ways, so I will not repeat unnecessary details here.

Habermas and this influential concept have suffered multiple academic challenges from different researchers since he first mentioned the public sphere. For example, Fraser (1992) has discussed the appropriate boundaries of the public sphere almost thirty years ago. She indicates that the “liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere” mentioned by Habermas is no longer feasible under altered conditions of the “welfare state mass democracy” in the late twentieth century, and “some new form of the public sphere is required to salvage that arena’s critical functions and to institutionalise democracy” (1990, p. 58). Moreover, from the perspective of mass media – one of the significant components of Habermas’s public sphere, researchers have found various evidence to uncover the deficiencies of the public sphere (e.g., Gitlin, 1998). For example, Habermas (1989a) himself also criticised the commercialisation progress (profit generation and advertisement) of the traditional media, which has endangered the existence of the public sphere. As a result, the public sphere of the media has become undemocratic and a privatised sphere (Fuchs, 2017).

Even if scholars mentioned above (and there are more are not covered) have questioned the public sphere proposed by Habermas, researchers are still striving to prove the plausibility of public sphere theory, and especially the positive connection between the digital media technologies such as social media and the public sphere today. For instance, Bowen (1996) expresses that the Internet does provide avenues for political expressions and several ways to influence politics and become politically active. Clay Shirky (2011, p. 30) mentions that social media would be “coordinating tools for nearly all of the world’s political movements, just as most of the world’s authoritarian governments (and, alarmingly, an increasing number of democratic ones) are trying to limit access to it.” Jiang (2016) also indicates that social media could function as a critical arena for discussing politics and expressing public opinions in China. However, it should be noted that new social media platforms like Weibo, WeChat, Facebook, YouTube still have the same commercial nature as traditional media, whether they are based in the U.S. or China. Fuchs (2017) describes these new media companies as capitalist media, and as part of the capitalist economy, they earn monetary profit by selling advertisements. Most of these social media platforms could only be counted as a pseudo-public space harnessed by companies for commercial purposes (e.g., Barnes, 2006; Lange, 2007; Arora, 2015). Alternatively, as Garnham (2000, p. 41) states, “The colonization of the public sphere by market forces” can be observed by the increasing commercialization of social media platforms. Within these commercialised social media platforms, individuals’ opinions or stories, no matter in the forms of text, picture or video, once online, will be more easily buried if they do not capture the imaginations quickly and firmly enough (Goode, 2009). Besides, Goode (2009) also states that the traditional function of media, being a gatekeeper, does not vanish in these social media platforms. Conversely, this function has been amplified by the computer algorithm, “whether or not a particular story reaches the front page of a popular online news site or remains buried several pages deep has consequences akin to “traditional” gatekeeping processes” (Goode, 2009, p. 1295). In sum, even if a portion of the public sphere optimists mentioned above regards social media as an ideal starting place for the public sphere, the “public sphere” is still a “utopian” idea. It has been challenged and restricted by the political and commercial impact and other practical factors as we mentioned above.

In 1998, Gitlin indicated that assumptions of a single public sphere are “unwarranted, even foolhardy”. Today after twenty-three years, Gitlin’s words are still meaningful. Nevertheless, as Habermas also mentioned in a conversation with Zhang (2000, p. 28), people should not leave the concept of ‘utopia’ aside: “We must not equate utopia with illusion. Illusion is based on unfounded imagination, which can never be realized. Utopia, however,

contains hope and embodies a long-awaited future that is completely different from reality, providing a spiritual impetus for the future.”. Hence, in this thesis, I regard the ideal public sphere concept as a point of departure for exploring consumer video activism in China. Next, I present more discussions on the public sphere concept in the context of China.

### ***3.4.2 Scattered Public Sphere Research in China***

In China, similar discussions and research projects have increasingly emerged right after the first and the only (by the year 2021) Chinese version of “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere” published in 1999 (translated by Cao et al.). By combing relevant Chinese academic journals about the public sphere theory according to the CSSCI (Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index) in the last twenty years, I have found out that these research projects have covered the vast majority of humanities and social science fields. Such as in the Chinese historical, cross-cultural studies, Jilin Xu (2003) explains the political legitimacy and historical origins of the public sphere in modern China (1840-1949) in detail by taking Shanghai as a case study; in the social sciences studies, Chen (2009) illustrates the Habermas’s public sphere and its characteristics.

From the perspective of media and communication studies, the focus of Chinese scholars is on the interrelationship between the Habermas public sphere theory and the evolving and changing media in the context of China. Many Chinese scholars (e.g., Xu and Zhao, 2009; Yuan, 2010; Guo, 2013; Qiu and Shen 2017; Liu, 2018) attempted to demonstrate that the Chinese social media platforms have the possibilities to construct a public sphere in China. Especially in the research field of media and communication, scholars are more inclined to deem the Habermas public sphere a research object or take it as a utopian model to evaluate the public’s media practice in the Internet age in China (Huang, 2009). However, it should be pointed out that since the early 2010s, more and more Chinese researchers, like researchers in other countries mentioned above, have begun to question and criticize Habermas’s public sphere theory. As Xia and Huang (2008) state, in media and communication studies, the research related to the public sphere has led to two problematical directions in China. The first kind is that scholars have applied Habermas’s public sphere theory to Chinese society without critical thinking. These studies often exaggerate the role of mass media (especially social media) and neglect the interactive relationships among the mass media, government departments and other social organisations in China (Huang, 2009). The other kind is that a part of Chinese scholars unilaterally disclaims the full value of the public sphere theory. They believe that it



does not apply to Chinese society (e.g., Zhang and Bai, 2017). In sum, Chinese researchers who focus on media and communication studies related to the public sphere are talking past each other, or in other words, public sphere research in China is relatively scattered.

Even so, there are still a few Chinese researchers who attempt to draw lessons from the public sphere theory and define a subordinate concept that is more in line with the actual situation in China. For example, P.C.C. Huang is the first to re-examine the public sphere theory and define (1993) a concept of “third realm” based on the Chinese situation. In the classical definition of the bourgeois public sphere of Habermas, “the bourgeois public sphere evolved in the tension-charged field between state and society.” (Habermas, 1989a, p. 142). However, as Huang (1993, p. 216) argues, Habermas’s public sphere is an “ideal abstracted from early modern and modern Western experience”, but “that is inappropriate for China”, Chinese public sphere should not be treated as a simple binary opposition between state and society. As Huang (1993, p. 238) concludes:

We need to break out of the old conceptual habits of postulating a simple binary opposition between state and society. Contrary to the vision of the public sphere/civil society models, actual socio-political change in China has really never come from any lasting assertion of societal autonomy against the state, but rather from the workings out of state-society relations in the third realm.

The “third realm” concept of Huang has been followed and discussed by Chinese scholars since it was published. For example, Xia and Huang (2008), Huang (2009), Feng (2015), etc., focus on the “third realm” and take it as arguments to criticise the Habermas public sphere and discuss its applicability in China. However, besides these discussions on the “third realm”, Chinese scholars stopped there, especially for those who are in the field of media and communication studies. As Huang (1993) indicates, the bourgeois public sphere is just one variant type of public sphere mentioned by Habermas; it is necessary to define a subordinate “public sphere” concept that is more in line with China’s national conditions. However, only few researchers are concentrating on this research gap in China. Yang and Calhoun’s (2007) research on “green public sphere” is a significant example. According to them, the emergence of debates surrounding dam building on the Nu River signals the rise of a “green public sphere” in China. Within it, the environmental non-governmental organizations played a leading role for making the critical environmental discourse, and mass media, the Internet and alternative media produced and disseminated by those non-governmental organizations were the main channels of communication. As another researcher who focus on this gap, Xiaoping Guo (2013) argues that with the development of Chinese political civilization, the reform of the news

system, the technical support of new media communication, and the gradual awakening of citizens' environmental awareness, and the legitimacy of environmental protection topics recognised by the government, Chinese "environmental protection public sphere" is most likely to emerge and take the lead.

In recent years, following Yang and Calhoun, and Guo, Sun et al (2018, 2020) continued to shed light on the public sphere in China from the perspective of environmental politics. Since it is difficult for Chinese citizens to articulate their concerns about public issues through civic organizations or other formal means of participation, they have to participate in relevant discussions through informal ways (Sun et al, 2020), such as the online forum. Sun et al (2018) investigated the ordinary Chinese citizens' everyday talk about online environmental talk on three online forums and demonstrated that these talks serve as an informal mechanism for the general public to directly participate in environmental politics in China.

### ***3.4.3 The Feasibility of the "Consumer Sphere" in China***

To fill the research gap of the indigenous public sphere research mentioned above, and further investigate the consumer video activism tactics, I regard Habermas's public sphere and relevant studies mentioned above as a starting point, illustrating a proto-consumer sphere model in this thesis. The "consumer sphere" I illustrate in this thesis has similar roots as the "green public sphere" and "environmental protection public sphere". According to Lo and Leung (2000), the Chinese political system did not provide the public with an institutional channel to exert important influence in the environmental policy process. It can be regarded as another fundamental root cause of the emergence of the "green public sphere" and "environmental protection public sphere", in addition to what Guo (2013) and Sun et al (2020) pointed out (Subsection 3.4.2). Back to the "consumer sphere", government relevant departments and businesses in China did not provide Chinese consumers with enough efficient channels to safeguard their rights and interests as well (Section 5.2). It leads consumers to turn to the "consumer sphere" to seek solutions.

Before defining the "consumer sphere model", I want to explain why it is a "consumer" sphere from two perspectives, then discuss the accessibility of the "consumer sphere" model compared with the public sphere, and the role of all forms of media played in the "consumer sphere".

*First*, from the perspective of the relationship between consumer culture and politics, the relationship between consumption and citizenship in the world today is getting closer even

though they tended to be situated in two opposing spheres of “private and public” a generation ago (Trentmann, 2007, p. 147). According to Trentmann (ibid), this tendency is attributable to multiple movements: the global spread of neoliberalism from the second half of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century, the backlash of NSMs, the rise of the agency of women in influencing public affairs through consumption and gender studies. In recent years scholars from different disciplines (social movement studies, gender studies, just to name a few) have indicated the civil potential of consumption around various topics such as “fair trade, sweatshop products, and related issues of social and environmental justice” (Trentmann, ibid, p. 149) and use the term “citizen-consumer”<sup>24</sup> to symbolize it (e.g., Micheletti, 2003; Martens, 2006; Tian and Dong, 2011). In sum, consumption has functioned for a long time as an “alternative sphere of political action and inclusion for groups excluded from the formal body politic [...]” (Trentmann, ibid, p. 149). For example, in China, take the issue of environmental management as an example, Martens (2006) indicates that Chinese citizens have been turning to open boycotts and demonstrations and demanding environmentally sound products to participate in the environmental management and pursue a liveable environment. The growing relationship between consumption and citizenship has underpinned the emergence of the consumer sphere that this thesis is going to illustrate. *Second*, from the perspective of the government control, unlike environmental destruction, human rights violation issues, which have been strictly controlled and governed by the government, “marketplace choices” (or consumptions) have gradually become a new way of civic engagement that consumers can employ their agency (Micheletti, 2003), especially in China. As Yang (2009b) points out, the Chinese central government may tolerate and even encourage grassroots protests that do not directly challenge their legitimacy, hence, consumer activism issues will not be limited by the government as long as these collective actions are not anti-state and anti-party (Herold, 2008) in China, which creates another essential objective foundation for the “consumer sphere” model. Moreover, as Svensson (2016) proposes, the growing Chinese middle class (with strong purchasing power) nowadays are also trying to find ways to express and safeguard their interests without opposing the party-state apparently, and “[they] are increasingly attracted to more personalised and interested-based ways of networking and forms of civic engagement” (Svensson, 2016, p. 57). In sum, from the perspective of the Chinese people, the consumption (consumer rights protection) area tolerated by the government is a low-risk sphere for them to participate in civic life.

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<sup>24</sup> According to Trentmann (2007), Tian and Dong (2011), the term “citizen-consumer” refers to those individuals or groups whose consumption practices are guided by civil concerns.

When talking about the ideal public sphere mentioned by Habermas (1989a), the discussion about its accessibility has never ceased. The rational public sphere model described by Habermas based on the bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth century has been criticized by scholars for its exclusions (e.g. Fraser, 1992; Ward, 1997; Papacharissi, 2002). For example, Fraser (1992) contended that Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere worked as a realm only for privileged men to train their skills of governance and "assert their fitness to govern", and "women, workers, people of colour, and gays and lesbians" (p. 114; p. 123) who are called subaltern counterpublics are excluded from it. The emergence of the Internet in the 1990s stimulated debates on the accessibility of the public sphere further. Some scholars believed that Internet technology is fundamental to equality of access to information, which can strengthen deliberative democracy and the public sphere (Gimmler, 2001). Some disclaimed the positive impact of Internet technology, proclaiming that the internet is not available to all social groups (e.g. Ward, 1997; Lunat, 2008), and situations like discursive dominance and the digital divide (Papacharissi, 2002) restrict the public space created by the Internet and prevent it from becoming a public sphere. For example, even if the cost of entering the public sphere decreases because of the Internet, the "public sphere rich" will still get richer, while the "public sphere poor" will continue to be relatively poorer because of the increased sources of news and forums of political discussion (Brundidge, 2010).

In the context of China, in addition to the above-mentioned studies (e.g., Huang, 2009; Xu and Zhao, 2009; Yuan, 2010; Guo, 2013; Qiu and Shen 2017; Liu, 2018) discussing the positive connections between the Internet technology and the public sphere, some research (e.g. Liu, 2007; Jing and Yang, 2007; Wang, 2011) demonstrated that the online space supported by the Internet technology is restrained by similar factors mentioned above. Taking Weibo as an example, Wang (2011) defines that the user verification system created by Weibo form an inequality between Weibo users, which reduces the accessibility of the "public sphere" constructed by Weibo. As a variant starting from the "public sphere", the online "consumer sphere" proposed in this thesis is more accessible because of the arrival of the short video technologies (Section 5.3), and the Chinese government's tolerance of consumer activism issues mentioned in subsection. Ideally, every Chinese consumer who cares about the consumer rights interests of herself/himself and the general public is included in the "consumer sphere". However, we should not neglect that its accessibility will also be restricted by the above-mentioned factors mentioned above, such as the digital divide and the capital impact (Sections 2.7 and 5.3).

According to Habermas (1989b), the role of modern mass media, such as newspapers and magazines, radio and television, plays an essential role in the ideal public sphere. Put differently, the public sphere needs “specific means [mass media] for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it” (ibid, p. 136). Studies on the public sphere have explored the complicated relationships between the public sphere and various forms of media, such as newspapers (e.g., Raymond, 1998), community radio (e.g., Forde, Foxwell and Meadows, 2002), television (e.g., Dahlgren, 1995), alternative media (e.g., O’Donnell, 2001) and new social media platforms (e.g., Iosifidis, 2011). To date, there have been many similar discussions of how Internet-based media influences the construction process of the public sphere in the context of China (e.g., Song, 2010; Li, 2016). Inspired by these studies, we need to consider the role of all forms of media (from We-media to mainstream media) played in the “consumer sphere” proposed in this thesis (Section 7.6 and Subsection 8.3.3).

Within the “consumer sphere”, based on short video technologies (SVB platforms and short videos), by recording, uploading, sharing and reposting short videos about their unsatisfied consumption experiences or any practice related to these experiences, Chinese consumers can express and discuss their grievances, capture the attention of mainstream media/we-media, public relations departments of businesses, government departments and the mass public to influence the decisions and behaviours of relevant government departments and businesses, and safeguard their and the public’s rights and interests without opposing the party-state. Unlike the utopian bourgeois public sphere, the “consumer sphere” model is more pragmatic and currently working in Chinese society (Chapter 5 and 6). On the one hand, this “consumer sphere” has the potential to become an accessible and alternative online space for consumers to both take part in more public-concerned issues and safeguard their rights and interests at the same time (Subsection 5.4.1). Consumers can actually get in touch with the media within the “consumer sphere” when they need, by adopting the short video activism tactics. With the assistance of the media, the “consumer sphere” can become a lively “Internet-based channel” (Cheung, 2016) for public opinion, which can mobilise the public opinion to monitor the government and business, address broader issues of justice, and most importantly, push for legislative and policy reforms. On the other hand, this “consumer sphere” has stimulated the growth of people’s consumer rights consciousness, and it “has contributed to people’s growing awareness of individual rights, albeit limited to economic and legal rights, and given them a range of ‘learning experiences’ in locating and using avenues to exercise those rights” (Hooper, 2005, p. 17).

### 3.5 Conclusion

Putting Chinese consumers' short video activism practice under the social movement research framework can obtain better and deeper conclusions. More specifically, applying a range of grievances generation theories in social movement research to the short video activism practice of Chinese consumers, the underlying reasons of Chinese consumers' short video activism practice can be better understood. Moreover, by regarding the latest consumer video activism as a new repertoire of contention, this thesis can better examine the formation process of the consumer video activism tactics, especially the internal and external impact on it, such as individual's personal experience, cultural expectations, and economic or regime change. Therefore, in this thesis, I focus on the Chinese consumers' experience and perception of the short video activism practice in the long-term and broader society. More precisely, drawing on Liu's (2019) usage of the repertoire of contention concept in his research, I study the experiences and perceptions of four groups of interviewees (Chinese consumers, PR department officials, and mainstream media journalists/we-media operators, relevant government department officials) towards SVB platforms and the consumer video activism tactics, rather than concentrating on it only through the case study.

Based on practice theorists and their significant "anti-dualism" practice theories, such as Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens and Schatzki, Couldry (2004) has come up with a media practice theory in media studies. Couldry's media practice paradigm has inspired many researchers in the media studies field. Such as Askanius (2020) proposes a practice-based framework in video activism research. As she says, it helps us avoid falling into the dilemma of media-centrism (or focusing on the video contexts only) and focusing on the video technologies only. Drawing lessons from the "activist media practices" concept (Mattoni and Treré, 2014) and other thoughts on media practice, I define the short video activism practices of Chinese consumers as the elastic mutual interaction processes between the consumers, media object (short videos and SVB platforms), and media subjects (mass public/Chinese consumers, PR department officials, mainstream media journalists/we-media operators, and relevant government department officials). The overall media practice approach offers an essential observable and practicable toolkit for this thesis.

The public sphere concept has been heatedly discussed by many researchers worldwide. As the late-comers, Chinese scholars did not criticise the Habermas public sphere until the 2010s. Among the scattered and critical public sphere studies based on the actual social situation in China, P.C.C. Huang (1993) was the first to define the concept of the "third realm",

which is more appropriate to the Chinese social complex realities. This thesis responds to Huang's academic appeal: scholars should regard Habermas's public sphere and relevant studies as a starting point and define a subordinate "public sphere" concept that is more in line with China's national conditions. Given that the increasingly close relationship between consumption and citizens in the world today, and the government's tolerant attitude towards the consumption area, I illustrate a "consumer sphere" model and looking into the relationships between short videos, SVB platforms and four actors (Chinese consumers, PR department officials, mainstream media journalists/we-media operators, and relevant government department officials) involved within this model. The accessibility of the "consumer sphere" and the role of all forms of media (we-media and mainstream media) played in it are explored in this thesis.

## Chapter 4: Methodologies

### 4.1 Introduction

This thesis adopts two research methods: semi-structured interview and case study. The semi-structured interview is regarded as the main research method in this thesis. This thesis regards the case study as a research strategy including two data-collection methods: use documentation as evidence and online observation. The qualitative method of the semi-structured interview can provide more accurate responses and details than other quantitative data-collection methods. By interviewing four main actors involved in the consumer video activism tactics: *Chinese Consumers* (figure 1.0); *Mainstream Media Journalists/We-media Operators* (figure 1.1); *Public Relations (PR) Department Officials* (figure 1.2); and relevant *Government Department Officials* (see figure 1.3), we can find out their subjective perceptions of the consumer video activism tactics (and short video technologies), dissect the interrelationships between them, and understand how they “interact with each other” to “make” these tactics work. The specific interviewee selection process is explained in detail in the following sections. The guiding interview questions (English version) is given in Appendix A. This thesis will also focus on four consumer video activism cases in China: “*Protest of Chengdu homebuyers*”, “*Counterfeit goods on PDD*”, “*Tearful protest on Mercedes hood*”, and a particular case: “*Hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels*”. These four cases provide a rich context to explore the essential role of short videos and SVB platforms, the interactions between Chinese consumers, media, businesses and related government departments in the consumer video activism tactics. They can also support the interview findings. This methodology chapter will illustrate the following sections in detail: advantages and disadvantages of research methods adopted in this thesis; data collection design for each method, including where (geographical location) and when (time period) data is collected; the selection process for interviewees and cases; ethical concerns; limitations of proposed methodologies; pilot study design and its result.

### 4.2 Semi-Structured Interview

#### 4.2.1 Understanding the Semi-Structured Interview

The semi-structured is widely used in qualitative research for a long time for various reasons. Before I illustrate details of interview questions, interviewee selection and preparation progress,



it is necessary to re-elaborate the semi-structured interview method and build relationships between this substantial method and my research.

As Ritchie and Lewis (2003, p. 36) mention, the interview method opens a window for researchers to look at “detailed investigation of people’s perspectives, for [an] in-depth understanding of the personal context within which the research phenomena are located, and for very detailed subject coverage.” Or in Berg’s words (2007, p. 96), “it [interview] enables interviewees to speak in their own voice and express their own thoughts and feelings.” Or in the words of Ragin (1994), interviews pump up volumes of subjects and minimise the researcher’s voice as low as possible. In his book “*Learning from strangers*”, Weiss (1995) states that interview allows researchers or journalists to get access to observations of others, and we could learn through interviewing and interviewees’ answers about people’s “interior experiences”.

Structured interviews and semi-structured interviews are the two main types of interviews (Blee and Taylor, 2002). According to Firmin (2008, p. 837), structured interviews “involve administering relatively standardised interview questions to all participants in a research study”, which ensures that all interviewees “are given equal opportunities to provide data across the same research constructs”. Moreover, the structured interview can easily lead to answers that “can be compared across participants and possibly quantified” (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 1001). These features of the structured interview allow it to be widely used in survey research and opinion polling (Blee and Taylor, 2002). Besides its advantages, structured interviews also have the following disadvantages: it only passively records people’s opinions and attitudes, and does not take advantage of the dialogical potentials for knowledge production inherent in human conversations (Brinkmann, 2018). In contrast to the structured interview, the semi-structured interview relies on an “interview guide”, but the interviewer can make timely adjustments based on interactions during the interview, providing greater breadth and depth of information, and offering researchers the opportunity to discover the interviewee’s “experience and interpretation of reality, and access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher” (Blee and Taylor, 2002, p. 92-93). Moreover, semi-structured interviews can “make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee” (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 1002).

Few researchers have studied Chinese consumers’ activism strategies/tactics through the interview, and Chinese consumers rarely have the opportunity to speak out their stories. Global North researchers have neglected Chinese consumers’ personal experiences for a long

time and Chinese scholars have not paid enough attention to the importance of Chinese consumers' subjective experiences in consumer activism studies. In terms of global North scholars, Brooke Overby is one of the few researchers from the global North who study consumer protection issues in China from the legal study perspective. However, his (2006) research did not focus on Chinese consumers' subjective experiences. In terms of Chinese domestic scholars, Ding and Li's (2010) research is one of the few high-quality projects to date focusing on the functions of opinion leaders during online consumer activism in China. However, although they used the individual interview method in their research, they only shed light on online opinion leaders rather than consumers. From the perspective of the overall consumer activism research, researchers mostly have focused on the strategies and tactics of consumer activism based on the local historical and social context. Few of them have concerned consumers' personal experiences, perceptions and feelings in their studies. Hence, to avoid the shortcomings above, this thesis will pay more attention to the main actors' subjective experiences (including but not limited to Chinese consumers) involved in the consumer video activism tactics by regarding the semi-structured interview as the main research method.

Blee and Taylor (2002, p. 93-96) point out seven reasons that semi-structured interviews can benefit in social movement research ("broader and diverse; context; meaning; longitudinal; identities; human agency; received"), these points can explain to a certain extent how the semi-structured interview method is beneficial to this thesis. For example, by adopting the semi-structured interview, I have opportunities to gain access to the perceptions of a broader and diverse group of actors involved in the consumer video activism tactics; to scrutinise the semantic context of statements by relevant government departments and businesses; to understand the meaning of how Chinese consumers/media/government departments/businesses regard the consumer video activism tactics and how they feel about short video technologies; to bring the human agency to the centre of the analysis. More specifically, it allows me to "get access" to Chinese consumers (and mainstream media journalists /we-media operators; PR department officials; and relevant government department officials)' experiences and perceptions of the consumer video activism tactics and related short video technologies, allowing us to study the origins, dynamics, and impacts of these activism tactics adopted by Chinese consumers; the role of short video technologies in these tactics; and the interrelationships between Chinese consumers, media, businesses, and related government departments behind these tactics at great length.

However, we should bear in mind that although there are many benefits to using the semi-structured interview method, it is not flawless. For example, as DeJonckheere and

Vaughn (2019, p. 7) point out, not all interviewees can be excellent participants, which is a common problem that occurs in semi-structured interviews: “some individuals are hard to engage in conversation or may be reluctant to share about sensitive or personal topics”. Moreover, as Ayres (2008, p. 811) mentions, in semi-structured interviews, the interviewer’s ability directly affects the results of the entire interview: “the development of rich, relevant data rests on the interviewer’s ability to understand, interpret, and respond to the verbal and nonverbal information provided by the informant”. Furthermore, as E. W. Said (1978) indicates in his book “*Orientalism*” that the cultural context shapes the way people talk and think, different cultural backgrounds between the interviewer and interviewee lead to mutual incomprehension to a certain extent, and this situation will disturb the interviewee’s and interviewer’s subjective perceptions of the interview question. In this thesis, the interviewer and interviewees in this thesis share the same cultural background. As a result, it could reduce miscommunication and misunderstanding problems to a certain extent. However, it is necessary to take into account the authenticity issue in the qualitative interview. As Nunkoosing (2005, p. 701) indicates, “The interviewee can choose whatever means is available to him or her to construct his or her story.” Hence, if the interviewer is unqualified or performs poorly, the semi-structured interview method is essentially risky. In this thesis, it is necessary to develop a proper interview guide and conduct pilot interviews before initiating the interview to avoid the risks mentioned above. At the same time, all interviews should be conducted by an experienced interviewer. Like all other interview methods, semi-structured interviews involve many privacy issues about the interviewee, and researchers can find themselves “privy to very intense and private emotions and experiences” of interviewees (Blee and Taylor, 2002, p. 113). Hence, I must fulfil the ethical obligation to protect the interviewee’s privacy to protect them from any harm in this thesis.

#### ***4.2.2 Interviewee Selection Process***

The following section will introduce the preparation and interviewee selection process of the semi-structured interview. There are in total sixty-two (N=62) interviewees, including six (N=6) pilot interviewees and fifty-six (N=56) interviewees in this thesis. Six pilot interviewees are extracted from the groups of *Chinese Consumer (CC)*, *Public Relations Department Official (PR)*, and *Mainstream Media Journalist/We-media Operator (MJ/WO)* equally and respectively. It should be noted that technically, I could not carry out pilot interviews with the *Government Department Official (GO)* group because it is challenging to persuade

Chinese government officials to attend the pilot interview due to their busy daily schedules. All interviews were carried out from February 2019 to May 2019. All interviews were conducted in Chinese, then translated into English after the end of all interviews.

In detail, the interviewee recruiting process is as follows: (1) Snowball sampling, most interviewees were recommended or introduced by their predecessor-interviewees; (2) Friends or ex-colleagues recommending, partial interviewees were introduced by friends or ex-colleagues; (3) Active searching in different social media platforms, such as Weibo, WeChat, Douyin, and LinkedIn, etc. Fifty-six interviewees are divided into four groups: ① *Consumer* (N=15, from number 1 to 15), any consumer who has encountered or participated in consumer activism incidents in their daily lives or has witnessed consumer activism incidents before; ② *Any mainstream media journalist or we-media operator* (N=15, from number 16 to 30) who focuses on consumer disputes, consumer activism and any other consumer-related issue, and has covered consumer activism incidents; ③ *Public relations department officials* (N=14, from number 31 to 44) in different large corporations (because most large corporations care about their brand images in public in China, and they have specialised public relations departments) who have handled consumer activism cases; ④ *relevant Government officials* in any consumers rights protection department (N=12, from number 45 to 56) who have witnessed or handled consumer activism cases. Each group contains at least three key informants. In this thesis, “key informants” are those respondents across the four groups who are more experienced, more knowledgeable about, and more exposed to, consumer activism events. More specifically, in the consumer group, the key informants are well-known individuals with rich experience in the field of consumer rights protection (I call them “veteran consumer activist”); in the PR department official group, the key informants are brand-focused professionals, senior brand managers, and directors; in the mainstream media journalist group, the key informants are well-known television journalists and editors; and in the government department official group, the key informants are secretary generals, spokesmen, and department directors. To make sure the representativeness of the sample and the overall sample is unbiased, controls are placed on the types of respondents chosen for the interview in terms of quotas and I specifically looked for different types of people to interview. Hence, the interviewee numbers for each group are equally and flexibly sized. Regarding the respondents’ demographic data, there is no gender bias in these interviewees; the male and female ratio is equal among the 56 interviewees. All the

interviewees have a bachelor's degree or higher, and all of them are comfortable and familiar with mobiles and different social media apps (e.g., WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, etc.).

All interviews were conducted in the form of face-to-face and telephone interviews in three cities – Beijing, Guangzhou and Foshan in China. The interviews generally lasted from 30 to 200 minutes<sup>25</sup>. Interviewees have the right to choose between face-to-face interviews or telephone interviews. Twenty-seven interviewees were interviewed face-to-face, and thirty-five interviewees were interviewed through telephone. All interviews were audio-recorded and verbatim transcribed. As a PhD project, this research is limited by insufficient funds and time. These reasons have constrained the interviewee number and the place for conducting semi-structured interviews directly. Beijing is the political, economic and cultural centre of China, and leading mainstream media organisations, government departments, and companies are located in this city. Therefore, in Beijing, by active searching online and seeking help from friends, I could collect a maximum number of suitable interviewees. Guangzhou and Foshan are two cities where I grew up and used to work. Therefore, finding the right interviewee was accelerated by a network of my ex-colleagues, friends, and families. For face-to-face interviews, interviews mostly took place in public areas such as a quiet coffee shop and city library meeting room, some interviews completed in interviewees' offices or workplaces; for telephone interviews, it took place in my living rooms in Foshan and Beijing. All the names for interviewees were replaced by numbers (i.e., interviewee 1) to protect their privacies and safeties, as written in their informed consent forms.

Before the actual interview began, six pilot interviews had been conducted. During the pilot interviews, interviewees were encouraged to ask any question they had, and I had to explain interview questions in as much detail as possible. During the formal interview, an in-depth discussion of a specific interview question was allowed. Moreover, before all interviews started (pilot and actual interviews), interviewees were given essential introductions about the background information of the consumer video activism, and introductions of two consumer video activism cases (“Protest of Chengdu homebuyers”, “Counterfeit goods on PDD”). This process ensured the interviewee would have a better understanding of interview questions' meanings and logics. Generally speaking, it guarantees overall fluency during the interview procedure.

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<sup>25</sup> The time of interviews of government officials and PR department officials was about 30 to 60 minutes (reasons will be explained in the following paragraphs soon), and was shorter than that of the other groups. The average interview time for other interviewees was about 60 to 120 minutes. Only a few interviewees had an interview time of 200 or more minutes.

Overall, the interviews focused on questions about interviewees’ subjective perceptions of the consumer video activism tactics. The four groups of interviewees have their own additional corresponding interview questions: the core interview questions set for the consumer group focus on their previous consumer video activism experiences that they encountered or witnessed, such as how they used short videos and SVB platforms to safeguard their interests, why they chose these tactics, and what was the result; for the mainstream media journalist group, the interviews focused on questions about their previous reporting experience on consumer video activism, such as why they regard short videos and SVB platforms as their news sources; for the PR official group, the interviews focused on questions about the way they deal with consumer video activism in their work, such as how it affects their working routines; and for the government official group, the interviews focused on questions about their roles in the process of consumer video activism, such as how they usually deal with it.

Getting access to government officials and public relations officials is the most challenging part during the interview because their positions require them not to make any comment or statement related to their departments or companies without permission. Moreover, it is essential to note that March 15 is the international day for protecting consumers’ rights and interests since 1983. During this period, the consumer activism topic will become particularly striking and it will be actively followed by government officials in consumers rights protection departments and PR department officials in large companies and media journalists. As a result, it is hard to interview them during this period. Regarding this specific situation, I have come up with an interview method for this thesis: the interviews with the groups of government officials, PR officials and media journalists in the field were conducted before or after March 15, 2019, and the remaining interviews with the group of Chinese consumers were conducted during the March 15 period. Because Chinese consumers usually pay extra attention to the consumer activism topic during this period.

<i>Chinese Consumers (CC)</i>		
Number	Gender	Note
1	Male	
2	Female	
3	Male	
4	Female	
5	Male	Key informant, veteran consumer activist, well-known “Samsung” fighter

6	Male	Key informant, veteran consumer activist
7	Female	
8	Male	
9	Male	
10	Male	
11	Male	
12	Male	
13	Female	
14	Male	Key informant, veteran consumer activist and well-known online celebrity
15	Male	

Figure 1.0: Chinese consumer group

<b><i>Mainstream Media Journalist/We-media Operator (MJ/WO)</i></b>			
Number	Gender	Occupation	Note
16	Male		Key informant, former television journalist in Fujian “BBT”
17	Male	Newspaper journalist	
18	Female	Newspaper journalist	
19	Male	News website editor	
20	Male	News website journalist	
21	Male	News magazine journalist	
22	Male	Convergence media journalist	
23	Female	Convergence media journalist	
24	Female	Short video news platform journalist	
25	Male	News website journalist	
26	Male		Key informant, veteran journalist and news editor in the consumption field
27	Male	Short video news platform journalist	
28	Male	Newspaper journalist	
29	Female	News magazine journalist	
30	Male		Key informant, well-known opinion leader (we-media operator) in the consumption field

Figure 1.1: mainstream media journalist/we-media operator group

***Public Relations Department Officials (PR)***

Number	Gender	Occupation	Note
31	Female		Key informant, senior brand manager
32	Female	Brand specialist	
33	Female		Key informant, senior brand manager
34	Female	Brand manager	
35	Male		Key informant, brand-focused professional
36	Female	Brand specialist	
37	Female	Brand specialist	
38	Male	Brand specialist	
39	Female	Brand specialist	
40	Female	Brand specialist	
41	Female	Brand specialist	
42	Male	Brand manager	
43	Female	Brand manager	
44	Male		Key informant, veteran brand director

Figure 1.2: public relations department official group

<b><i>Government Department Officials (GO)</i></b>			
Number	Gender	Occupation	Note
45	Male		Key informant, secretary general (CA)
46	Female	Senior officer (CA)	
47	Female	Senior officer (CA)	
48	Male	Senior officer (CA)	
49	Female	Senior officer (CA)	
50	Male		Key informant, spokesman (CA)
51	Female	Deputy director (MSA)	
52	Male		Key informant, senior officer (MSA)
53	Female	Officer (MSA)	



54	Female	Officer (MSA)	
55	Female	Officer (MSA)	
56	Male	Director (MSA)	Key informant, director (MSA)
p.s. Consumer Association (CA) and Market Supervision Administration (MSA) here refer to the branches of CCA and MSA located in Guangzhou, Foshan, and Beijing.			

Figure 1.3: government department official group

### 4.3 Case Study

Next, I explain why four case studies are adopted in this thesis. As Zainal (2007) indicates, case study research can be used as a powerful method when researchers need to further investigate, explore and understand complex issues. Yin (2018, p. 23) also defines the research method of case study as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.” Yin’s statement is representative among researchers who pay attention to the research method of the case study.

However, it should be noted that some scholars who support the case study argue that the case study should not be viewed as a specific research method only but also as a research strategy. As Snow and Trom (2002, p. 151) argue, in social movement studies, the case study indeed is a research strategy that includes different types of data-gathering methods or procedures, and it “seeks to generate richly detailed, thick, and holistic elaborations and understandings of instances or variants of bounded social phenomena [...]”. Overall, whether it is defining the case study as a method or strategy, case study scholars recognise that the case study can provide a comprehensive and detailed display of a modern social phenomenon through multiple data collection methods. Inspired by Snow and Trom (2002), in this thesis, I use the case study as a research strategy that includes various data-gathering methods.

As I have mentioned above, in this thesis, the semi-structured interview is the leading research method, which helps us to understand the Chinese consumers’ and other main actors’ subjective perceptions of the consumer video activism tactics and short video technologies. Besides these interviews, this thesis sheds light on four latest cases to better describe consumer video activism in the current Chinese society objectively and holistically and to provide more objective evidence and circumstances. By doing so, it can also directly support and verify the interview findings of this thesis. Again, this thesis prefers to adopt the above-mentioned Snow and Trom’s perspective regarding case study as a research strategy, including two data collection methods – use of various documentation as evidence and online observation. More

specifically, inspired by Chadwick's (2011) method of studying the "political information cycle" and Lei's (2021) methods of researching Chinese food-delivery courier's resistance, I have conducted online real-time, close observations to illustrate the dynamics of consumer video activism in contemporary China. I have compiled a dataset that contains both textual and visual analysis of social media posts (short videos, pictures and text) in different SVB platforms, with complementary analysis of news coverages by Chinese mainstream media, of government departments' responses and other relevant online content such as social media debates, describing four selected cases: "Protest of Chengdu homebuyers", "Counterfeit goods on PDD", "Tearful protest on Mercedes hood", and "Hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels".

From the perspective of social movement studies, Snow and Trom (2002) introduce three types of cases – normal or representative cases, critical cases, and negative and extreme cases and suggests that different case types mean different evaluative criteria and expectations and have different uses and restrictions. For instance, normal and representative cases, "[these cases are] fairly or reasonably representative of the larger social movement with which it is associated, and thus provides a basis for some sort of descriptive and/or theoretical generalization." (2002, p. 158). According to their classification, the four cases selected in this thesis fall into "normal and representative cases". Hence, by researching and analysing these representative cases of consumer video activism and combining the interview results, we can draw a comprehensive picture of the consumer video activism phenomenon.

Although the case study has the advantages mentioned above, it is not suitable for generalisation (Snow and Trom, 2002). Taking the case studies in this thesis as an example, these consumer video activism cases cannot represent the overall situation of consumer activism in China (see Subsections 2.4.2.2<sup>26</sup>, 5.2.1.2 and Section 8.4). To improve the shortcoming of the case study, Snow and Trom (2002) provide three ways<sup>27</sup>. The first is to design the case study with at least one of the following pathways as an objective – theoretical discovery, theoretical extension, and theoretical refinement. Simply speaking, theoretical discovery means generating new theories. It involves the generation of "grounded theory" described by Glaser and Strauss (1967); theoretical extension refers to extending existing theoretical expressions to new or different social categories, backgrounds or processes, and even extend to other theoretical levels; theoretical refinement involves the use of new case

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<sup>26</sup> I defined two main forms of consumer activism in China in subsection 2.4.2.2 - "interest-oriented consumer activism" and "patriotic consumer activism" - according to the objectives of consumers. Consumer video activism can be regarded as "interest-oriented consumer activism" according to the findings (subsection 5.2.1.2).

<sup>27</sup> Again, although Snow and Trom's suggestions for the case study in social movement research, these suggestions can still be helpful to this thesis.

materials to modify existing theoretical views or aspects (Snow and Trom, 2002). Hence, in this thesis, in conjunction with semi-structured interviews, the purpose of the case study is to provide a richly detailed and holistic descriptive account of the “consumer video activism” tactics in Chinese society and generate relevant theories via the grounded theory. The second way they suggest is to conduct case studies that “illuminate selected movement-related processes and theoretical issues as well as provide detailed, holistic analyses” (ibid, p. 166). The last way they suggest is to broaden the case study to include comparative objectives. In response to these last two suggestions, four cases in this thesis will be divided into two types for comparison, namely, consumer video activism tactics used by ordinary consumers and influential we-media operators (Subsection 6.5.3), and four cases will be used for verifying the findings of the semi-structured interview by presenting the detailed working mechanisms and process of the consumer video activism tactics.

### ***4.3.1 Documentation as Evidence***

#### ***4.3.1.1 Introduction to the Use of Documentation***

The semi-structured interview method cannot solely demonstrate the complex connection between SVB platforms and consumer activism in China. Therefore, this thesis examines four additional cases as a supplement. As mentioned above, this thesis treats the case study as a research strategy, which includes two specific data collection methods: use various documentation as evidence and online observation. First, the documentation. In each consumer activism or consumer video activism case, various forms of “documents” or evidence are produced directly or indirectly by consumers, such as news reports, short videos, government statements, company statements, etc. These “documents” can help me to “corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (Yin, 2018, p. 115) because “documents can provide specific details to corroborate information from sources”. For example, in this thesis, the documents can corroborate data obtained through online observation. Moreover, “documents” can be regarded as the evidence to verify interviewees’ subjective perceptions of consumer video activism, as with many social sciences researchers normally use documentation to verify their research findings (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000; Bowen, 2009).

As Snow and Trom (2002, p. 151) indicate, documents and archives are “grounded in real-life situations and settings, and are therefore more likely to generate the kinds of data that allow for the development of a richly detailed and holistic understanding of the phenomenon of interest”. In this thesis, the efficiency of the consumer video activism tactics can also be

shown through these “documents”. For example, the statement made by the government or business on the consumer’s use of the short video activism tactics can directly prove the effectiveness of these tactics. Moreover, it is difficult for the researcher to contact the consumers who record and post the first short videos from the outsider’s perspective, not to mention interviewing with them. These consumers usually refuse to participate in an hours-long and boring academic interview because they live in the spotlight of the media every day. Sharing their experience again with outsiders who are trying to be as objective as possible will not help the results they want to achieve. At this point, “documents” related to these consumer activism cases in the public domain “are obtainable”, and no need to get the consent of those consumers (Bowen, 2009). Besides that, there is another advantage to collecting documentation as evidence, which is to avoid the possibility of overly influencing a study’s participants (Raptis, 2012), such in a semi-structured interview, improper questions (e.g., “leading question” problem mentioned by Ayres, 2008, p. 811) of the interviewer may affect the respondent’s answer.

Simply speaking, documents can be comprised of media reports (newspapers, press releases, radio and television program scripts), government papers, publicity materials, formal letters, financial accounts, diaries, memoranda, letters and photographs, advertisements, agendas, attendance registers, manuals, background papers, books, brochures, journals, event programs (i.e., printed outlines), maps, charts, organisational or institutional reports, survey data and any electronic media (Bowen, 2009; Altheide, 2000, Raptis, 2012). In this thesis, I mainly focus on the following documents: research case-related government online announcements; mainstream media news reports; commercial companies’ public announcements and responses; and short-videos, pictures or text posts posted by consumers in different SVB platforms, as “documents”.

Although using documents as evidence can provide robust data for this thesis, we should not ignore its disadvantages. Documentation will affect the research results when the researcher only uncovers partial evidence, or unable to recognise erroneous or biased information, or unable to understand the content of the information correctly (Raptis, 2012). According to Raptis (ibid, p. 322), it is essential to “ascertain whether items are authentic, credible, representative, and meaningful” to avoid these problems. Moreover, Yin (2018, p. 116) also indicates that researchers should not consider overreliance on documentation in case study research because “the casual researcher may mistakenly assume that all kinds of documents [...] contain the unmitigated truth”. To avoid it, Yin suggests that researchers should remember that the documentary evidence reflects a communication among other parties

attempting to achieve some other objectives. By doing so, researchers can reduce the risk of being misled by the documents and analyse them more critically (Yin, 2018).

#### 4.3.1.2 Data Collection

This thesis focuses on the following online data of four cases: “Protest of Chengdu homebuyers”, “Counterfeit Goods on PDD”, “Tearful protest on Mercedes hood”, and a special case – “Hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels”. During the data collection process, the researcher himself is the research instrument.

As a former experienced journalist and a public relations manager, based on my prior working experience, I have selected the research cases with the following criteria: (1) **Short video lead**: Short video is the core medium that helps the event spread rapidly among the public. (2) **Limited timeframe**: the case must happen no earlier than the year 2018. Because the fresher the case is, the easier it is to review and collect the data. (3) **Cross-platform**: the core short-video of the case can be easily found in different SVB platforms in China, such as Weibo, WeChat, Douyin, etc. (4) **Media exposure**: these cases have successfully attracted the news reports from Chinese mainstream media and we-media – at least one mainstream media has reported the case officially through their newspapers, websites, social media accounts or news apps after the case happened. (5) **Public concern**: these cases should be concerned by the public. The Weibo hot topic ranking list is the measurement of such public concern. Selected cases must be positioned on the trending topic list during their period of occurrence. (6) **Government response**: these cases have earned official responses from the relevant government department. (7) **Enterprise response**: these cases have earned official responses from responsible enterprises. According to the above criteria, three research cases<sup>28</sup> have been found: “Protest of Chengdu homebuyers”, “Counterfeit goods on PDD”, and “Hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels”.

The data collected starts from the occurrence of each case and ends three months after that date. The advantage of doing this is to collect relevant documents to the greatest extent and then create an accurate timeline for each case. For instance, the “Protest of Chengdu homebuyers” case happened on 26 June 2018, so the data collected for this case started on 26 June 2018 and ended on 26 September 2018; the data collected for the “Hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels” case started on 14 November 2018 and ended on 14 February 2019; the

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<sup>28</sup> The following cases “Protest of Chengdu homebuyers”, “Counterfeit Goods on PDD”, “Hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels”) were selected by me actively. The case of “Tearful Protest on Mercedes Hood” was found by me during the online observation process.

data collected for the “Counterfeit goods on PDD” case started on 1 July 2018 and ended on 1 September 2018. I used “Baidu” as the main search engine for this online review process. “Baidu” was mainly used for searching the news coverage in mainstream media and government responses. Other reviewing platforms include Weibo, WeChat, Douyin and other SVB platforms in China. The data collection process was conducted in Cardiff and Beijing from January 2019 to November 2020. After the data collection process was over, I coded the data with all observational notes including: type of the case, type of medium involved, the time when core short videos appeared, the platforms involved, the specific time when media reported, the content of media coverage, type of media, response time of government departments and enterprises, and the responses and actions of government departments and enterprises. Based on a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2014), I generated insights about the CVA and verified the interviewees’ subjective perceptions of consumer video activism and reconfirmed whether the SVB platforms and short videos empower Chinese consumers to safeguard their consumer rights and interests. Moreover, the coded data pushed me to consider the subtle differences and variations between the four cases.

### **4.3.2 Online Observation**

#### *4.3.2.1 Introduction to the Online Observation*

Inspired by the digital ethnography approach, online observation is adopted as another data-collection method in the case studies of this thesis. “In digital ethnography, we are often in mediated contact with participants rather than in direct presence.” (Pink et al., 2016, p. 3). The concept of digital ethnography can be regarded as the extension part of ethnography, like Pink and her colleagues (ibid, 2016, p. 3) conclude, most ethnographic activities such as “watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions” (O’Reilly, 2005, p. 3) can transfer into a digital ethnography approach to some extent, such as “watching what people do by digitally tracking them, or asking them to invite us into their social media practices; listening may involve reading, or it might involve sensing and communicating in other ways; ethnographic writing might be replaced by video, photography or blogging.”

As Pink (2016) states in the book *“Innovative methods in media and communication research”*, the definition of ethnography is not singular, and there is no simple statement or explanation about what ethnography should involve. This definition can also be used to explain digital ethnography. The term digital ethnography is not a particular research method, “but a set of research strategies and the kind of research endeavour that informs them” (Sartoretto,

2016, p. 191). here are various methodological frameworks of digital ethnography, such as the social media ethnography approach (Postill and Pink, 2012); virtual ethnography approach (Hine, 2000, 2008); and netnography approach (Kozinet, 2010).

Normally, the method of participant observation is used by anthropologists in their ethnography research because it offers “direct experiential and observational access to the insiders’ world of meaning” (Jorgenson, 1989, p. 15). However, in recent years, it is also integral to digital ethnographic research. Today in the digital-media-saturated world, thanks to different latest digital technologies, digital ethnographers’ observation ranges have expanded from the offline and physical form into the online and virtual form, from the field in a fixed range to the open cyberspace (Murthy, 2008), as Postill and Pink (2012) indicate, the daily life of the digital ethnographer “involves part of one’s life on the Internet, keeping up-to-date with and participating and collaborating in social media discussions.”. Inspired by this observation method used by digital ethnographers, I use another data-collection method in the case studies of this thesis – online observation. As Markham indicates, observation “does not necessarily take the same form as studies in intensely physical or face-to-face contexts” (2013, p. 440). Put differently, unlike researchers using the participant observation method that requires them “being there [in the field]” and “simultaneously observe and participate (as much as possible) in the social action they are attempting to document” (Hume and Mulcock, 2004), I regard myself as a non-participating online observer (Williams, 2008) only, I observe and record the detailed relevant content of the selected case on SVB platforms (see the following subsection for more details), instead of going to the place where the cases happened and observing and participating in the incidents.

As one of the major sources in case study research, observational evidence is valuable and helpful in providing additional information about the research topic (Yin, 2018), and it is powerful and able to generate reliable data when combined with other sources of evidence such as interviews (McKechnie, 2008). However, we should remember that the data-collection method of observation also has its weaknesses, such as: it heavily relies on the ability of the observer, requires much time and other resources, it is usually associated with a specific “location”, and it has the risk of observer bias (McKechnie, 2008). This method of online observation also has similar advantages and disadvantages as observation. Given that the pros and cons of the observation method, to reduce the observer bias and increase the reliability of the data, according to the suggestions given by McKechnie (2008) and Yin (2018), in this thesis, this method is not a sole method, and multiple sources (documentation and semi-structured

interviews) are used to verify the data collected by this method. At the same time, I extend and expand the time and scope of online observation as much as possible.

#### *4.3.2.2 Data Collection*

By targeting specific selected words, hashtags and accounts, Millette (2016) successfully observed the rise and fall of a group of young activists named TaGueule on Twitter. Her online observing strategies, together with the digital ethnography approach, directly inspired my online observation plan. I have observed and recorded a particular consumer video activism case on three SVB platforms: “WeChat”<sup>29</sup>, “Weibo”, and “Douyin”.

The online observation process lasted for two months, from the first day of March to the last day of May in 2019. This process was divided into two steps: Initial observing and selected case observing. During the observation period (from March 1, 2019, to May 31 2019), I have mainly observed these platforms via my computer and mobile phone in my room in Beijing. During the first step of initial observing, the daily observing processes were as follows: (1) searching following specific Chinese words on Weibo and Douyin: “消费者” (Consumer), “维权” (Safeguard legal rights), “消费者维权” (Consumer activism), “奸商” (Profiteer), “骗子” (Liar), “欺骗” (Deceive) (all selected words are relevant to consumer activism events in China), and recording the search result daily; (2) observing the daily hashtags or hot topics on WeChat, Weibo and Douyin; (3) paying attention to any short video clip, photos or text related to the consumer activism topic, and following the user who posted it. This initial observation step aims to seek out one suitable consumer activism case for the next observation step.

Fortunately, during my initial observing progress, a typical consumer video activism case – “Tearful Protest on Mercedes Hood” was found on April 11, 2019. This case met all criteria mentioned in the above Subsection 4.3.1.2, hence, it was adopted as the observing case. In the second step of online observation – selected case observing, by searching any online post, repost and discussion related to this identified case, “Tearful Protest on Mercedes Hood” on WeChat, Weibo and Douyin, I continued to follow the latest developments in this case, and I observed the rise and fall of this particular consumer video activism case.

Finally, in the process of searching and observing this research case online, I have also observed and understood the affordances of these three SVB platforms thoroughly and how Chinese consumers use them properly, by employing the same coding schemes and analysis

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<sup>29</sup> Regarding WeChat, I focus on WeChat subscription accounts (WSA), not WeChat personal accounts. WSA is accessible for all WeChat users and the public, similar to Facebook pages.



method adopted in the documentation analysis (see Subsection 4.3.1.2). As three of the most popular and successful SVB platforms in China, the functional designs of WeChat, Weibo and Douyin represent the affordances of most SVB platforms in China.

## **4.4 Self-Reflections**

### ***4.4.1 Ethical Concern***

Privacy and confidentiality are the two most important ethical issues in qualitative methodologies. During the interview process, all interviewees were interviewed in the safe and convenient places they preferred, especially for public relations department officials in certain commercial companies, mainstream media journalists/we-media operators, and government department officials (except for those telephone interviews). The real name of each interviewee is replaced with numbers (e.g., Interviewee 1) in this thesis; any direct quotation from the interview is anonymised as well. During the interview, the respondent has the right to refuse to answer any question they do not want to answer and exit the interview at any time she/he wants.

The researcher and the interviewee signed an informed consent form before the actual interview, which pointed out that the interview was entirely based on the interviewee's free will. If an interviewee chooses to resign during or after the interview, their answers will be destroyed entirely. The research purpose, method, background, length of the interview, interviewees' rights, interviews are tape-recorded for subsequent coding, and other privacy and confidentiality issues are all written clearly in the informed consent form. All forms are made out in two original copies, one copy to be held by each party. Interview recordings are stored in a safe location. Besides, all other data was collected in public spaces, such as news sites, government official websites, commercial companies' official websites, WeChat, Weibo and Douyin. Moreover, the personal account names and specific details of the relevant short videos published by individual users used in this thesis are intentionally blurred to protect their privacy. The Research Ethics Committee of the School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University reviewed and approved the research plan and the methods used in this project.

### ***4.4.2 Limitations***

The cost issue is one of the major disadvantages of face-to-face interview, especially for a PhD researcher who has limited research time and funding. This factor limited the number of interviewees directly. Given that the author of this thesis is the only researcher to conduct the interview and case study, the shortage of manpower factor also limited the number of collected

data. It is well known that the face-to-face interview can provide more extra information about the interviewee for the interviewer than the telephone interview, such as body language, facial expression, intonation, etc. (Opdenakker, 2006). However, not all interviews were completed in the form of face-to-face in this thesis because some interviewees were not willing to reveal their identities. The limited time and funding also prevented the researcher from conducting more face-to-face interviews. Therefore, it is essential to adopt multiple data-collection methods to verify the answers of interviewees and the final findings of this thesis. Hence, in this thesis, four case studies are adopted, in which case data are mainly through two data collection methods – use of various documentation as evidence and online observation.

#### **4.5 Changes in Original Research Plans**

The original research plan of this thesis was to adopt the semi-structured interview as the only research method, and to interview the consumers who had participated in three consumer video activism cases (“Protest of Chengdu homebuyers”, “Counterfeit goods on PDD”, and “Hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels”), and this plan aimed to discover whether short videos and SVB platforms (and the short video activism tactics) would empower consumers in those three cases by studying those participants’ subjective experiences of consumer video activism.

After many attempts to contact those consumers, only a few replied and those who responded directly refused to be interviewed for privacy and personal safety concerns. I realized that even though I might be able to get permission from some of the interviewees after making more contacts, I wouldn’t be able to interview them face-to-face. Because these consumers are based in different cities in China, the limited research time and funding prevent me from visiting these places.

Therefore, after a month of failed attempts to contact these consumers who had participated in three consumer video activism cases (from January 2019 to February 2019), I changed my original interview plan. Inspired by the “activist media practices” approach (Mattoni, 2012; Mattoni & Treré, 2014), I deconstructed the consumer video activism tactics into two observable interaction parts: interactions with media objects and media subjects. I singled out mobile phones, short videos and SVB platforms from the media objects involved in the consumer video activism tactics, and selected four respondent groups (media professionals, public relations (PR) department officials, government officials) from the media subjects deeply involved in these tactics. More specifically, in the new interview plan (current interview plan), four groups of interviewees were selected (see Subsection 4.2.2), including

fifteen Chinese consumers (Group 1), fourteen public relations department officials (Group 2) of commercial companies, fifteen mainstream media journalists/we-media operators (Group 3), and twelve government department officials (Group 4). By interviewing these respondents' subjective perceptions of the consumer video activism tactics and the short video technologies behind these tactics, the working principle of these tactics, the interrelationships between the four main actors involved in it, and the critical factors that limit its ability are clearly shown in front of us. This new interview plan aims to find out what happens to the activism tactics of Chinese consumers and their corresponding results when they intertwine with SVB platforms and short videos; how do the consumer video activism tactics work; what happens to the media journalists, PR officials and relevant government department officials in China respectively when they intertwine with these tactics.

The pilot interview results (see the following subsection) proved the feasibility of the new research plan and tested the effectiveness of semi-structured interview questions designed for these four groups. However, after taking advice from several pilot interviewees and reading the relevant literature on case studies, I started to worry that the semi-structured interview method used in this study was not sufficient to unfold the whole picture of today's consumer video activism in China. Considering the authenticity issue and other limitations of the semi-structured interview method mentioned above, I decided to adopt an alternative research method in my research to support the interview findings. Hence, inspired by Snow and Trom (2002), in this thesis, I use the case study as a research strategy that includes two data-collection methods – use documentation as evidence and online observation. After deciding to add case studies to this research, I designed detailed data-collection processes (Subsections 4.3.1.2 and 4.3.2.2). To test the feasibility of these data-collection methods, I tried to find out suitable cases by following these processes. Fortunately, I found four suitable cases for this research, which demonstrated the feasibility of these two data-collection methods. For example, in the “Counterfeit goods on PDD” case, over 50 short videos and relevant documents with research value were found and collected on Weibo, Douyin and other SVB platforms. This result has shown that there is enough research data online for us to observe and analyse.

#### **4.6 Pilot Study Results**

Before the formal interview began, six pilot interviews had been conducted. The pilot interview aimed to test the validity of interview questions and perfect their expressions. Except for the GO group, six pilot interviewees were randomly selected from the remaining three interview

groups averagely, including two Chinese consumers, two public relations department officials, and two mainstream media journalists (The reasons why I did not conduct pilot interviews with the government official group have been already mentioned in Subsection 2.2.2 above). Based on the pilot interview results, question sheets used to interview groups 1, 2 and 3 have been modified for obtaining more accurate answers from interviewees. I did not have the opportunity to conduct pilot interviews with group 4. Therefore, the interview question sheet of group 4 was given to several anonymous government officials who agreed to examine the sheet instead of joining the pilot or formal interview. As a result, all interview question sheets have been modified according to the pilot interview results and those Anonymous' suggestions.

Moreover, this pilot interview has inspired me: there are four different versions of the interview question in total in this thesis, and whether the interviewees are journalists, PR department officials, or government officials, they are all consumers. Therefore, the interview questions used to interview group 1 can be used in the interviews with group 2, 3, and 4 again at the appropriate time for obtaining more data. According to the overall findings of the pilot study, all pilot interviewees have agreed that Chinese consumers have difficulty in safeguarding their legitimate interests via the traditional channels, such as negotiating with the businesses directly and approaching the CCA for help; and admitted the effectiveness of the consumer video activism tactics and the short videos and SVB platforms have opened up a new channel for them to shout out their grievances and safeguard their rights and interests.

In sum, it is hard to give any formal research conclusions based on the pilot study's findings. However, the valuable pilot interviews and case selection processes have confirmed that the research and the research methods are feasible.

## **Chapter 5: Findings of the Semi-Structured Interviews**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Nobody can fully cast off the practice of consumption in this world, no matter who you are and what your occupation is. Even those anarchists who adopt different “anti-consumption” tactics will still get involved in a current consumption society. Today, fakes and deceptive advertisements are rampant in Chinese society. When the relevant government departments responsible for protecting the rights and interests of Chinese consumers cannot resolve consumer complaints about counterfeit goods and deceptive advertisements, Chinese consumers have no choice but to protect themselves in their way. In recent years, the consumer video activism tactics have emerged, and it has become an effective way for Chinese consumers to protect their rights and interests.

Before demonstrating any detail of the consumer video activism tactics in China, it is necessary to review the basic concept of Chinese consumer activism again. In this thesis, consumer activism means that Chinese consumers have to adopt a series of online (e.g., video activism) or offline (e.g., protest in-store), or a combination of the two, alternative and even illegal activism practices (this thesis mainly focuses on one of their digital media-related practices of consumer activism – the consumer video activism. In what follows, it is hereinafter referred to as “consumer video activism tactics” or “short video activism tactics”) to protect their legitimate rights and interests, if they are unable to obtain reasonable compensation from the business through the “official” ways, such as negotiating with the business and seeking help from relevant government departments.

By analysing the results of the interview with the Chinese consumers; the public relations department officials; the mainstream media journalists/we-media operators; and the government department officials, we can further comprehend the working mechanisms, underlying reasons, impact, strengths and weaknesses of the consumer video activism tactics, we can also learn more about the complex interactions between Chinese consumers, media, businesses, and relevant government departments behind these tactics. Moreover, we can have a comprehensive understanding of the concept and the actual situation of Chinese consumer activism. It should be noted that I am not advocating that consumers should use the short video activism tactics to safeguard their rights and interests in this thesis.

The outline of this chapter is as follows (in addition to the introduction and conclusion sections): Sections 5.2 and 5.3 lay the foundations of the research of consumer video activism tactics – the unique characteristic of consumer activism and the underlying reasons of consumer

activism in China, and the strength of short videos and SVB platforms. By looking into these parts, I can find out the underlying reasons for the consumer video activism tactics comprehensively. Section 5.4 demonstrates the overall working mechanisms of the consumer video activism in detail from four aspects: Subsection 5.4.1 explores how the short video activism tactics work from the perspective of consumers and the obstacles encountered when consumers using these tactics; Then, Subsection 5.4.2 describes the role that mainstream media/we-media play in the consumer video activism tactics, and shows the relationship between media, government departments and businesses from the perspective of mainstream media/we-media; The following Subsection 5.4.3 presents how Chinese businesses respond to the Chinese consumers' short video activism tactics in two opposite ways; The last Subsection 5.4.4 examines the attitudes of Chinese consumer rights protection departments towards the consumer video activism tactics.

## **5.2 The Realities of Consumer Video Activism in China**

### ***5.2.1 The Characteristics of Consumer Activism in China***

#### *5.2.1.1 The Considerations of Chinese Consumers in their Activism Practices*

Most Chinese consumers are constantly struggling to safeguard their rights and interests. According to the interview results of the CC group, all fifteen interviewees believed that it is pretty difficult for them and other consumers to safeguard their rights and interests in China. Like the CC group, interviewees in the MJ/WO group also acknowledged that the overall difficulty of consumer activism in China based on their experience in reporting the content of consumer disputes, consumer activism and any consumer-related issue is considered high:

“According to my work experience, the status of businesses and consumers in front of the government is different. Chinese consumers are comparatively weak, and businesses are in a powerful position. Because businesses are usually large taxpayers of local governments, the government tends to help companies resolve consumer complaints instead of helping consumers defend their rights.” (Interviewee 20, MJ/WO group)

“I have reported many cases of consumer disputes or consumer activism in China. In my experience, it is still very difficult for consumers to get money or compensation back from the company directly today.” (Interviewee 28, MJ/WO group)

“It is difficult for ordinary consumers to protect their rights. If they can easily get the money back with the assistance of the government, why are they still asking us for help?” (Interviewee 30, MJ/WO group)

For these interviewees, the overall difficulty of claiming compensations from the businesses have hindered them from enacting any consumer activism tactics (including the consumer video activism tactics). Therefore, they have to weigh up the pros and cons before actually conducting their activism plans. Interview results of the CC group and the MJ/WO group show that Chinese consumers have the following three concerns before deciding to implement the short video activism tactics: **(1) *The Damage Extent***. Consumers’ activism tactics are directly tied to the extent to which they are financially, physically or mentally damaged. The more money they lose or, the more psychical or mental damage they suffer, the more they are willing to employ the short video activism tactics or other activism tactics to defend their rights and interests; **(2) *The Ratio of Success***. Most consumers will estimate the probabilities of success of their activism tactics based on success rates of previous similar cases and their personal life experiences. The higher success rates of similar cases in the past, the more they are willing to implement their short video activism plans. On the contrary, these consumers will be reluctant to adopt any activism tactics if they foresee that their success rate is rare; **(3) *Privacy Matters***. Most consumers believe that choosing to use the short video activism tactics (posting their unfortunate personal stories in the forms of a short video on SVB platforms) means exposing themselves to public criticism. Consumers will not use these tactics if they believe that their privacy is far more important than their financial, psychical or mental losses. Here are the details of representative interviewees’ answers about their “cost considerations”:

“If a company infringes my rights very seriously, such as causing me huge financial loss, or physical and mental damage, I will definitely use various tactics to defend my rights.” (Interviewee 7, CC group)

“Especially for valueless goods or services that everyone can easily afford in daily life, consumers do not bother to do anything to get back their money, unless a product or service costs them a fortune, such as a house or a car. It happens to me, too. I will consider the ratio of success issues. For example, If I know that the company is not

going to solve my problem even if I ‘protest’, then why should I waste my money, time and effort to adopt different tactics to fight against the company?” (Interviewee 10, CC group)

“If the product or service I buy cost me a lot, and it goes wrong, I will do that thing [use any consumer activism tactics]. But I will consider privacy issues because I do not want to be judged or criticised by the public for whatever I do.” (Interviewee 27, MJ/WO group)

The overall interview results above suggest that the damage extent, success ratio and privacy matters concern Chinese consumers most, even though some interviewees mentioned some other considerations such as time and economic costs during a consumer activism progress. Moreover, these three “considerations” usually exist simultaneously. Generally, Chinese Consumers have to make sure that their practices are “profitable” before they enact their self-protecting activism tactics. In other words, the activism approach of Chinese consumers is driven by protecting their interests. The interview results below further prove this point.

#### *5.2.1.2 Self-interest-oriented Feature: Interest-related Index*

Chinese consumer activism is filled with personal interest considerations (as mentioned above, the damage extent, ratio of success and privacy matters are the top-three considerations). As interviewee 13 (CC group) pointed out, “Chinese consumers are selfish”. The overall interview results elucidate that the consumer activism issue in China tends to be self-interest-oriented, and most Chinese consumers usually choose to “look on” instead of joining in one ongoing consumer activism issue and becoming a part of it. Here are more answers evidencing the self-interest-oriented nature of the consumer activism issue in China:

“So far, most of the consumer activism cases I have seen are related to people’s interests.” (Interviewee 4, CC group)

“At the beginning of every ‘well-known’ consumer activism story, there is a helpless victim (or a small group of victims) who wants to get her money back or ask for compensation for her loss.” (Interviewee 38, PR group)



As mentioned in the literature review of Chinese consumer activism, as the main focus of this thesis, the “interest-oriented consumer activism” in China is a form of consumer activism that occurs to safeguard the rights and interests of the initiator or/and the general public. Here, the interview findings suggest that within this form of “interest-oriented consumer activism”, a case of self-interest-oriented consumer activism can transform into a public-interest-related consumer activism event. Although all interviewees in the CC and MJ/WO groups have admitted that “selfish” motivations and personal-interest-related considerations exist in most consumer activism cases in China, these interviewees still believe that these cases can draw the attention of the public, media journalists, businesses and government departments to a certain extent (Chapter 6) and benefit all consumers. It means that the self-interest-oriented consumer activism in China can be sublimed into the public-interest-related consumer activism event or movement. I have defined two logics of change based on the interview results: “*comrade logic*” and “*potential victim logic*”.

“*Comrade logic*” happens when more consumers with similar experiences stand out and support the consumer who initiates a fight against a company. And these consumers who join later become the comrades-in-arms of the foremost consumer, and all of them share the same goal: to safeguard their legitimate consumer interests. The following selected interviewees’ answers prove this point:

“Consumer’s self-interest is not conflicted with the public interest. If one consumer stands out first and fights against a company for safeguarding her interests, then other consumers who find themselves with the same experiences will follow her/him and do the same thing. Then this is no longer a fight for a person, but a fight for a group of people.” (Interviewee 34, PR group)

“I once encountered a consumer activism case while working for this company: in the beginning, only a few people who bought our apartments complained about quality problems such as water leaks online. Later, after other consumers with similar experiences saw these complaints online, they had a strong emotional resonance with those who complained, and they began to complain online together with previous apartment buyers.” (Interviewee 38, PR group)

“*Potential victim logic*” happens when more consumers are involved in a consumer activism event against a company, as they unwilling to be potentially harmed someday like the consumer (also the first acknowledged victim) who initiates the fight against this company:

“Personally speaking, no matter what others look at me, I do not care about other people’s business because [Chinese] consumers only fight for themselves. But if someone’s unfortunate experiences somehow become a public event, which means these bad things may happen to me, then I will pay close attention to this case. Helping others is helping yourself.” (Interviewee 1, CC group)

“All Chinese consumer activism cases I have known followed the same logic: a company violates a consumer’s rights and interests first, then after the media exposure, this dispute between the company and the consumer becomes a public event. The reason for this transformation is simple: because everyone knows that the bad things that happen to someone else’s head may also happen to them, they cannot ignore it.” (Interviewee 3, CC group)

“The reasons why the public pays attention to these consumer activism events are that they also care for their own interests and they want to avoid becoming the next victim.” (Interviewee 7, CC group)

As one of the key informants in the Chinese consumer interview group, interviewee 14 (the founder of a renowned non-profit product evaluation lab in China) indicated: “Most consumer activism cases in China are self-interest-oriented, Chinese consumers will not stand out and care about other people’s business unless they are the victims like everybody else.”

These representative answers of Chinese consumers reveal a common transformation path between self-interest-oriented consumer activism and the public-interest-related consumer activism event in China. This path can be indicated by a specific index – “*Interest-related Index*”. This index refers to the correlation between a case of self-interest-oriented consumer activism and the interests of mass consumers. More specifically, the higher the *interest-related index* of a case of self-interest-oriented consumer activism, the higher probability that this case will be noticed by the public and sublimed into a public interest related consumer activism movement; and the lower the index, the lower probability this case will be transformed to a public event.

To sum up, we should not ignore the self-interest-oriented nature of the Chinese consumer activism issue. In China, most cases of consumer activism can be regarded as the personal confrontation between the individual and the company, which aims at safeguarding the initiator's rights and interests. Nevertheless, the convertible path between these self-interest-oriented consumer activism cases and the public-concerned consumer activism event should not be neglected, as the key informant 6 (CC group) indicated: "Protecting others is protecting ourselves, vice versa. Many people think that the misfortune of others has nothing to do with them, but this is completely wrong. Everyone is a part of the overall consumer group. The more you care about other consumers, the more power the overall consumer will have, and the more power you will have."

### *5.2.1.3 Self-initiated Consumer Activism*

The above interview findings also suggest that consumer activism in China is self-initiated. Interviewee 42 (PR group) told a story about one of his mailing experiences in China to me. In his answers, he repeatedly emphasises what he did during the whole activism process. Interviewee 42 followed the "three-step strategy" (will be explained in Subsection 5.2.2.2) described below partly: "I sent a soymilk machine back to Shenyang through a famous Chinese delivery company, but when my family received the machine, they found that the machine was damaged." Consequently, interviewee 42 called the service hotline of that delivery company and demanded compensation from them. He complained many times, but nobody took his complaint seriously. The irresponsible attitude of that delivery company irritated him. As a result, interviewee 42 contacted the delivery company again, but this time he declared that he would have posted his bad experience with them on Weibo and other social media platforms. Working as a public relations official, interviewee 42 familiar with these intimidating consumer activism tactics. "After I said that, one of their managers contacted me and promised to buy me a new machine as compensation." Interviewee 42's experience of fighting against a listed delivery company represents what most interviewees will act when they encounter similar problems: consumer activism here in China is usually initiated by themselves to a large extent.

However, I am not saying that the ad hoc consumer group and non-profit organisation contribute nothing to the consumer activism in China, what I want to emphasise is the unique activism path of Chinese consumers: once a Chinese consumer makes up her/his mind to stand out and fight against a company, she/he will initiate activism tactics by herself/himself first,

and there is no such an ad hoc group or organisation tell them what should do, or what is the activism plan and goal in advance of their practices. Ad hoc groups and non-profit organisations in China only play an unimportant assistant role in the consumer fight. They usually do not get involved in consumer activism cases actively unless the consumers actively approach them. If a consumer reaches out to an ad hoc group or non-profit organisation on her/his own, then this group or organisation will assist this consumer in safeguarding her/his interests. Moreover, these groups and organisations do not take the lead in calling on the consumer to boycott something or initiating a consumer activism campaign.

In some cases, consumers who have similar experiences formed their ad hoc activism groups. These groups are only a platform for these consumers to communicate with and give advice to each other. For example, the ad hoc activism group interviewee 4 (CC group) joined was established by several consumers who had bought annual membership cards from the same fitness club. Members in this ad hoc group knew each other on a Chinese version of the TripAdvisor social media platform. Before they joined this group, most of them had initiated their activism tactics. As interviewee 4 indicated, the group she joined only served as a communication and information exchange space for those consumers, and the purpose of the consumers joining this group is to seek help to safeguard their interests.

## ***5.2.2 Underlying Reasons of Consumer Activism***

### ***5.2.2.1 The Business's Inaction-led Grievance***

Under what circumstances Chinese consumers will start taking action to safeguard their legitimate consumer interests? The answers of the CC group (N=15) show that the grievances of Chinese consumers usually are first triggered by the business's inaction-led grievance, which mainly caused by the following two major gaps: (1) ***Product/Service Quality Gap***: the gap between the consumer's expense and the unworthy service or product he/she get; (2) ***After-sales Service Gap***: the gap between their rational expectations for compensation and the company's disappointing response they receive. The representative interviewees' answers unveil these two gaps:

“I pay for the product or service satisfying me. If the service or product provided by the company does not meet my reasonable expectation or even let me suffer financial loss or other things, I will stand out and fight for my rights and interests I deserve.”  
(Interviewee 1)

“I think this world needs a feedback mechanism. When the product or service you get is awful, do not bear it silently. Instead, I think you have to let them [businesses] know their products and services are not worth the price, and consumers should have the right to get their money back.” (Interviewee 2)

“Usually, if I am going to safeguard my rights and interests and get my money back, I think I must in a circumstance of the price I pay and the service I get is unequal.” (Interviewee 3)

By analysing the interviewees’ personal experience of consumer activism, I discover that the “business’s inaction-led grievance” circumstance is more obvious than the government’s negligence-led grievance situation (see the next section). For example, interviewee 4 chose to join an ad hoc victim support group because the fitness club she had joined breached the previous service contract between her and the fitness club:

“One of my ex-colleagues transferred her membership card to me under the constitution of this club. The membership card was valid for at least one year. However, just three months after I got the card, the fitness club closed without any advance notice. I contacted the club manager, and he told me I needed to go to another club they ran if I wanted to continue using that membership card. I rejected his solution instantly because that club he mentioned was extremely far away from my home.”

At that moment, interviewee 4 only wanted her money back “because they breached the contract first and I did not access any equipment or service they provided.” Nevertheless, unfortunately, she did not retrieve her money back even though she joined an online activism group, which consisted of many consumers with the same experience as her. Another example, one of the key informants (Interviewee 5, a famous “*Samsung*” fighter in China) shared his personal experience of fighting against the famous mobile phone company *Samsung* with the author of this thesis. According to his answers, his novel personal protest against *Samsung* was initiated from improper solutions and compensations provided by *Samsung*. Here is the story: interviewee 5 purchased a brand-new *Samsung* note-7 mobile phone on May 26, 2016, via one of the online *Samsung* official stores, and he received that phone on May 27, 2016. Unfortunately, barely a day later, on May 28, the brand-new *Samsung* note-7 he bought caught

alight and exploded while it was charging on the working desk. After complaining to *Samsung* many times about this terrible explosion, *Samsung* has not responded to the appeal of interviewee 5 directly, even to this day. Interviewee 5 insisted:

“My appeal is simple and unemotional: *Samsung* should give me proper compensation according to the Chinese newly amended consumer law or give me a new note 7.”

His appeals have not been solved by *Samsung* to this day (In March 2021, interviewee 5 now is still fighting for his legitimate consumer interests. He has even engaged in a lawsuit against *SAMSUNG*). The words of interviewee 5 are vivid testimonies to the existence of the consumer service gap in China. Among the answers of the CC group, the product/service quality gap is the most salient cause of the company’s inaction-led grievance. Besides the circumstance of mere normal quality defect of product or service that disappoints consumers, this gap usually involves companies’ deceptions to the Chinese consumers. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a detailed account of those deception features of the product/service quality gap based on the perceptions of Chinese consumers. Overall, the answers of the CC group reveal that there are three frequent circumstances of deception in the Chinese market: **(1) Deceptive advertising.** Companies oversell their products or services through exaggerated and mendacious advertisements, such as deceptive oral, textual, and graphical introductions; **(2) Indistinct and imparity clauses.** This is often the case when consumers purchase certain intangible services (such as online training courses), or certain tangible products that are not currently delivered, such as property under construction. **(3) Illegal products and other violations.** Products or services provided by the company violate laws in China. Meanwhile, these illegal products/services are likely to cause harm to the physical and mental health of consumers. These three situations mentioned above usually appear together or in pair. As interviewee 6, another key informant, a famous crusader fighting against consumer frauds in China, put it:

“There was a company in China selling a health product named ‘JiCao’ tablet, and they exaggeratedly claimed that the ‘JiCao’ tablet was extracted from the valuable *Cordyceps Sinensis*. This company invested considerable amounts of capital towards advertising for ‘JiCao’ in Chinese mainstream televisions, newspapers and magazines. Their advertisements claimed that ‘JiCao’ could work wonders on various diseases. It was not true. After our serious investigation, we found that the ‘JiCao’ did not have the

curative effect described in their advertisements. In addition to that, we have discovered heavy metals far exceeding Chinese national safety standards existed in the ‘JiCao’ tablet.”

The grievances generation theories mentioned above in Chapter 2 provide a helpful tool for analysing the causes of Chinese consumers’ short video activism tactics. The representative answers of these interviewees mentioned above disclose that one of the underlying reasons of the interest-oriented consumer activism in China is the grievance caused by businesses after-sales inaction, or called the “inaction-led grievance”. However, it only presents parts of the complex spectacle of Chinese consumer activism. Next, I introduce another significant cause of consumer activism issues in China – the governmental negligence-led grievance.

#### *5.2.2.2 The Government’s Negligence-led Grievance*

Inaction-led grievances caused by businesses and negligence-led grievances caused by governments are intertwined in China’s consumer activism issues. In China, according to law, government departments such as the Market Supervision Administration and Consumers Association should act as a role in helping consumers defuse their grievances caused by businesses’ after-sales inaction and protect their legitimate consumer rights through effective law enforcement. However, the CC group’s interview results indicate that not all consumers plan to turn to these governmental departments if they fail to claim their money back from the businesses directly. As interviewee 10 stated:

“In my impression, the work efficiency of “12315”<sup>30</sup>[and other relevant governmental consumer protection departments] is extremely low. I have heard many stories from friends or online saying that even after consumers complained to the local branch of the Chinese consumers association and other relevant government departments, their problems are still unresolved.”

Interviewee 10 was not alone. Four interviewees in the CC group had similar feelings to interviewee 10. They (five out of fifteen interviewees) all insisted that the local government consumer protection department does not play their role in protecting consumers’ rights and

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<sup>30</sup> “12315” hotline is set by the *State Administration for Market Regulation* to accept consumer complaints and reports.

interests. As interviewee 2 described: “Even if I turn to the governmental department, I still assume nothing will come of it.” Therefore, these five interviewees indicate that they will not ask for help from these governmental consumer protection departments, even if they fail to defend their consumer rights and interests via direct negotiation with the company. Instead, they will choose other tactics of consumer activism they know to defend their rights and interests.

These interview results above are unable to discredit the government consumer protection departments in China. However, it indeed shows us a tapestry of the governmental negligence-led grievance of Chinese consumers. As the following interviewees mentioned, this grievance and the business’s inaction-led grievance conspire together to make the consumers choose the last resort of claiming their money back – various tactics of consumer activism (I only focus on one of the latest consumer activism tactics – consumer video activism in this thesis. I shall come back to this in Section 5.4 of this chapter). As a representative example, the personal experience of Interviewee 15 is revelatory:

“After I called the local ‘12315’ hotline at least ten times, somebody finally answered my call and told me they were going to respond to me after 7 working days. The ‘12315’ hotline and the relevant government departments are useless.”

On the day before interviewee 15 called the “12315”, he was finishing his visit to Zhangye outside of the Danxia Geology Park and preparing to leave the place then head for his next travel destination. “Suddenly, several people claiming to be staff members of the Danxia Geology Park showed up and required me to pay for the entrance ticket fee. That was ridiculous, I have not found any official notice about this charge, and I was not even in the park, so why should I pay for the entrance fee?” Interviewee 15 recalled. According to his understanding of the consumer protection law in China and his experience, interviewee 15 then chose to call “12315” for help, but as mentioned above, nobody from “12315” was “going” to help him at that time. As a result, Interviewee 15 had to temporarily compromise and paid the entrance fee that should not be charged.

That was not the end of the story. After interviewee 15 paid the entrance fee, his grievances against the Danxia Geology Park and the “12315” hotline gathered together and prompted him to post his experience with anger on Weibo at night. By doing so, he used this occasion to express all his grievances against the operator of the Danxia Geology Park and the



local government consumer protection department and safeguarded his rights and interests successfully.

“After I posted my story on Weibo, on the next day early morning, a man who claimed to be the manager of Zhangye Danxia Geology Park called me and said they wanted to pay back my money and apologise to me.”

In addition to those five interviewees who do not believe in those government consumer protection departments, other interviewees from the CC group still regard the “12315” hotline and other consumer protection departments as their first choice of seeking help if they are unable to resolve the problem by negotiating with the company directly. However, they are not the heartfelt believer of the “12315” hotline and government departments. As interviewee 2 stated, these interviewees do not count on these departments completely. They (except the interviewee 3 indicated he will appeal against the company) will adopt other more effective online strategies and tactics of consumer activism as interviewee 15 did if governmental departments fail to help them:

“Even if I choose to ask those government departments for help, I will still post my story on Weibo and other social media platforms.”

Interviewee 1 and 13 also expressed:

“If the government is unable to help me to solve my problem, then I will go for a more effective way to protect myself, posting my experience on Weibo, perhaps.”  
(Interviewee 1)

“I will consider taking social media as the approach to defending my legitimate consumer rights if necessary.” (Interviewee 13)

From these interviewees’ perceptions on consumer activism mentioned above, I find that there is a clear and common three-step pattern of seeking justice and compensation shared by Chinese consumers today in the SVB social media age – if their rights and interests are infringed by certain businesses, then: *Step one*, they will negotiate with the business directly and claim for financial or other types of compensations; *Step two*, if the previous step fails,

then consumers will seek assistance from appropriate government departments, such as calling the “12315” hotline, and/or asking help from the local market supervision administration and consumers association; *Step three*, if these previous rational methods all fail, then these consumers will turn to various digital media related tactics of consumer activism (it should be noted that consumers’ mere offline radical tactics are excluded from this thesis, these tactics are illegal and prohibited by the government), such as sharing their unfortunate stories in the form of short videos with journalists and making it public through different SVB platforms. In sum, this three-step strategy of Chinese consumers above shows us that the relevant government department’s inaction constitutes another part of the underlying reasons of consumer activism. Under its influence and the grievance caused by businesses’ after-sales inaction, Chinese consumers are “forced” to turn to the online tactics of consumer activism, as we mentioned above.

### **5.3 The SVB Platform and the Strength of the Short Video**

#### ***5.3.1 Entertaining but Multifunctional Short Video Platforms***

##### *5.3.1.1 Public Perceptions of the SVB Platform*

Judging by the name, the short video activism tactics are counting on the short video medium and corresponding distribution platforms (SVB platforms). Therefore, to provide a more in-depth illustration of the Chinese consumers’ short video activism tactics, it is helpful to look at how different people and groups use and feel about the SVB platform. “My first impression of the short video is that most short videos I have seen before on SVB platforms are entertainment-oriented content.” As interviewee 2 (CC group) mentions, most interviewees from each interview groups share the same perception of the current short video content and SVB platforms in China, they all deem that SVB platforms are loaded with superficial mass entertainment content:

“Attractive men and women, hilarious videos, most short videos on these platforms amuse the viewers, and most of us watch these short videos for laughs only.”  
(Interviewee 10, CC group)

“Douyin [TikTok] and Kuaishou are two popular short video social media platforms in China that mostly provide entertainment short videos.” (Interviewee 21, MJ/WO group)

“You do not need to think when you are watching these hilarious short videos.”  
(Interviewee 27, MJ/WO group)

These representative answers above point out the entertaining characteristics of SVB platforms in China obviously. In the public mind, short videos and its living platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou were born with an entertaining character. As one of the interviewees (Interviewee 13, CC group) concluded: “as everyone played mahjong for entertainment in the absence of mobiles, watching hilarious and pleasing short videos on those short video platforms are gradually becoming a popular and convenient source of leisure for us.” Certainly, SVB platforms in China have forged new entertainment for the Chinese public today. People of different ages, educational levels, income levels and social backgrounds can all seek their pleasures on these platforms by uploading user-generated short videos or watching short videos uploaded by other users.

Nevertheless, by providing creative SVB social media platforms and related technologies with unlimited potential to the mass market, these Chinese social media companies have been popularizing the new medium of short video among the public users unintentionally. People have been gradually becoming accustomed to living with the short video. Today, from watching breaking news to learning English, from watching the latest product reviews to complaining about the quality of product or service, Chinese SVB platform users are using the SVB platform for different practical purposes far beyond the entertainment field. For example, as interviewee 24 (MJ/WO group) mentioned, she learns English on one of the short video platforms: “I followed an English teacher on Douyin, by watching his English teaching short videos, I have learned the authentic pronunciation of many English words.” Also, interviewee 32 (PR group) described her new habit of watching short video news on Douyin and other SVB platforms: “We used to sit in front of the TV and watch the CCTV news program at a regular time each day, but today including myself, fewer people watch the news on TV. Now I regularly watch the short video news on Douyin.”

### *5.3.1.2 New Bidirectional Channels for the Chinese Media*

Meanwhile, not just public users, Chinese mainstream media journalists/we-media operators have also scented the potentials of the SVB platform and the short video. The interview findings suggest that Chinese media takes these platforms as a new way to distribute their news and regard them as new significant news sources.

Those mainstream media organisations in China are starting to make short video news then distribute it on SVB platforms. For example, one of the most popular programs of Fujian TV station – Fujian Bang Bang Tuan<sup>31</sup> has started to make their daily long television videos into eye-catching short video clips and to upload them to their Douyin and other SVB accounts since August 2018. As one of the key informants, interviewee 16 (MJ/WO group), who is familiar with the BBT, described: “There is no doubt that these short video news clips have been increasing the influence of the original BBT program. As a trending communication means, the short video is a developing trend of the traditional TV news program in China.” Like Fujian BBT, mainstream media organisations in China today such as CCTV, People Daily and Xinhuanet have all created their official accounts on Douyin, Kuaishou and other SVB platforms and made their “traditional” news coverages (video news programs, textual reports, audio recordings, etc.) into short videos and posting it on these SVB platforms. By taking advantage of short videos and SVB platforms, Chinese mainstream media organisations have maintained their media-leading position among the public. In other words, the emergence of short videos and SVB platforms in China has offered a new and much-welcomed communication channel for these national media organisations.

Unlike those Chinese mainstream media organisations that run and own their exclusive television channels, newspaper serial numbers and radio channels, we-media operators only have their social media accounts. They are counting on these platforms for publishing their content. With the social media upgrade, these we-media operators have gotten a free ride and started to expand their territories from the traditional social media platform to the SVB platform (for these free rider, all they need to do is register new accounts on these SVB platforms, and start to transfer their content into short videos).

From experienced product reviews to exposures of unscrupulous companies, Chinese we-media operators have turned SVB platforms into their only official media channels by uploading different types of short video programs to these platforms. For example, as one of the leading short video programs on Douyin, “Daddy Lab” concentrates on the safety issue of children products since its establishment in 2015<sup>32</sup>. As one of the key informants – interviewee 14 (one of the co-founders of the “Daddy Lab”) indicated: “Short video program is the developing trend of the communication medium, and it allows viewers to watch programs

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<sup>31</sup> BBT is a civic news program in Fujian aiming to resolve contradictions between consumers and businesses. It has 2.66 million followers on Douyin by the end of August, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> By testing the chemical elements in different children products such as baby shampoo and baby milk powder, their short video program has successfully attracted 13.517 million followers by the September of 2019 (most followers are Chinese parents)

conveniently on their mobiles, and they do not need to think carefully about the meaning of each word as they read newspapers.” Interviewee 14 recognised that SVB platforms such as Douyin are efficient media channels for Chinese we-media operators, as he states: “In just a few days after the first short video of Daddy Lab was released on Douyin, it won one hundred thousand views. This kind of achievement is difficult to obtain before the SVB platform age.”

In addition to adopting the SVB platform as a new distribution channel, Chinese mainstream media and we-media both regard the SVB platform as their new news sources (Section 5.4). Moreover, similar to the previous search method, using the SVB platform to search for news sources/story ideas is only the first step to confirm the news topic, and the next step still requires a fact-checking process for these mainstream media and we-media. Interviewee 18 (MJ/WO group) admitted that the SVB platform works like a news hotline in the past, and it enables the Chinese journalist to obtain the latest topic in real-time. Interviewee 18 also mentioned: “there is a team in our office who specialises in this matter. They normally actively search for short video content with news value on these platforms. For example, when they find a short video with newsworthiness, they will contact the first person who uploads this video to verify its authenticity. If the video is real, then my colleagues will write a story about it. Otherwise, it will be ignored.” Interviewee 17 (MJ/WO group) stated that he would take the SVB platform as one of his news sources and adopt the verified short video as evidence of his works. Interviewee 30 (MJ/WO group), the founder of a popular Weibo we-media account dedicated to reporting on the daily news in Dalian (a city in China), also acknowledged that they had found many news topics in SVB platforms; Weibo is his first choice to look for news topics.

### *5.3.1.3 The Image-Maintenance Tool for Chinese Companies*

The interview findings stress that Chinese companies usually use SVB platforms as an image-maintenance tool to promote their brands and products (these “companies” generally refer to large companies that have received widespread attention from Chinese consumers and companies concerning their public brand images). Specifically, these companies use SVB platforms and short videos to promote the positive images of their companies in the eyes of the public and to diminish the impact of negative consumer activism incidents on their companies’ images at the same time.

SVB platforms (and short videos) are strongly favoured by Chinese companies today because of their powerful advertising function. Interviewee 31(PR group) stated that her

company regards the SVB platform as an essential marketing tool for promoting the company's products and brand image. Interviewee 36 (PR group) stressed that SVB platforms provide a new way for the Chinese company to promote their images, products and latest changes and advancements. Interviewee 41 (PR group) believed that companies could use their brands or products in the form of short video clips on these SVB platforms. Interviewee 43 (PR group) also indicated that "short video advertising is booming today, and it will continue to develop rapidly in the next two to three years." As she points out, many Chinese companies actively use SVB platforms and short videos to promote their brands and products, "We have tried this short video advertising many times. The promotion effect of promoting on these platforms is much better than normal print advertisements. The age of print advertising is over, and we can easily display our company's brand and products through ten-second videos and get better advertising effects."

SVB platforms have become a helpful monitor of consumer sentiment for Chinese companies. By actively hunting for consumer complaints on these platforms, Chinese companies are capable of resolving these complaints promptly. As interviewee 36 mentioned, "these [SVB] platforms provide us with another way to listen to the opinions of our consumers." In the company the interviewee 36 works for, there is a team dedicated to dealing with consumer complaints, "they search consumer complaints on every [SVB] platform 24 hours a day, once they discover a complaint, they will make every effort to solve it, and earnestly request the consumer to delete that video." Interviewee 36 stressed that this method is more efficient in handling consumer complaints than traditional customer service hotlines. Interviewee 39 (PR group) also contended that the company she works for could discover its management and product defects better and faster by using the SVB platform properly, "The emergence of a [complaining] short video notices us that our products or management must be problematic, it helps us to locate the problems we do not know." Moreover, as interviewee 43 indicated, a company can build up a responsible image in public by actively discovering complaints and solving them.

To sum up, SVB platforms (and short videos) should not be regarded only as a platform for entertaining, because Chinese people, media professionals and large companies today have all found their ways of using these platforms to serve different purposes: for the mass public, from watching breaking news to safeguarding their legitimate consumer rights and interests, they are making use of the SVB platform for different practical purposes instead of only using it for entertainment; for the media, including mainstream media and we-media, they use SVB platforms as a new channel for news dissemination, and also take it as a source of news topics;

for businesses, SVB platforms have become one of their new and efficient image maintenance tools. On the one hand, these companies promote their brands and products in short video advertisement on SVB platforms. On the other hand, they actively look for short videos of negative complaints related to their companies on these platforms and do everything possible to reduce their impact.

These ways of using the SVB platform in China break the stereotype that SVB platforms are used only for entertainment. However, these ways mentioned above are only the tip of the iceberg. I now turn to the focal point of this thesis – the consumer video activism tactics. The rest of chapter 5 is organised as follows: based on perceptions of interviewees in four groups, the rest of the chapter describes the strengths of the short videos compared with other media such as picture and text in daily communication and consumer activism event; discusses four groups of interviewees' perceptions to the consumer video activism tactics.

### ***5.3.2 The Eye-catching Feature of the Short Video***

#### ***5.3.2.1 Key Strengths of the Short Video***

As I discussed the multifunctional features of the SVB platforms above, these platforms provide new ways for people to live, study, work and do other things. Taking English learning as an example, in the past, people could only learn English face-to-face with teachers in the classroom, but now people can learn English faster and cheaper (or even for free) through these SVB platforms.

As a new medium of communication, the short video should be regarded as the core of the SVB platform. Whether it is an English teaching program, a television news program, or a product promotion advertisement, they are all made in the form of short video no matter what platform they are on. According to my observations on Weibo, Douyin and other SVB platforms, users can save most short videos (uploaders can set on the platform to prohibit users from downloading their short videos) they want from these platforms to their phones and spread these videos across different platforms handily. For example, a user can download an English teaching short video from Douyin on her/his phone, then send it to her/his friends on WeChat. These cross-platform and downloadable features of the short video remind me that this thesis should focus not only on the interviewees' perceptions of the SVB platforms but also on their perceptions of the medium of the short video. As the core content of SVB platforms, short videos should also be another focal point in this thesis.

Therefore, before discussing the strength of “consumer video activism” in China, it is necessary to highlight the characteristics of short videos as a new medium, by comparing it with the traditional medium – text and pictures. After analysing all the interviewees’ (except for the government officials) perceptions of the short video in their daily lives and works, I discover that short videos have the following conspicuous positive characteristics in the eyes of them:

**(1) Informative and Efficient.** The short video contains more information such as sound than the text and picture. Consequently, short video users can get more information about one thing in less time. As interviewee 28 indicated: “If a speech contest has both text and short video coverage, I will prefer to watch the latter one. Because you will hear his voice, you will see who is speaking, you will see his actual performance and even the surroundings where he is speaking in a short video. However, you will not be able to get this information in a written text.” Interviewee 38 had similar perceptions with interviewee 28, “sound, subtitles, and moving pictures in short videos can help me to obtain more information.”

For some interviewees, short videos also enable them to express themselves to others more accurately within a short time. “I usually choose to share what I see with my families and friends by sending them short videos recorded by me or others. Recording short video is simple and fast, and I can use it to express what I want to show quickly and accurately.” Interviewee 41 said. Moreover, as interviewee 27 indicated, short videos are more understandable, people can digest them more efficiently, “For me, the short video is more like processed food, I can finish it quickly. However, the text or picture looks like raw food to me, and my brain needs more time to understand it.” Interviewee 15 also pointed out that watching short videos can save him time in his busy work.

**(2) Audio-visual and Convincing.** As a Chinese saying goes, “seeing is believing.” In addition to helping people acquire and communicate information more efficiently, short videos are also audio-visual. It can strengthen the credibility of the information people acquire and communicate. Interviewee 27 believed that short videos could truly present the whole story of an event that has already happened. “The expression of short videos is more intuitive, allowing viewers to experience the scene described by others more realistically.” Interviewee 9 said, “like ‘Huazong’, he used a short video to tell the public the fact that many five-star hotels in China are not up to standard.” (I shall come back to this case – “Hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels” in Chapter 6).

Interviewee 8 expressed a similar view: “If I only post a text on my Weibo saying there is something bad happening somewhere, then no one will believe me unless I am the official



mainstream media. Instead, a short video less than a minute is more convincing than a lengthy text description.” Moreover, it is difficult to falsify short videos without being noticed by people, especially for those short videos recorded in “one-shot”. In the eyes of interviewee 42, “Short videos recorded in ‘one shot’ are very convincing to me, and it can be viewed as solid evidence.” Interviewee 8 also agreed that short videos are difficult to be faked, compared with text and pictures.

**(3) Low-threshold.** As a user-friendly medium, the threshold for both using and understanding short videos is low. “For most people who are not proficient in writing, the emergence of short videos lowers the difficulty of their precise expression.” Interviewee 9 recalled that before short videos became popular in China, for an ordinary person, his or her writings would be difficult to get attention on the Internet unless his writing is attractive to the public. Interviewee 42 indicated that writing and photographing require more time and energy for ordinary non-professional people, “It is not easy to describe an event logically with accurate text or to record it with an objective photographic perspective.” In contrast, as he says: “filming short videos is far easier than writing long articles.”

Short videos are easier to understand than rigid text and static pictures. “For example, if you try to use written words to describe something happening in an industry objectively, then only people who are closely related to it and people in the industry will understand what you write.” Interviewee 25 stated. Moreover, short videos are easy to use for certain groups of people, such as older and less educated. As interviewee 32 said: “My parents and even my grandparents can use short video platforms like ‘Douyin’ with ease. It is less difficult for them to use and understand short videos.” Interviewee 18 had a similar point, “for those who are not good at writing and photographing and low education, short videos are more suitable for them.”

“Many educated people are unable to express themselves accurately and logically in words, like some managers and officials I know.” Interviewee 34 indicated that even educated people could not use written text fluently, and the threshold for writing is much higher than shooting short videos for the public. “Like most of us, even educated managers make grammatically and logical mistakes in writing.”

**(4) Eye-catching.** As interviewee 34 stated: “The era of the picture-reading era is gone. We are now stepping into an era of short-video-watching. For me, short videos are the most eye-catching media.” In terms of communication effects, short videos perform better than text and pictures. Interviewee 17 and 25 also recognised that the short videos are more appealing to the audience. “If something has nothing to do with the public, then they are reluctant to read

large text narratives about it. However, short videos are different. Short videos are more attractive to the public.” Interviewee 25 mentioned.

As a predominant medium today online in China, short videos offer a new and eye-catching way of obtaining and expressing information for all Chinese online. People can obtain more information in less time via short videos. Meanwhile, the audio-visual characteristic of short videos boosts its credibility in front of users. The easy-to-use feature of short videos expands its user base, allowing more people, such as older and less educated, to enjoy the convenience brought by short videos. Moreover, these strengths of short videos are also helpful for Chinese consumers in fighting for their rights and interests online.

### *5.3.2.2 Short Videos are No Panacea*

As we can see from the above perceptions of interviewees on short videos, those positive characteristics of short videos are making more people become short video users. Although today the public in China is entering an era of short-video-watching steadily, short videos are no panacea for everyone. When analysing and categorising the interview results, I found that some interviewees (10 out of 44, except for the government officials) are not keen to use short videos for the following reasons:

**(1) *Avoiding Higher Data Charges.*** Compared with reading static pictures and text, watching videos will consume more traffic of users. It means that users will bear higher data costs. Given this situation, the use of scenarios of short videos will be limited to a certain extent. For example, users will choose to watch short videos only when there is a free Wi-Fi network in the field or their data is sufficient. As interviewee 40 argued: “All short video platforms on my phone are set to play video over Wi-Fi only, I do not want to pay any extra charge for watching short videos.” Interviewee 40 usually prefers reading pictures and text rather than short videos to save data. Interviewee 33 also indicated: “I will not waste my data watching any meaningless short video.”

**(2) *“Pictures plus Text” Works Fine.*** Short videos are not an icon that appeals to everyone, and some interviewees are more attached to pictures and text. In other words, these groups of people are satisfied with expressing and obtaining information with pictures and text. For example, interviewees 7, 13, 24, 32 and 39 prefer to use pictures plus text to communicate with others because it can also express the ins and outs of one thing, just like short videos. “Recording a short video then uploading it to a short video platform both make me feel troublesome. For me, taking pictures and writing is more suitable.” Interviewee 19 said.

**(3) *The Trouble with Sound.*** Sound, one of the beneficial characteristics of short videos, can become a problem for some users. “Watching short videos is inconvenient in the metro or on the bus.” Interviewee 40 is not used to watching short videos in public places because the sound coming from her phone makes her feel embarrassed and has no privacy, “but you cannot turn off the sound when you are watching a short video.” Interviewee 4 has the same concern as interviewee 40.

From the above, although compared with traditional media such as pictures and text, short videos as a new type of media have unparalleled advantages, short videos are not a panacea for everyone. Moreover, these alternative voices above indicate that short videos will not replace pictures and text as the only medium online. Instead, short videos join with pictures, text, memes, signs etc., to form a media system for people to obtain and distribute information online. Alternatively, to be more precise, short videos become another essential communication medium for users on different SVB platforms in China. The following answers of interviewees state that the combination of short videos, static pictures and text is the most appropriate way for them to obtain and distribute information online, even though these interviewees (10 out of 44, except for the government officials) acknowledge the advantages of short videos. The following are representative answers from each group (except for the government officials):

**(1) CC Group**

“The combination of short videos, pictures and text is the best solution for me. I always use this combination in my WeChat public account.” (Interviewee 1)

“Short videos spread really well, but for me, the short video plus text and pictures should work better together.” (Interviewee 12)

**(2) MJ/WO Group**

“I will combine these media when conditions allow so that I can make things clearer.” (Interviewee 23)

“As a journalist, you definitely hope that in your report, in addition to the basic text and pictures, there will also be short video evidence.” (Interviewee 29)

**(3) PR Group**

“Compared with pictures and text, short videos can more completely record the event. However, everyone has different preferences. Some people are better at expressing and obtaining information with pictures or text, and some prefer short videos. For me, I will combine these methods. For example, I will use pictures, text and short videos to record something together so that when I tell this thing to others online, different people can understand it more completely in a way they are familiar with.” (Interviewee 33)

## **5.4 The Working Mechanisms of the Consumer Video Activism**

### ***5.4.1 “The Crying Baby Gets the Milk”***

#### *5.4.1.1 Applying Short Videos to the Consumer Activism*

Before further discussing the connection between SVB platforms, short videos and consumer activism, we should figure out why short videos SVB platforms are becoming a popular way of defending Chinese consumers’ interests today. The above analysis of the underlying reasons of consumer activism in Section 5.2 of this chapter has answered this question from one aspect. It exposes that the traditional and standard methods, such as amicable negotiation between the consumer and businessman, seeking assistance from government departments, contribute little or nothing to protect Chinese consumers’ rights and interest. Given this situation, Chinese consumers have no choice but to take alternative measures to recover their losses.

From another perspective, after employing those “mainstream” and “government-suggest” method, Chinese consumers do not know about other methods for protecting themselves. More than half of the interviewees (27 out of 44, more specifically, 9 out of 15 in the CC group; 7 out of 15 in the MJ/WO group; and 11 out of 14 in the PR group) indicated that they are unaware of other alternative methods of safeguarding their consumer rights interests, besides speaking out their own unfortunate experiences through the mainstream media or social media.

As mentioned above, with the advent of the short video, Chinese social media platforms upgraded themselves to SVB platforms, and mainstream media started to set up their official accounts on different SVB platforms. Like the moves of Chinese mainstream journalists and we-media operators, Chinese consumers also take advantage of this opportunity. They began to use the power of short videos and SVB platforms to shout out their stories for defending their rights and interest.

Given that most Chinese consumer activism cases are self-interest-oriented, no matter what kind of method Chinese consumers use, their ultimate goal is to let businesses that have

violated their rights and interests compensate them rapidly and accordingly. Therefore, Chinese consumers attach great importance to the effectiveness of the rights and interests' protection method. If people know that a certain form of resistance will not work, their enthusiasm for resistance will fade instantly. For the consumer video activism tactics, Chinese consumers are willing to use them for defending their rights and interests because they have frequently witnessed its strengths in their daily lives:

**Immersive.** Such as interviewee 10 recalled a short video about consumer activism he watched on an SVB platform: "A group of landlords were blocking the entrance gate of the local government service hall, yelling for the government to help them recover their financial losses. I was deeply impressed by that short video." As interviewee 10 said, this short video made him feel like he was at the protest scene with those landlords, "I felt their anger, their grievances, this short video made me feel I was there." This *immersive* feature of short videos made interviewee 10 realise that the short video and SVB platform can become an alternative consumer activism tool for him when he needs it.

**Authentic and Objective.** Interviewee 15, a professional photographer in China. From the perspective of his previous experience of successfully using Weibo to defend his consumer rights and interests, he believes that short videos and SVB platforms provide consumers with a new expressive medium that is different from text and pictures. From the professional perspective of photography, he states that short videos are more authentic and objective than text and pictures; short videos can be used as legal evidence in consumers' protests against businesses and their legal actions, as long as the short videos are not falsified or artificially compiled.

**Effective.** "I have seen many short videos of consumer activism on Weibo." Interviewee 8 strongly recognises the role of short videos and SVB platforms in consumer activism, "It helps consumers resolve problems faster online." To approve his point, interviewee 8 described in detail the common rationale behind the successful consumer video activism cases he observed on SVB platforms: "SVB platforms such as Weibo, they are not responsible for your financial loss. However, as the media, what they can do is allow you and assist you in spreading your unfortunate story. Once your story is successfully spread on the platform, the company that violates your consumer rights will notice you, and they will resolve your problem as soon as they can in order to protect the company's brand image." Interviewee 8 states that Chinese SVB platforms assume the functions of government departments indirectly, "[short videos and SVB platforms] it is more powerful than the CCA." In the eyes of interviewee 8, the consumer video activism tactics are far more *effective* than other

traditional tactics of consumer activism, such as negotiating with the business or seeking assistance from the CCA.

**Uncomplicated.** Like interviewee 8, interviewee 7 also discovers the logic behind the consumer video activism tactics. She suggests that for people who are not good at expressing their dissatisfaction with texts and pictures online, using short videos to express their dissatisfaction and uploading them to SVB platforms are an *uncomplicated* way to safeguard rights and interests. Interviewee 13 believes consumer video activism tactics are more suitable for people who do not understand the literal Internet expression, like her parents.

**Attractive.** As interviewee 2 indicates, short videos can give her and everyone a powerful visual impact in a flash, “such as the short video filmed by Huazong [case four: Hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels] I have watched recently, everyone was impressed when they saw it. Then as more and more people reposted this short video on different places [SVB platforms], more and more people started to pay attention to this matter.” Interviewee 2 thinks that short videos are *attractive* so it can “raise the voice” of the messages it contains, and attract the attention of more audience on different SVB platforms.

There is a saying in China that “the crying baby gets the milk”, which explains the actual situation of consumer activism in China. A Chinese verb called “闹大” (*nao-da*, a Chinese verb, meaning “to make a big deal out of something” or, in more colloquial English, “to make a fuss over”) was constantly mentioned in the answers of many interviewees. For Chinese consumers, in most cases, they have to “cry” loudly and let the public hear their tearful voices if they want to retrieve their rights and interests that have been violated, such as:

“Many Chinese businesses will not take the initiative to solve consumer problems unless they are oppressed by public opinion. Therefore, it is necessary for consumers to ‘*nao-da*’ their complaints and demands.” (Interviewee 1)

“Chinese consumers always want to post their stories online and let everyone know about their stories. The public’s constant attention to consumers’ stories will put pressure on businesses and force them to resolve consumers’ demands soon.” (Interviewee 6, one of the key informants)

“The prerequisite for the success of consumer activism in China is whether consumers can make their stories known to more people.” (Interviewee 12)

The strengths of consumer video activism mentioned above, such as immersive, authentic and objective, etc., can “nao-da” consumers’ grievances and spread them around effectively. Therefore, by adopting the consumer video activism tactics, Chinese consumers will increase their respective success rates of consumer activism. In sum, all (15) interviewees in the CC group hold the view that short videos and SVB platforms provide consumers with a new mean of consumer activism, and the vast majority of interviewees believe (14 out of 15) that short videos and SVB platforms play a positive role in protecting the rights and interests of consumers. Such as interviewee 8 said: “If I come to the step of protecting my consumer rights and interests online, I would prefer short videos and SVB platforms.”

Nevertheless, among these 14 interviewees, 12 people profess that combining short videos with text and pictures is the best option to safeguard their consumer rights and interests on SVB platforms (2 out of 15 interviewees state that they will only use short videos on SVB platforms). They stressed that this “combination strategy” can significantly improve their success rate of consumer activism:

“If I want to get my money back, I will use text, pictures and short videos at once. The short video can show the whole process of an event more completely, and it is solid evidence for the consumer. For example, the short video can clearly show how poor the service in this store is; Pictures can clearly show the most important moment in the short video, which saves people the time to flip through the short video repeatedly; Written text can clearly describe the antecedents and consequences of an event, as well as the specific demands and ultimate goals of the consumer.” (Interviewee 2)

“The most effective way to fight for your consumer interests online is to post your sad story on SVB platforms with a combination of short videos, text and pictures. By doing this, you can maximise the persuasiveness of your story, then let more people and media understand your situation and to help you get your losses back.” (Interviewee 6)

Besides, by adopting the “combination strategy”, consumers can distribute their grievances more effectively across different SVB platforms, making more people pay attention to their unfortunate experiences and increasing the success rate of their activism tactics. One of the key informants, interviewee 14 combines short video, text and pictures in his product evaluation reports and other consumer-activism-related content. As he indicated, “WeChat

users are more used to reading to long text, and people on Douyin are more addicted to short videos.” In other words, users’ reading habits are shaped and influenced by the social media platforms they use most. Although most Chinese social media platforms have already evolved into SVB platforms, users’ reading habits still exist. “Many of our Douyin followers came to Douyin and became our fans after seeing our text reports on WeChat. Similarly, many of our followers on WeChat came from Douyin.” Interviewee 14 said. As a result, interviewee 14’s well-intentioned warnings and the product evaluation reports produced by his lab can be seen by more people with different reading habits on different platforms.

#### *5.4.1.2 Critical Factors Limiting the Ability of the Consumer Video Activism*

Imagine there is an unfortunate Chinese consumer named Lee. Because he found that the mobile phone he bought from a well-known mobile phone maker in X city in China has serious quality problems, now he wants to return the phone and get his money back. After worthless negotiation with the mobile phone store and tediously waiting for replies from the relevant government departments such as the CCA, now Lee has to solve the problem in his way.

Lee remembered many successful examples of consumers safeguarding their rights and interests by posting short videos on SVB platforms. Fortunately, he had filmed a piece of a short video about the process of buying that faulty phone with his old phone. Under this situation, to get his money back, Lee started to post it with another short video showing the phone’s quality issues on his SVB accounts. Although the consumer video activism cases that Lee witnessed online were successful and effective, it does not mean that the imitation of Lee will also be effective. According to the CC group interview results, several critical factors limit the efficacy of Chinese consumers’ and Lee’s short video activism tactics. In addition to the privacy matters mentioned above in Section 5.2, the main hindrances of consumer video activism are outlined below by discussing how mainstream media/we-media, government department and business-hired “Shui jun” impact on the consumer activism tactics.

For Chinese consumers, one of the key factors that determine the success of the consumer video activism tactics is media coverage, which includes mainstream and we-media reportages. As mentioned above, Chinese consumers must become “crying babies” and let the public hear their sad stories if they want to retrieve their money successfully, and with the advent of short video techniques, consumers have a new and effective approach to “cry” out loud. However, it should be noted that in this unique Chinese consumer video activism process, besides these short videos and SVB platforms, the role of the mainstream/we-media is



indispensable. The vast majority of interviewees (14 out of 15) in the CC group believe that Chinese mainstream/we-media play a constructive role in the activism process because the media reportages can amplify the voice of consumers and attract more public attention. One of the key informants, interviewee 5 stressed that he needed to increase the influence of his activism story through media reportages to put pressure on the Samsung company. As interviewee 10 indicated, Chinese consumers post short videos on SVB platforms because they want to use them to put pressure on businesses. However, their approaches may not be effective unless the media pay attention to it, “For example, I only have two or three hundred Weibo followers and WeChat fans, under this situation, even if I post a short video on these [SVB platforms], it is not easy to attract the attention of the public. Therefore, I need them [the media] to help me.”

However, not everyone’s story can be fortunately selected and reported by the media. More than half of the interviewees (8 out of 14) who acknowledge the positive role of the media in the consumer video activism tactics also state that not every consumer is fortunate enough to be covered by the media. Moreover, as some interviewees indicated, when reporting on consumer-related incidents, Chinese media are more inclined to report incidents that can attract more widespread attention and bring higher advertising benefits:

“Media usually report those cases that can generate traffic and advertising revenue for themselves.” (Interviewee 1)

“When Chinese media cover topics such as consumer activism, they will choose topics that can generate potential advertising revenue. For example, some listed companies pay protection fees to the media in order to avoid negative consumer-activism-related reports.” (Interviewee 6)

Some interviewees also expressed concern that the media did not cover consumer-related topics because of government constraints. For instance, interviewee 3 believes the mainstream media are vulnerable to pressure from the government, so they tend to not report on some consumer-activism-related issues that will have a negative impact on the government (see the next Section for more detail). On the contrary, they usually tend to report cases of consumer activism that have nothing to do with the government and are caused by the business’s negligence. “Chinese media have done a better job in helping consumers to solve some of their daily problems, such as the renowned television station program named

‘1818 *Huang jin yan*’ [golden eye], they have helped consumers who have been deceived by barbershops and beauty shops to get their money back.” Interviewee 3 indicated.

In addition, government departments in China will prevent the media from reporting on topics related to consumer activism; they will also directly impact consumers’ activism tactics. On January 9, 2019, China Netcasting Services Association (CNSA) officially released two sets of regulations about online short videos and SVB platforms. Under these regulations, 100 categories of short video content<sup>33</sup> are banned on every Chinese SVB platform (CNSA, 2019). In response to these regulations, some interviewees in the CC group (7 out of 15) profess that these regulations may restrict consumers from using short videos to cry out their grievances and protect their rights and interests. “Many previous examples prove a fact that in order to protect a local business, governments will restrict the consumer’s activism action and prevent the media from reporting on it.” Interviewee 7 feels that those regulations on short videos and SVB platforms will further restrict consumers’ use of short videos to protect their interests.

In the process of using short videos and SVB platforms to defend their rights and interests, consumers may also be hindered by their “antagonist” – those large businesses. There are usually two expectations for Chinese consumers after posting a short video of businesses’ illegal behaviours on SVB platforms. One is that the consumer may successfully attract the attention of the business, and her or his problems are resolved, which is the most desirable result for consumers. Another expectation is that the business refuses to acknowledge the problem and uses different propaganda strategies (for more details, see Subection 5.4.3) such as “*Shui jun*” (online water armies) to dilute the negative impact of the consumer’s short video. Unfortunately, the second result is more common for Chinese consumers. Especially for the “*Shui jun*” tricks of businesses, more than half of Chinese consumer interviewees (9 out of 15) held the view that it will hinder general consumers from successfully using short videos to defend their rights and interests. “Most people in China cannot discriminate between paid posters and authentic comments, and they are easily deceived by businesses, which leads them to choose to trust these bad guys rather than those who need compassion and help.” Interviewee 2 stated. Without the support of public opinion, the probability of consumers’ success in protecting their rights will be reduced. Interviewee 8 even deemed that “online water armies” hired by one company will drown consumers’ voices in their online short video fight against

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<sup>33</sup> See [http://www.cnsa.cn/index.php/infomation/dynamic\\_details/id/68/type/2.html](http://www.cnsa.cn/index.php/infomation/dynamic_details/id/68/type/2.html) and [http://www.cnsa.cn/index.php/infomation/dynamic\\_details/id/69/type/2.html](http://www.cnsa.cn/index.php/infomation/dynamic_details/id/69/type/2.html) (accessed 5 September 2020).

this business, “then the general public will not hear the voices of these needy consumers, they will fail to retrieve their lost rights and interests.” Interviewee 8 stressed.

## ***5.4.2 The Role of Mainstream/We-media in Consumer Video Activism***

### ***5.4.2.1 The Mutual Action between Media and Short Videos***

As an essential part of the short video activism tactics of consumers, Chinese mainstream media journalists/we-media operators play a key role in bridging the gap between the claims of consumers and businesses’ responses by reporting the short video activism tactics of consumers and making it more “appealing” to the mass public, relevant government departments and businesses. The results of most interviews with mainstream media journalists/we-media operators (14 out of 15) in the related field of consumer activism indicated that the short video activism tactics of Chinese consumers are conducive to claiming compensations for their losses. For instance, based on his personal working experience in the field, key informant interviewee 16 acknowledged: “Generally speaking, I think consumers’ short video activism practices can increase the speed at which consumers can obtain compensation from the business. It makes more people, including mainstream media, relevant government departments and the business involved, aware of the voice of this consumer, which is a good way for Chinese consumers to protect themselves.”

Most Chinese consumers have already realised that Chinese media, including mainstream media journalists/we-media operators, play an essential loudspeaker role in their “battles” against the business, as mentioned above. At the same time, Chinese media also realise their importance in the battles of Chinese consumers. All 15 interviewees from the MJ/WO group contended that most mainstream/we-media could largely help Chinese consumers solve their problems. Given this situation, they do not disclaim the effectiveness and positive significance of Chinese consumers’ short video activism tactics. For instance, as interviewee 23 described: “In the case of a pregnant woman protesting on the roof of her Mercedes Car in Shunde Foshan [after seeing the successful protest case in Xi’an initiated by Wang, which I mention in chapter 6, this pregnant woman chose to imitate Wang’s approach], the local media helped her to a large extent.” Interviewee 23 indicated that after the local media, including the one she worked for, reported on this incident, the local relevant government departments asked them to withdraw their online reports, “the local government’s action of requiring us to withdraw relevant reports proves that the protest of that pregnant woman got their attention.” In the eyes of interviewee 23, the reason this case can be finally resolved is

that the previous media reports directly attracted the attention of the government, which led them to intervene in this matter.

Chinese consumers' short video activism tactics have become one of their essential sources of information for Chinese media. Nearly all interviewees (14 out of 15) from the MJ/WO group expressed that short videos related to consumer activism on SVB platforms and SVB platforms themselves are their frequently-used information sources. Meanwhile, most interviewees (13 out of 15) acknowledged that short videos offered by consumers could effectively attract their attention because short videos can make it easier for journalists to understand the truth of the matter and attract more attention from the audience. More than half of them (9 out of 14) chose to use short videos as their news evidence and include them in their reports. Such as interviewee 20 discussed, even in the days of television and newspaper, he and other journalists in Qingdao used micro video recorders to shoot videos during their undercover investigations on poor hygiene practices in restaurants and hotels because these videos were good evidence for the media. "Short videos posted by consumers on different platforms today are far more powerful than before", according to interviewee 20, if consumers can provide them with any short video evidence, they will treat these short videos as important news clues and evidence in their news reports. Interviewee 26, one of the key informants in the MJ/WO group, expressed that he will put it in his news report if there is a piece of short video evidence. Moreover, five of these nine interviewees prefer to adopt short videos as their news evidence and source.

There are three approaches to using short videos and SVB platforms as information sources in these 14 interviewees: *active searching*, *passive receiving* and a *combination* of the above methods. Active searching means journalists take the initiative in looking for any short video that is worth investigating on different SVB platforms. As interviewee 21 revealed, he and his colleagues often actively search news stories on different SVB platforms, "these [SVB] platforms are our important news sources, and those short videos released by consumers are our news clues." Only a few (3 out of 14) journalists expressed clearly that active searching is their routine method of getting news stories. Passive receiving usually means that mainstream media journalists and we-media operators passively receive news clues and stories through different SVB platforms by setting up official accounts on SVB platforms and leaving news hotlines, email addresses, etc. As interviewee 16 indicated, "we receive news clues from callers instead of actively searching stories online, short video evidence is very welcome, and it works better if we put it in our reporting." One interviewee (1 out of 14) claimed that the institution she/he works for adopts the passive receiving approach only. For the remaining interviewees

(10 out of 14), they adopt active searching and passive receiving approaches simultaneously. Nevertheless, for the 14 interviewees who choose to use short videos and SVB platforms as their news sources, clues, or evidence, they will indeed verify the authenticity of these short videos before they put these materials into their reports.

#### *5.4.2.2 The Interplay between Media, Government Departments and Businesses*

Given that the mainstream/we-media in China is under the influence of both government control and the market-oriented economic system, we should not neglect the complex interplay between media, different government departments, and businesses in the process of Chinese consumers using short videos and SVB platforms to fight against businesses. Excluding one invalid answer, I divide the answers of the remaining 14 interviewees in the group of mainstream media journalist/we-media operator into four situations:

**(1) *Obedience Under Pressure.*** Under this situation, journalists are being forced by the government and businesses not to cover certain topics related to consumer activism or even to remove their corresponding news reports. More than half of the interviewees (9 out of 14) stated that they are working under the constant pressure of governments' instructions or businesses' public-relations tactics. As interviewee 18 described, the government has a profound influence on the coverage of journalists, "Taxi drivers in Harbin always ripped off customers in the past, and we wrote an investigative report on this phenomenon at that time. However, not long after that article came out, the governor of Harbin was very unhappy and required us to delete that report. Our report was eventually deleted." Unlike the direct and strict government orders, the way businesses influence the media is mostly through soft public-relations strategies, such as advertising partnerships. As interviewee 23 stressed, the institution she works for is the government's mouthpiece. Their news topics are restricted by the government and not allowed to be reported. Meanwhile, she says, "we also consciously do not report negative news related to its business partners." Among those nine interviewees, 6 out of 8 said that they are often under pressure from both the government and business; 2 out of 8 said they are often pressed by the government only; 1 out of 8 said that he is often pressed by the business to remain quiet.

**(2) *Disobedience Under Pressure.*** Under this situation, journalists are still under pressure from government departments and businesses, however, the institutions they work for or the journalists themselves can withstand the pressure and continue to cover topics related to consumer activism or not to withdraw relevant reports. Unfortunately, only a few interviewees

(2 out of 14) expressed that their institutions can withstand pressures from governments and businesses simultaneously. As interviewee 28 described, “Because local protectionism prevails, different local governments often pressure the editors and the executive staff in the institutions I work for, to try to stop them from publishing my reports. My interviews are often restricted by different local government departments. Nevertheless, we still have the guts to publish those investigative reports.” As for the pressure from the business side, interviewee 28 said it does not affect his interviewing and reporting. Some interviewees (3 out of 14) showed that their institutions or themselves are only immune to businesses’ influences.

**(3) Cooperation without Pressure.** Under this situation, journalists “voluntarily” choose to cooperate with government departments and businesses to solve problems for consumers without pressure from both actively. Few (2 out of 14) interviewees made it clear that the relationship between media and the government or the business should not be antagonistic. In their eyes, on the one hand, media should follow the instructions given by the government and actively report the violations of businesses informed by consumers to relevant government departments before they report these incidents, instead of being pressured by the government. In this way, the relevant government department can solve problems for consumers. As interviewee 16 put it, “we media is more like a mediator between governments, businesses and consumers.” On the other hand, media should report on an incident with the proactive attitude of helping businesses to correct their mistakes and resolve conflicts with consumers, rather than avoid or remove negative reports due to advertising partnerships.

**(4) Freedom without Pressure.** Under this situation, journalists are free to report any news topic related to consumer activism, and they are not under pressure from governments and businesses. Only the case of interviewee 24 belongs to this situation.

To sum up, for those few (5 out of 14) journalists who can withstand the pressure from governments or businesses, and those (1 out of 14) who are free to report any consumer activism topic, their reports can force government departments and businesses to respond more quickly to consumers’ demands. Even if more than half of the interviewees (9 out of 14) indicate that they have been prevented by governments’ instructions or businesses’ public-relations tactics from covering certain stories related to consumer activism, all 15 interviewees still insisted that most mainstream/we-media can indeed help Chinese consumers to solve their problems to a large extent. As interviewee 23 indicated that the intense response from the government and business show that media attention and reporting on the consumers’ short video activism tactics can attract their attention and press them to solve problems for consumers.

### ***5.4.3 The Response of Public Relations Official to Consumer Video Activism***

#### ***5.4.3.1 A Smoking Gun of Businesses' Faults***

As the core object of being complained and denounced in the whole process of consumer activism, businesses' attitudes determine the effectiveness of Chinese consumers' short video activism tactics. Therefore, by analysing the views of public relations officials on these tactics, we can find out the actual effect of this approach and its impact on the business. All 14 interviewees from the PR group confessed that consumers could better attract their attention and urge them to resolve problems by employing these short video activism tactics for the following reasons. Firstly, they all indicated that short videos posted by consumers are ***solid evidence*** of businesses' faults. Therefore, on behalf of their businesses, they must find consumers who post those short videos and solve their problems timely. Otherwise, it will finally become significant and damage businesses' images:

“As a real estate company, if a buyer posts a short video on a [SVB] platform saying that the apartment he bought from us has some quality problems, such as floor leakage. Then we will feel nervous about it because this short video can prove that the apartments we built and sold have quality problems, which will directly affect the brand image of our company in the minds of other potential buyers and the overall company performance.” (Interviewee 31)

“We are unable to shift the blame to others if a consumer posts short videos about our mistakes. These short videos are the smoking gun, and we have to admit our mistakes, contact her/him and solve the problem.” (Interviewee 40)

Secondly, as mentioned above in the previous Section, short videos posted by consumers can be easily adopted by the mainstream/we-media as their news evidence in their reports, which can amplify the adverse influence of short videos related to businesses uploaded by consumers to different SVB platforms. Nearly all (13 out of 14) interviewees from the PR group articulated that the risk of further spread of the short video caused by ***mainstream/we-media reports*** compels businesses to pay more attention to consumers' short video activism tactics and solve the problems of consumers faster than before:

“The media coverage of consumers’ short videos can greatly help consumers to lift their voices. We try our best to solve consumers’ problems quickly if the media reports on it.” (Interviewee 35)

“If the media reports on the short video [posted by consumers], we will contact these consumers as soon as possible and solve their problems, to avoid this matter from being further exposed by more media.” (Interviewee 37)

“The short video itself spreads fast, and it can attract media attention easily. We do not want to see this happen because potential consumers may not buy our products if they see the news.” (Interviewee 39)

Thirdly, given that the complicated relationship between the media and the relevant government department in consumer activism issues, as mentioned above, consumers’ short video activism tactics can quickly lead to *government intervention* after being reported by the media. In the eyes of Chinese businesses, the involvement of relevant government departments in consumers’ short video activism matters force businesses to respond to consumers’ demands as fast as they can, more than half of the interviewees (9 out of 14) acknowledged this fact:

“If the media reports on the short video posted by a consumer about the quality problems of our products, we will be under pressure from relevant government departments in quick succession. Then we have to admit mistakes, solve problems, to maintain the brand image.” (Interviewee 34)

“When relevant local government departments and the media are both paying attention to it [short video evidence posted by consumers], we will solve their [consumers’] problems more actively than before.” (Interviewee 39)

“Businesses will absolutely follow the government’s requests to quickly respond to consumers’ demands, especially in the case of large businesses.” (Interviewee 44, key informant, veteran brand director)

The above interview results indicate that Chinese consumers’ short video activism tactics can arouse the concern on Chinese businesses undoubtedly, because the short video



spreads fast and provides consumers with the smoking gun they need to draw the attention of the media and relevant government departments, thus undermining the business's brand image in front of the public (potential consumers). As a result, once Chinese consumers post short video evidence on different SVB platforms, Chinese businesses must actively and quickly respond to their demands for protecting their brand images.

#### *5.4.3.2 Businesses' Self-protection Strategies against Consumers' Short Video Activism Tactics*

There are still many ways for Chinese businesses (especially for those large corporations that care about their brand images) to escape the negative impact of consumers' short video activism tactics and protect their brand images (more specifically, their benefit), besides admitting mistakes and solving problems actively. The interview results show that there are at least two main strategies for Chinese businesses to suppress the spread of short videos of complaint or protest. First, *24-hour-a-day monitoring*. Most interviewees (11 out of 14) expressed that in their companies, they have a monitoring team to monitor short videos and any other negative content (such as comments) related to their businesses on different SVB platforms 24 hours a day. For example, a member of the monitoring team in the A company interviewee 31 works for needs to search for any negative evidence (e.g., a short video showing the quality problems of a product of company A; some negative comments about a product of company A.) on different SVB platforms which related to the company's name, latest products, slogan, etc., during his duty period every day. Once he finds one, he will record the content in time and report it to the relevant staff in the public relations department. Moreover, 12 interviewees mentioned that their businesses usually hire "*Shui jun*" (online water army, staffed by the monitoring team in most large businesses in China) to leave particular positive comments below any negative short video/texts/pictures found by the monitoring team.

This 24-hour-a-day consumer opinion monitoring mechanism enables businesses to find any short video (or any other content) that are harmful to the business's image released by consumers on different SVB platforms in the first place. Specifically, this method allows businesses to find out who is the uploader of those activism short videos and respond to her/his demands promptly, thereby limiting the further spread of these short videos. For instance, interviewee 36 expressed that they will contact the consumer who posts short videos and solve her/his problems if their monitoring system finds such short video and confirms its authenticity. Interviewee 44 described the detailed working mechanism of the monitoring system in the

company he works for: “The 24-hour-a-day monitoring enables us to find out problems and deal with them promptly. Once the monitoring team detects a problem [a short video], they will inform us, then we will report the problem to our head office, and at the same time, we will contact the consumer who uploaded the video, and do our best to resolve her/his problems. After we solve her/his problems, we will ask her/him to delete the short video as soon as possible.”

Following the first method, most Chinese businesses usually tend to *build strong relationships with the mainstream/we-media* to prevent the news from being further disseminated by the media once negative short videos (or texts, images) about the business appear. Most interviewees (12 out of 14) articulated that they have constantly established useful contacts with different mainstream/we-media through various means to prepare for a rainy day. For example, as interviewee 39 put it: “We want to be friends with journalists.” In order to “become a good friend” of journalists, interviewee 39 will “find out what they like, cater for their interests.” For example, “we gave all female journalists we know a gift on the international women’s day, we invited journalists and their children to participate in our free summer vacation parent-child tourism activities.” Interviewee 39 said. The result of being friends with the journalists is, as interviewee 39 mentioned, “when they find news stories related to us [the company interviewee 39 works for], positive or negative, they will inform us in advance before reporting it.”

In addition to “making friends” with the mainstream/we-media, Chinese businesses choose to strengthen their good “friendships” by advertising. All 12 interviewees above indicated that their businesses have always advertised on different mainstream/we-media. As interviewee 31 put it, “Every year, we put many advertisements in different mainstream/we-media, such as advertorials about the social responsibility of our company.” As interviewee 41 indicated, besides paying advertising fees to media agencies, some businesses also privately give the journalists who are responsible for the advertorials or the news stories related to these companies red-envelope cash, to make them write better or write positive. “After we invite our friends [journalists] to dinner, give them red-envelope cash, put advertisements on their platforms [e.g., newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations, social media platforms.], they will treat us better.” Interviewee 41 said. By paying the “protection money” to the media, Chinese businesses, especially for those large corporations that care about their brand images, have effectively built strong relationships with most mainstream/we-media. Therefore, these relationships have empowered Chinese businesses to control the media. Specifically,

companies can better promote themselves, prevent the media from reporting negative news about them, and even require the media to delete the negative reports that have been reported.

These strategies mentioned above have given time businesses time to protect their brand image. By monitoring short videos and any other negative content related to their businesses on different SVB platforms 24 hours a day, businesses can make those short videos posted by consumers “vanish” (locate the consumer who posted the negative short video, solves her/his problems, and asks her/him to delete the original short video) promptly before the mainstream/we-media reports on it. By building solid relationships with the mainstream media journalists/we-media operators via emotional bonding and advertising, businesses make the media stand on their side.

#### ***5.4.4 Government Department Officials Attitudes towards Consumer Video Activism***

##### ***5.4.4.1 “It Does Work, but We Don’t Encourage It”***

When talking about the consumer activism issue in China, the role of the relevant government department should not be ignored. In this thesis, I was fortunate enough to interview 12 government officials from two core departments of consumer rights protection (MSA and CA) in two cities. Their valuable points offer us a glimpse of the working mechanism of the Chinese government departments of consumer rights protection and give us a clue that we can use it to envisage the future of the consumer video activism tactics from the government’s view. The interview results of government department officials demonstrated that they (12 interviewees) all share a common view of the latest Chinese consumers’ short video activism tactics: these latest and popular activism tactics can help consumers to safeguard their rights and interests, but it is not a correct and rational way. Hence, these tactics are not encouraged by the government. As interviewee 50 (key informant, spokesman) put it, “*It does work*, consumers successfully get what they want [by adopting the short video activism tactics], consumers are free to use these tactics as long as the short video content posted by consumers does not involve illegal content. These tactics are not illegal, *but we [CA] do not encourage Chinese consumers to use them.*”

The reason why these short video activism tactics work is simple in the eyes of these government department officials: Short videos posted by consumers can effortlessly evoke media/public attention, and it is bound to urge relevant government departments to press ahead with the proper resolution of the consumer activism issue. As interviewee 52 (key informant,

senior officer) mentioned: “In China, relevant government departments follow a logic of ‘*the crying baby gets the milk*’ when handling with people’s grievances in most cases, this method will certainly attract our attention.” Interviewee 53 also disclosed that they would speed up to solve the consumer’s problems as long as her/his short videos cause widespread public attention. So far, the vast majority of interviewees (54 out of 56) in the four interviewee groups (Chinese consumers; mainstream media journalists/we-media operators; public relations department officials and government department officials) have recognised the underlying logic of the success of consumer video activism: Your cry will be neglected unless you cry loudly enough; your demand will be ignored unless it can draw enough attention. In other words, consumers’ short video activism tactics can amplify their voices and make more people (including mainstream/we-media, businesses involved and relevant government departments) pay attention to it. Under the pressure of media/public opinion and government supervision, most companies (especially those that care about their brand images) have no choice but to acknowledge their mistakes and compensate consumers accordingly. However, some interviewees (4 out of 12) in the GO group demonstrated that because small businesses and individual peddlers do not value their brand image (or they do not realise it at all), consumers’ short video activism tactics (and media coverage, government intervention) do not affect them.

Again, from the government department officials’ perspective, they are not saying that the consumers’ short video activism tactics are rational and recognised by the government, even if they have admitted the effectiveness of this approach. Combining Article 39 of the *Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Consumer Rights and Interests (2013 Amendment)* and the interview results, the government-encouraged, rational, and legal methods of complaining and protecting personal legitimate rights and interests for Chinese consumers only include: (1) negotiate with and reach out for a reconciliation with the business; (2) request consumers associations or other legally-established mediation organisations for dispute mediation; (3) complaint to the relevant governmental administrative department (such as MSA); (4) apply to the personnel dispute arbitration commission for arbitration; (5) file a lawsuit in the people’s court.

Compared with these legal approaches, most of the government department officials (10 out of 12) identified that the consumer video activism tactics have the following defects: (1) It will create a *negative demonstration effect* across the society, which will “induce the public to do the same thing, and reduce the credibility of reasonable dispute resolution methods encouraged by the government in front of the public” (Interviewee 50); (2) *Not all consumers’ complaints or claims are reasonable and legal*, “so even if they use this method, the final

results still will not meet their unreasonable requirements, and their practices will even cause damage to the reputation of the business.” (Interviewee 46); (3) *Not all consumers who use this method will succeed, but everyone who uses this method will definitely face the problem of losing personal privacy.* Such as interviewee 54 expressed: “Although the consumer who protested on the hood of a Mercedes Car in Xi’an successfully protected her interests through a short video, she lost her privacy. People were constantly talking about her online during that time, which has caused great harm to her work and life.”

#### *5.4.4.2 The Cooperation with Media in Consumer Activism*

The evidence mentioned above of how the media plays a role in the consumer video activism tactics highlights the impact of media coverage on the government’s action. From the perspective of mainstream media/we-media, by reporting on the consumers’ short video activism tactics, they are capable of attracting the attention of relevant government departments and pressing them to solve problems for consumers, which is a necessary process of consumer video activism (Subection 5.4.2). Most interviewees (10 out of 12, 5 from the MSA, 5 from the CA) in the GO group did not deny this situation publicly; only two interviewees in this group indicated that media reports would not accelerate their process of handling any consumer activism issues.

From the perspectives of the MSA and CA officials, there is another cooperative relationship (Subsection 5.4.2) between government departments and the mainstream/we-media. The results of interviews with officials from the MSA and CA indicated that they generally take the initiative to cooperate with the media in the context of protecting consumers’ rights and interests by informing the media about the unfair, deceptive and fraudulent practices of the businesses they know (for the MSA and CA, the ways in which they obtain such information include but are not limited to the following ways, e.g., by collecting consumers’ complaints and conducting independent investigations). As interviewee 50 pointed out, “Media exposure/coverage is one of the significant ways for us [CA] to make businesses admit their faults and to protect consumers from being deceived by businesses. Normally, businesses choose to immediately admit their mistakes and make compensation to consumers after we ask the media to expose their offences in most of the cases.” In a word, in the eyes of the government departments, the media is an effective weapon for regulating the market and punishing the business that violates the legitimate rights and interests of consumers.

Meanwhile, the interview results indicate that these officials of MSA and CA expect the media to voluntarily inform them of any consumer complaints or consumer activism issues as soon as the media gets it. Hence these departments can know certain consumer activism issues in the first place and deal with them accordingly. As interviewee 45 (key informant, secretary-general) indicated, “the media can first tell us [CA] what consumers want and how consumers are defending their rights, instead of directly reporting these issues without communicating with us.” Moreover, these two government departments also use the media as a “warning panel” for consumers by asking the mainstream/we-media to promote the correct consumer knowledge to consumers, including consumer tips such as how to identify the true and false products, how to avoid being deceived by businesses, how to protect their rights adequately, etc. As interviewee 53 mentioned, they (MSA) will closely follow the social hotspots and issue related consumer warnings to consumers through the media, “[by doing so] we are helping consumers to avoid false or misleading advertisings or even frauds.”

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This chapter mainly presents and examines the interview results of four groups of interviewees’ (Chinese consumers; PR department officials; mainstream media journalists/we-media operators; and relevant government department officials) personal experiences and perceptions of the Chinese consumers’ short video activism tactics; of the realities of Chinese consumer activism; and of short videos and SVB social media platforms.

From the perspective of the leading actor – Chinese consumers, the inaction of businesses and relevant government departments is why they choose to use the short video activism tactics to protect their rights. The interview results demonstrate that Chinese consumers are not inclined to use consumer video activism tactics to defend their rights and interests if they have other more straightforward options. Chinese consumers have at least three “considerations” before deciding to use the short video activism tactics: the damage extent, the ratio of success and the privacy matters. Moreover, Chinese consumers follow an explicit three-step strategy of seeking justice and compensation: step one, negotiate with the business directly; step two, if the previous step fails, seek assistance from consumer rights protection departments such as MSA and CA; step three, if these previous rational methods all fail, then turn to adopts the consumer video activism tactics. By doing so, consumers make more people, including the media and relevant government departments, pay attention to their unfortunate experiences and sympathise with their grievances. As a result, with the aid of media exposure, government

intervention and public attention, Chinese consumers can enable businesses to admit their faults and compensate consumers accordingly.

In the face of the new consumer activism tactics, the interview results of the public relations department officials (representative of the business) show that Chinese businesses have to resolve consumer complaints satisfactorily. Especially for those large ones that care about their brand images, they cannot ignore these “smoking guns” of their faults and let it continue to damage their reputations. However, as the stronger party in the contest, businesses have more ways to mitigate the negative impact of consumers’ short video activism tactics. From 24-hour-a-day monitoring to hiring “*Shui jun*”, businesses, on the one hand, can detect the short video posted by consumers rapidly and stop the short video from spreading at the source. From making friends with the journalists to advertising on the mainstream/we-media their media friends work for, businesses prevent the short videos posted by consumers from being secondarily distributed by the mainstream/we-media on the other hand.

The interview results prove that mainstream/we-media play a key role in the dynamics of consumer video activism tactics. By reporting on consumers’ short video activism tactics, mainstream media journalists/we-media operators pump up the volume of consumer’s grievance and make more people (officials from the governmental consumer rights protection departments, officials from the corresponding business’s public relations department and people interested in this matter) can hear it. As a result, the business exposed by the consumer with a short video has to respond to the consumer’s claims for reducing the negative impact of this incident on the company. From the perspective of mainstream media journalists/we-media operators, Chinese consumers’ short video activism tactics can effectively attract their attention, and these short videos have gradually become indispensable news clues and evidence in their news reports. Given that the mainstream media/we-media in China is under the influence of both government control and the market-oriented economic system, the complex interplays (obedience under pressure, disobedience under pressure, cooperation without pressure, freedom without pressure) between Chinese media, government departments, and businesses should not be ignored within the working mechanisms of consumer video activism.

Chinese governmental consumer rights protection departments also recognise that the consumer video activism tactics are effective enough to grab their attention. However, they do not hold the view that these tactics are reasonable and worth encouraging. In the eyes of most interviewees from the GO group, they only encourage Chinese consumers to use government-encouraged, rational, and legal methods to protect their legitimate rights and interests. These government department officials believe that the consumer video activism tactics will create a

negative demonstration effect across society and reduce the credibility of those consumer rights protection departments and methods encouraged by them. Moreover, they feel that not everyone who adopts the short video activism tactics will succeed, but people who use this method will certainly lose their privacy. To better cope with the increasing number of consumer video activism cases and other complex consumer disputes (or to put it bluntly, to better maintain the social stability and the credibility of these departments), these government departments have established a “government-led” relationship with the mainstream/we-media. On the one hand, some media have been tamed and become the informant of those government departments. They voluntarily inform their masters of any bit of intelligence related to consumers’ short video activism tactics and other notable activism tactics. On the other hand, these departments treat the media as a handy tool for regulating the market and punishing illegal businesses.

Two features of the “interest-oriented consumer activism” in China – self-interested-oriented and self-initiated are summarised clearly in this chapter. First, for most Chinese consumers, their activism tactics aim to recover their economic or mental losses only, not to pursue and protect the public interest. However, the possibility of this self-interested-oriented activism practice changing into a consumer activism event or social movement related to public interest still exists. According to the “interest-related index”, the higher the interest-related index of an “interest-oriented consumer activism case”, the higher possibility that this case will be changed into a public interest related consumer activism movement, and vice versa. Second, most cases of Chinese consumer activism are initiated by individual consumers themselves without any support team or organisation, unlike those activism practices in the global North initiated by specific organisations.

This chapter also examines the interviewees’ perceptions of the SVB platform and short videos behind the Chinese consumers’ short video activism tactics. From simply using short videos and SVB platforms for entertainment to using it to do all kinds of things (such as learning English and watching product reviews) spontaneously, the mass public has gradually found the strengths of the SVB platform and short video medium (informative and efficient; audio-visual and convincing; low-threshold; eye-catching). Chinese mainstream media journalists and we-media operators, and businesses (especially those large corporations or companies) have also seen the potentials of the SVB platform and the short video. The former has taken these platforms as a new way to distribute their shows and significant news sources. The latter regards these platforms and short videos as an image-maintenance tool for promoting their brands and products and monitoring consumer sentiment.



From the so-called officially advocated rights protection methods to these new short video activism tactics, the emergence of short videos and SVB platforms has changed how consumers safeguard their rights. Again, the overall interview results prove the effectiveness of the short video activism tactics from four key actors involved in consumer video activism. Nevertheless, it should be noted that when Chinese consumers need to safeguard their consumer rights, the short video activism tactics are not their first choice. The interview results indicate that for those consumers who choose to post the short video evidence about their unfortunate consumption experience on SVB platforms, the first problem they face is the loss of their privacy. The price for gaining attention is the loss of privacy. Besides, they will still encounter other problems, even if consumers who use this method do not care about losing personal privacy. First, not every Chinese consumer has the opportunity to be reported by the media and gain public attention. Second, government departments restrict the media from reporting on consumer activism issues while restricting consumers from posting illegal short videos. Third, businesses are using “*Shui jun*” (online water armies) and other strategies and tactics to dilute the negative impact of the consumer’s short video.

In sum, the semi-structured interview research method has enabled me to obtain rich research results on the consumer video activism tactics adopted by Chinese consumers in recent years. However, considering the limitations of the semi-structured interview method mentioned above and the insufficient funds and time, the interview results above can only depict part of the whole picture of consumer video activism in China. In order to increase the reliability of the interview findings and further explore the consumer video activism tactics, four cases of consumer video activism will be respectively examined in the next chapter as objective evidence to get a more comprehensive picture of the consumer video activism tactics.

## Chapter 6: Findings of the Case Studies

### 6.1 Introduction

On May 12th, 2020, one of my neighbours in Foshan, China, posted a short video demonstrating the severe water leakage problem in one of the underground garages in our community in our homeowner WeChat group (it is a discussion group composed of all homeowners/residents in that community), this short video attracted everyone's attention. Dissatisfied homeowners began to complain about the property management company<sup>34</sup> and left negative reviews based on their personal experiences in that WeChat group. The people who posted that short video even used it to urge the property management company of this community to fix the leakage problem in another so-called "official" WeChat group composed of homeowner representatives and the company representatives (I am in both WeChat groups). It should be noted that my neighbors have used this method more than once to safeguard their rights as homeowners. These tactics have worked well so far. As long as a short video shows up in that "official" WeChat group, the property management company representative will respond to it as soon as possible and deal with the problems that occurred in that short video.

The consumer video activism cases are proliferating in China, and we should not set them aside if we want to understand the working mechanisms and the underlying reasons of the short video activism tactics; and the tactics' impact on all involved parties (consumers, media, businesses and relevant government departments). Hence, as a supplementary research method, this chapter examines four latest and represent consumer video activism cases in China through two sources of evidence: public-accessed documentation and online observation. These four cases are "Protest of Chengdu homebuyers", "Counterfeit goods on PDD", "Tearful protest on Mercedes hood", and "Hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels". More reasons for choosing these four cases have been explained in detail in Chapter 4. By looking into these four cases, we can get a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of consumer video activism and indirectly verify the findings of semi-structured interviews, enhancing the credibility and reliability of this thesis as a whole. Moreover, according to the consumer's identity, these four cases can be divided into two types – influential we-media operators and ordinary consumers. By comparing these two types of cases, two different dissemination paths of short videos are shown.

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<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that in China, in most cases, the property management company of a community is usually a subsidiary of the real estate developer of the community.

In addition to the introduction and conclusion sections, this chapter contains four sections corresponding to four cases. Each section is composed of three subsections, which are the background introduction of the case, how did the short video activism tactics work in the case, and the outcomes and lessons of these cases.

## **6.2 Protest of Chengdu Homebuyers**

### **6.2.1 Background**

On April 19, 2018, Gang Fan, a committee member of the Monetary Policy Committee of the People's Bank of China, proposed a "six wallets" theory in the TV program "Da Jiang Tang" (China Economic Forum) of CCTV Channel 2. He pointed out that as long as "six wallets"<sup>35</sup> can help Chinese young couples afford the down payment on an apartment or a house, they should use that money to buy properties. Gang's "six wallets" theory quickly spread online after the show was broadcast. Many Chinese young people opposed and criticised this theory on different SVB platforms and online forums. For example, many viewers left negative comments after they watched the section of Gang talking about the "six wallets" theory in the show on bilibili.com on May 2, 2018<sup>36</sup> posted by a user named "da shuai ha ha ha". In these comments, people complained and criticised high housing prices<sup>37</sup> and pointed out the "six wallets" theory was unrealistic.

The above data and facts show that if Chinese young people want to buy their property, it will be difficult if they do not have enough savings or family financial support. Especially for those people who live in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and other major metropolises, they have to undertake substantial financial burdens if they want to buy a house by themselves. Under these social realities, homebuyers value their properties exceptionally because they paid so much for them. Thus, they will quickly adopt any tactics to safeguard their "houses" if their rights and interests as homebuyers are infringed.

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<sup>35</sup> According to Gang Fan, "Six wallets" refer to the financial support of two parents and four grandparents of a young couple.

<sup>36</sup> See <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1BW41137tZ?from=search&seid=15658509588142202324> (accessed December 5, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> Properties in China are selling at an astronomical price today, while the public average income is stagnating at the same time. According to the latest data report of "Numbeo" about the property prices in China (2018): Beijing, for instance, the price per square meter to buy an apartment in the city centre of Beijing is 100434.78 Yuan (about 11319.33 Pounds); however, the public average monthly net salary (After tax) is only 8485.58 Yuan (about 956.35 Pounds). Compared with Beijing, the price per square meter to buy an apartment in the city centre in Cardiff is only 3250 Pounds (2018), which is only half the price of Beijing. Moreover, Cardiff's average monthly net salary is 1733.57 Pounds (2018), and it is 1.7 times higher than the net salary in Beijing. Numbeo, is an independent and real-time updated database founded by an ex-Google engineer Mladen Adamovic, collecting and analyzing the data of cost of living, property prices, pollution index, quality of life in different countries and cities.

Today in China, due to the quality problems of the new houses purchased by homebuyers or the rapid decline in the price of their houses after their purchase, more and more homebuyers have begun to protest in front of the developer's sales centre and demand corresponding compensations. At the same time, they have also protested in front of relevant departments of the local government, urging them to punish the developers, help them obtain corresponding compensations, and promptly promulgate relevant laws and regulations to regulate the developers' violations. With the emergence and popularity of short videos and SVB platforms, these homebuyers have begun to realise that they can utilise these short video technologies to help them amplify their voices, thereby helping them achieve their goals more efficiently. The following case of the protest of Chengdu homebuyers is a recent convincing case.

Before analysing this case, it is necessary to introduce the fundamental difference between semi-finished residential housing and finished residential housing in China. "Semi-finished" means buyers need to hire another interior decoration company to decorate their apartments or houses before moving in. On the contrary, "finished-unit" means the buyer can directly move into the property without extra decoration work. On October 17, 2017, Chengdu People's Government released an announcement named "Implementation Opinions of the People's Government of Chengdu on pushing forward the development and popularisation of the finished residential property"<sup>38</sup> on their official website. According to this announcement, all properties sold by Chengdu real estate companies must be "finished-unit". However, the decorations offered by these companies are usually expensive, and homebuyers have to accept these costly plans if they want to buy a new apartment or house from these companies. After paying for the additional decoration costs, many Chengdu homebuyers found that the decoration quality of their newly-purchased apartments or houses was not as good as expected or even inconsistent with the promises of these companies. After they moved into their new homes, they even found many obvious quality defects, such as hollow-sounding tiles, floor leakage, etc.

### **6.2.2 "We Want Our Money Back!"**

"Poor quality of decoration, we want our money back!" On July 25, 2018, thousands of homebuyers gathered in front of the main office building of Chengdu Municipal Housing and

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<sup>38</sup> This announcement indicated that by the end of 2020, all of the new commercial housing (except for low-rise residential buildings) and the public housing of Chengdu should gradually turn into finished residential housing.

Urban-Rural Development Bureau (CMHADB) and protested against the government's inadequate regulation on local real estate companies' fraudulent behaviours. As mentioned above, these homebuyers' strong dissatisfaction with the decoration quality of the properties delivered by local real estate companies led to the outbreak of this protest. Actually, this protest had happened only a month ago. On June 26, hundreds of homebuyers protested in the same place for the same reason. To settle the problems of these homebuyers, the deputy director of the CMHADB, Jiangming Zhao showed up and started a conversation with some representatives of those protesters. According to a live audio recording posted by a WeChat public account (we-media account based on WeChat) named “杭州买房摇号管家” (Hangzhou housekeeper)<sup>39</sup> at the same day, Zhao promised on the spot that the problem would be resolved as soon as possible<sup>40</sup>.

Obviously, the CMHADB did not fulfil its promises (the joint announcement did not work as well), which led to the second protest that took place on July 25, 2018. During the second protest, many short video clips about the protest scene were emerging on SVB platforms such as WeChat, Weibo and Douyin. To prevent these short videos from being deleted by the publishers or the platforms, I saved representative short videos in screenshots and downloads. These short videos were recorded and posted by the homebuyers on the protest scene. For example, in one of the influential short videos (figure 2.0) posted on Weibo, thousands of homebuyers gathered together in front of the main office building of CMHADB. Each of them was holding a piece of white paper with the name of the apartment they bought and shouting: “Fang guan ju (CMHADB), this is your negligence!”. From these short videos on Weibo and corresponding comments, we can see that the homebuyers were very dissatisfied with the government's failure to fulfil the promise they made on July 25.

These short videos are all about the scenes of homebuyers protesting at the door of CMHADB, but the shooting angles are different. These short videos and the corresponding screenshots, together with the relevant text descriptions, can be regarded as vivid reports sent back from the protest scene by those homebuyers, describing in detail what happened on the

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<sup>39</sup> See <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/8N0F0t5zPXPp75pxabK0Ag> (accessed October 11, 2020). It should be noted that the WeChat public account was not the only account that posted live audio recordings at that time.

<sup>40</sup> To pour oil on troubled waters, on June 28, two days after the protest, CMHADB announced that they were going to actively organise and build a mutual communication platform between homebuyers and those real estate companies involved to solve the problems. On the same day, the Chinese ministry of housing and urban-rural development and other seven national ministries jointly launched a nationwide special operation (it would start in July 2018 and end in December 2018) to control chaos in the real estate market. The joint announcement stated that “this special operation targets four main problems: the property speculation, illegal real estate agency, illegal real estate enterprise and deceptive real estate advertisement.”

scene. These facts were continuously reposted by these homebuyers and other people on Weibo (also on WeChat and Douyin) and became one of the hot topics – #成都房管局# (CMHUDB) on that day (figure 2.1). According to statistics displayed on Weibo only, the total number of page views of this topic is 9.09 million<sup>41</sup>, and 7,876 people have participated in discussing this topic up to date.

By observing and analysing the discussions (text comments and reposts) below these short videos, I find out that these facts can be divided into four categories. *First*, providing additional information about this case. *Second*, criticising and condemning CMHUDB and the real estate companies involved. *Third*, tagging we-media, local and national mainstream media, and relevant government departments intentionally and asking them for help. *Fourth*, supports and comments made by other homebuyers who have similar experiences in Chengdu or from other cities in China (these comments and reposts either supported the Chengdu protesters who appear in the short video or illustrated their experiences, hoping to get a “free ride” and expose their affairs or both).

It should be noted that these four categories of content are sometimes mixed in a comment or repost. These short videos and the corresponding discussions tell that these Chengdu homebuyers realised that they could use these short videos to attract the attention of the media, relevant government departments and the general public to their protest and demands. These comments and reposts verified the interview findings – Chinese consumers realise the important role of Chinese media in their “battles” against businesses. Next, I describe how the media and government departments responded and intervened in this case.

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<sup>41</sup> As of October 10, 2020.



Figure 2.0: a screenshot of a short video posted by a homebuyer protesting at the scene on Weibo<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> To protect the user's privacy, I blurred their usernames and the text they posted. Except for mainstream media and we-media accounts, the ordinary individual usernames in all screenshots used in this study are blurred to protect their privacy.



Figure 2.1: a screenshot of the hot topic – #成都房管局# on July 25, 2018

Unlike the last time, Chengdu homebuyers just protested offline at the door of CMHUDB. This time they were protesting while also posting short videos of the protest scenes on Weibo and other SVB platforms. By doing so, they successfully attracted the attention of the public (these short videos were viewed and reposted by the public immediately), media (mainstream media and we-media) and the local (and national) relevant government departments.

For incidents like the first-round offline protest of Chengdu homebuyers on June 26, I could not find relevant mainstream media coverage. However, in this case, these Chengdu homebuyers took advantage of the short video and SVB platform (Section 5.3) to successfully break through the government’s information blockade and directly disseminate the facts of their protest and their complaints and demands to the public. At the same time, as more and more people noticed and reposted the short videos of the protest of Chengdu homebuyers on different SVB platforms, media also gained more news clues about this incident and started to report the protest of Chengdu homebuyers. They used the short videos and related screenshots obtained from these news clues as their news evidence and included them in their coverages. These logical facts validate interviewees’ words in the MJ/WO group – short videos and SVB platforms are now their important news sources. Moreover, after sorting out reports related to



this case, I found that we-media accounts were faster and more detailed in reporting this case than the mainstream media, occupying the dominant position in reporting the entire protest incident of Chengdu homebuyers.

Taking WeChat as an example: after those Chengdu homebuyers posted short videos of the protest on SVB platforms on July 25, many we-media operators on WeChat wrote or reposted articles about that protest on the same day: for example, an account on WeChat named “建筑工程那些事儿” (construction news) (figure 2.2) reposted an article describing the causes and consequences of the protest of Chengdu homebuyers. This article used eight short video screenshots of the protest scene and some simple text to describe the incident, which has been read by tens of thousands of people. Many people left their comments below this article: some condemned the inaction of the government; some suggested that if consumers do not “nao-da” their complaints and demands, then their problems would not be resolved<sup>43</sup>; others suggested that the government would pay attention only if the people share these screenshots and short videos with foreign media and let them report it; some homebuyers with similar experience in different cities wrote their stories and complaints in the comments for getting more attention. In fact, the screenshots in this article were not exclusive, and they have been used by many we-media accounts on WeChat. It is difficult to find which short video these screenshots originated from. It is not easy to find which short video these screenshots originated from. In this case, these short videos and relevant coverages reported by we-media operators were constantly making waves on different SVB platforms, leading some mainstream media to intervene and report on this incident. For example, affected by these short videos and related reports posted by many we-media accounts, Sichuan InfoNews Channel<sup>44</sup> sent their journalists to the protest site on that day (25 July, 2018) and published news reports about it on its WeChat account.

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<sup>43</sup> For example, a user commented: “Government departments often ignore consumer demands and complaints. If the people want to succeed in defending their rights and interests, there will be no results if they do not “nao-da” their complaints and demands.”

<sup>44</sup> Sichuan InfoNews Channel is an influential television media in Sichuan Province. Chengdu is the capital city of Sichuan province.

突发：成都房管局大厦再次爆发大规模精装修维权！中海、融创、万科、绿地等知名开发商未能幸免！

建筑工程那些事儿 2018-07-25



来源：梦回蓉城

7月25日上午 10 时，成都市房管局大厦聚集了上千名群众，再次爆发大规模精装修维权。



Figure 2.2: a screenshot of a short video about Chengdu homebuyers protesting at the door of the CMHUDB posted by “建筑工程那些事儿”

### ***6.2.3 Outcomes and lessons***

During the entire process of this incident, many real estate companies were involved. However, before the government intervened, none of them publicly responded to the complaints and demands of those homebuyers. In this case, short videos posted by Chengdu homebuyers on SVB platforms successfully caused the media’s attention, facilitating further dissemination of information about the offline protests of Chengdu homebuyers, which forced the local relevant government departments to intervene to help those homebuyers solve their problems publicly. These facts directly confirm the findings in Chapter 5 that the consumer video activism tactics can “nao-da” consumers’ grievances effectively, and the short videos and SVB platforms can play a positive role in protecting the rights and interests of consumers.

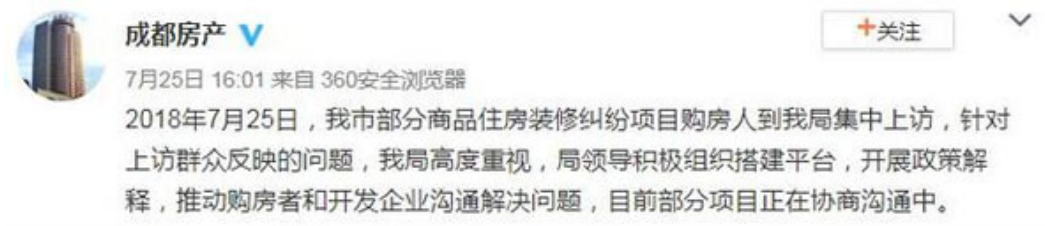


Figure 2.3: a screenshot of the official announcement posted by CMHUDB on its Weibo account

Later that day, on July 25, 2018, the CMHUDB posted an announcement (figure 2.3) on their official Weibo account<sup>45</sup> and promised to solve the problems. This time, the response of the CMHUDB was not an empty promise<sup>46</sup>. August 7, 2018, Chengdu Economic Daily reported (Wang, 2018) that “according to the CMHUDB, eleven government departments in Chengdu jointly launched a special crackdown movement on the order of the Chengdu real estate market” (several national mainstream media such as People Daily also reported this news at the same day). To be specific, this report emphasised that these seven departments would punish real estate companies that violated the law or used misleading advertisements for publicity. On August 23, Xinhua News Agency<sup>47</sup> (Li, 2018) reported that twenty-five Chengdu real estate companies were summoned and inquired by the CMHUDB on August 22 because they had not resolved the previous complaints of homebuyers about the decoration quality of the house: “The CMHUDB verbally warned these companies to solve the problems raised by those homebuyers [who participated the previous protests] rapidly; for those companies that are unable to resolve disputes over decoration contracts, the CMHUDB will request the relevant law enforcement departments to punish the company following relevant laws.” China News Agency, People’s Daily Online and other mainstream state-run media also reported the news.

In sum, the case of protest of Chengdu homebuyers (see the timeline of this case in figure 2.4) underpinned the new feature of the short videos and SVB platforms mentioned in Chapter 5. These eye-catching short video clips posted by Chengdu homebuyers succeeded in attracting the attention of the media and the public instantly and prompting the local

<sup>45</sup> “We have noticed the protest happened early today, and we have taken it very seriously. Bureau leaders will actively explain relevant policies to both parties, provide opportunities for both parties to negotiate, and urge real estate companies involved to resolve problems. Some companies and homebuyers are currently negotiating.”

<sup>46</sup> On June 26, the day these homebuyers protested, the CMHUDB made a similar announcement, and they did not deliver their promises, which triggered the second protest.

<sup>47</sup> One of the most prominent and most influential state-run press agencies in China.

government to intervene to help homebuyers solve their problems. The consumer video activism tactics can be regarded as an effective way for consumers to negotiate with the company and safeguard their legitimate rights and interests with the assistance of the local relevant government department, the media power and the public opinion.

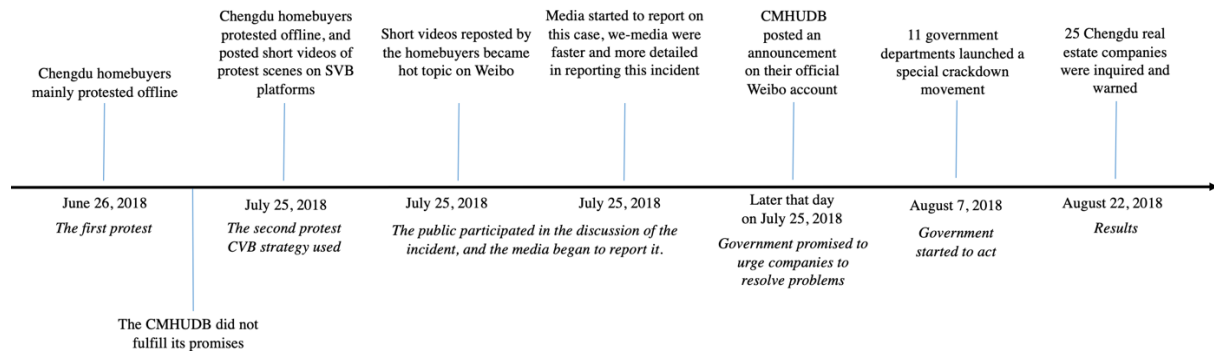


Figure 2.4: the timeline of the “Protest of Chengdu Homebuyers” case

## 6.3 Counterfeit Goods on PDD

### 6.3.1 Background

“PDD” was established by Zheng Huang in September 2015. It is an e-commerce platform similar to “Taobao” and “JD.com”, providing Chinese customers with various products from daily groceries to home appliances. Only five years later, as of August 21, 2020, according to the second quarter 2020 unaudited financial results of PDD<sup>48</sup>, in the second quarter of 2020, the average monthly active users of PDD reached 568.8 million, and its revenue reached 12.193 billion Yuan (about 1.4 billion Pounds). PDD is famous for its “team purchase” model, which typically allows customers to enjoy lower prices by joining a “team purchase”<sup>49</sup>. As stated by PDD on its official website: “Our business is [...] offering consumers value-for-money merchandise [...]”<sup>50</sup> However, low product prices do not guarantee good product quality – the products sold to consumers by PDD have repeatedly experienced quality problems.

In addition to this famous “team purchase” model, “PDD” is also known for its problem of counterfeit goods. The phenomenon of counterfeit goods on the PDD has already existed

<sup>48</sup> See <https://investor.pinduoduo.com/static-files/35ff26e3-ec5a-4167-9384-7f52b11312b6> (accessed October 11, 2020).

<sup>49</sup> For example, suppose consumers want to buy a certain product found on “PDD” at a lower price than the original price. In that case, they can invite their friends to buy this product together as a “team” by sending an invitation link to their friends via text message or WeChat. Once their friends accept this invitation and place an order, then everyone in this “team” can enjoy this product at a lower price.

<sup>50</sup> See <https://stories.pinduoduo-global.com/about/who-we-are> (accessed October 11, 2020).

since its launch in 2015. Some media had already reported the proliferation of counterfeit goods on PDD before the boycott PDD movement (see the following subsection) in July 2018. For example, on March 10, Economic View (Chang, 2018) (a subsidiary media organisation of China News Agency) reported that according to their investigations on Weibo and other SVB platforms, a large number of PDD users had complained about the poor quality of goods, false advertisements and the rampant counterfeit goods on PDD<sup>51</sup>. This report was reposted by several mainstream media such as the China News Agency, but even so, these reports still went unnoticed. Starting from July 2018, as more and more short videos exposing counterfeit goods on PDD appeared on different SVB platforms, the public, media, and relevant government departments (and even PDD itself) started to take this counterfeit issue seriously.

### ***6.3.2 “Do Not Buy Anything on PDD”***

Let us start with a short video that was widely well-known on various SVB platforms in 2018. In this short video, it can be seen that a consumer was going to use the electric shaver he recently brought from PDD. When he turned on the switch, the head of the electric shaver did not work normally. Instead, its knife head was rotating strangely at high speed. Then he gently shook the shaver in his hand, and the knife head fell to the ground, spinning on the ground like a toy top. Under the name “electric shaver bought on PDD”, this short video went viral and reposted by many Douyin users around July 2018 (figure 2.5), even though PDD claimed in its press conference on July 31, 2018, that the content shown in this short video was not accurate (PDD refuted this short video rumour and successfully won back the trust of some consumers). Due to a large number of reposts, I could not find out the originator of this short video, why he posted this video, and verify its authenticity. Even if it is obvious that most people shared this short film with other people because it was hilarious, this short video still played an essential role in the later consumer video activism boycott against PDD. More specifically, this short video, together with other short videos showing the poor-quality of counterfeit goods sold on PDD, caused damage to PDD’s brand image. Including this “electric shaver bought on PDD” short video, around July 2018, many short video clips showing the poor quality of counterfeit goods sold on PDD were uploaded by users of PDD at separate times with similar hashtags

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<sup>51</sup> “A customer ‘LongLong’ (pseudonym) told us that he received a text message from PDD, stating that he had won an iPhone X on PDD, and he only needed to click on a link to get it. However, when ‘LongLong’ clicked on the claim link in that message, he found that he was taken to the download page of the PDD App.” Economic Views reported.

such as “you get what you pay for”, “Counterfeit goods”, “Do not buy anything on PDD”, “I bought this from PDD” on different SVB platforms.



Figure 2.5: a screenshot of the short video titled “electric shaver bought on PDD” which was reposted by Douyin users in large numbers (this short video also appeared on WeChat and Weibo at the same time)

After sorting out the short videos about counterfeit goods sold on PDD I collected from Douyin, WeChat and Weibo, I found out that these short videos can be divided into three types: *type 1*, consumers’ direct experience of using counterfeit goods purchased on PDD. Such as short videos similar to the “electric shaver bought on PDD”, this type of short video was posted directly by consumers who had used any counterfeit good purchased on PDD (they used these short videos to express their dissatisfaction with these products and warn others not to buy them), or reposted by other users on SVB platforms who had seen this short video. These were the earliest short videos about counterfeit goods sold on PDD. Although some of these short videos could not be ruled out as artificial spoofing or rumoured content, no one could prevent these short videos from being continuously reposted on various SVB platforms such as Douyin, WeChat, and Weibo. This type of short video can still be seen on different SVB

platforms (figure 2.6). Posting and reposting this type of short video on SVB platforms has become one of the common ways for many Chinese consumers to express dissatisfaction with their recently purchased services or products.

*Type 2*, short video reviews about counterfeit goods sold on PDD produced by we-media operators. For example, “Vivo” is a well-known Chinese mobile phone brand, but on PDD, the counterfeit of “Vivo” – “Vivi” was rampant. Like other disappointed consumers of PDD, many people posted short videos showing their “Vivi” phones bought from PDD on Douyin. Inspired by these short videos and other first type short videos posted by the users of PDD around July 2018, many we-media operators started to produce their short videos of reviewing the counterfeit phone “Vivi” and post them on Douyin, Weibo and other SVB platforms: “This cost of this Vivi phone is less than 30 Yuan (about 3 pounds), and its performance in all aspects is very poor.” A we-media named “巧玩科技” (play with technology) said in its short video review (figure 2.7).

*Type 3*, news reports about the counterfeit goods sold on PDD. As mentioned above (Section 5.3), many Chinese mainstream media have set up their accounts on different SVB platforms. In this case, as shown in the interview findings, these mainstream media first obtained news clues from SVB platforms and reported on this topic, then made their original reports on PDD counterfeit goods into short videos and posted them to their accounts on SVB platforms. These mainstream media news coverages and their news reports edited in the form of short videos exposed the fact that PDD was flooding with counterfeit goods. For example, on July 31, 2018, the Politics and Law Program (PLP) of Changsha Broadcast and Television Group (CBTG) posted a short video news report, criticizing the proliferation of counterfeit goods on PDD by showing several noticeable counterfeit goods on PDD and interviewing lawyer and scholar (figure 2.8).

The timeline of the “Counterfeit goods on PDD” case is as follows (figure 3.0): Around July 2018, massive type 1 short videos began to appear on different SVB platforms like Douyin. Like a chain reaction, massive type 1 short videos inspired those we-media operators to make type 2 short videos and post them on their SVB accounts. Next, on July 26, PDD was listed on the Nasdaq exchange in Times Square in New York (Gao, 2018). Many mainstream media reported this news and posted it on different SVB platforms in the forms of short videos<sup>52</sup>. In their short videos, they talked about the news of the listing of PDD, criticised PDD for selling

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<sup>52</sup> At the same time, type 2 short videos were constantly growing, like the one posted by “巧玩科技” mentioned above.

counterfeit goods, and even urged the public and relevant government departments to consider the following public-concerned questions: “where do these thousands of fake goods come from”, and “how to perfect laws and regulations for protecting companies from copyright infringement”, etc. These type 3 short videos, together with the type 1 and type 2 short videos, prompted more Chinese mainstream media to report on this issue and criticised the PDD in succession. For example, on July 30, CCTV News (Zhi, 2018) published a news commentary named “Not selling fakes is the bottom line” on its WeChat official account (and this commentary was reposted by China News Agency<sup>53</sup> and other mainstream media on their news websites in succession), criticising the phenomenon of counterfeit goods on PDD. CCTV News also urged PDD to fight against counterfeit goods, saying “anti-counterfeiting is the obligation of e-commerce platforms like PDD”. Another example, Workers’ Daily (Yang, 2018), also published a news commentary with a similar attitude to CCTV News on the same day. For these mainstream media, some of them not only reported this issue via their main media channels (such as newspapers, televisions, websites) but also via SVB platforms, such as the PLP (type 3). The above three types of short videos actually have the same meaning: there are too many counterfeit goods on PDD so Chinese consumers, please do not buy anything on PDD, unless they solve this problem. The impact of these short videos was strong, urging relevant government departments to intervene and forcing PDD to respond.

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<sup>53</sup> See <http://www.chinanews.com/sh/2018/07-30/8584284.shtml> (accessed October 27, 2020).





Figure 2.6: a screenshot of a short video posted by a customer on Douyin on July 11, 2020; “I bought this fishing rod on PDD, it broke when I fished in the river for the first time, do not buy ‘XX’<sup>54</sup> fishing rod, really bad quality.” The customer said in the video

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<sup>54</sup> The brand of this fishing rod is replaced by “XX”.

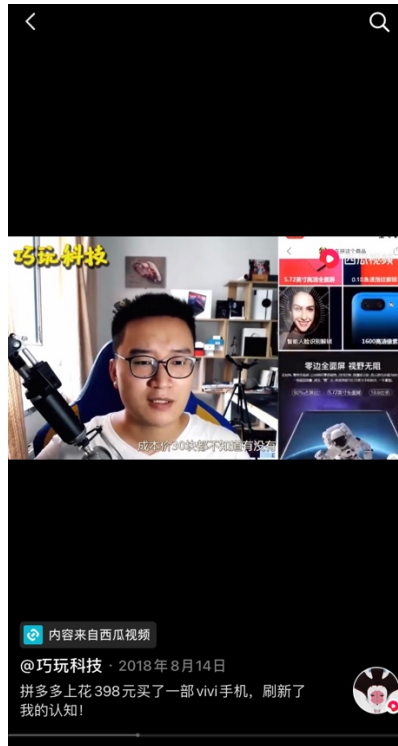


Figure 2.7: a screenshot of the short video “巧玩科技” (play with technology) reviewed the “Vivi” phone



Figure 2.8: a screenshot of the short video that PLP posted on its Douyin account criticizing the issue of counterfeit goods on PDD

### ***6.3.3 Outcomes and lessons***

Facing these short videos and the news reports caused by them, PDD held an urgent press conference on July 31, 2018, in Shanghai, China. Dada, the co-founder of PDD, responded to the problem of counterfeit goods at the scene. On the one hand, they admitted that PDD was not doing well enough and did not fulfil the responsibility of the e-commerce platform for cracking down on counterfeiting goods. However, on the other hand, they clarified that some type 1 short videos circulating on SVB platforms were not real (such as that short video “electric shaver bought on PDD” mentioned above). At the press conference, the press spokesperson of PDD Jing Ran stated that their industry competitors initiated the short video protest against PDD. However, Jing Ran did not show actual evidence on this point, which aroused suspicion from the media on site. The response of PDD on that day was not sincere enough to satisfy the media and the public. Instead, it attracted more media attention to this press conference and made them keep criticizing PDD. Some media kept making their news report about this press conference as short videos (type 3) and posted it on their SVB accounts, like what PLP did.

Those three types of short videos mentioned above and related news reports attracted the attention of relevant government departments and pushed them to step forward. On August 1, 2018, the Chinese State Administration for Market Regulation (CSAMR) stated that PDD must strengthen their review of commodities and online traders on their e-commerce platform by cooperating with the Shanghai industry and commerce bureau (Zhao, 2018). The CSAMR also warned PDD to observe the law when running their business. On the same day, PDD released an official announcement suggesting that they would cooperate with relevant government departments and regulators actively and thoroughly rectify and reform their misconduct, remove all counterfeit products from its platform, blacklist those shops selling copycat products to consumers (Bai, 2018). In sum, by looking into this case deeply, we can see that consumers’ short video activism tactics did work: First, the short videos posted by PDD users successfully “nao-da” (Subsections 5.4.1.1) their voices, which led to the second point. Media (we-media and mainstream media) played an essential role in the short video activism tactics – they regarded those short videos as their news clues and put them into their news coverages, which further spread the original short videos, made it more “appealing” to the mass public, to relevant government departments, and businesses. Then, the responses of the CSAMR and PDD to relevant media reports and the original short videos directly proved

the effectiveness of the consumer video activism tactics. These clear pieces of evidence confirm the findings drawn through semi-structured interviews in this thesis.

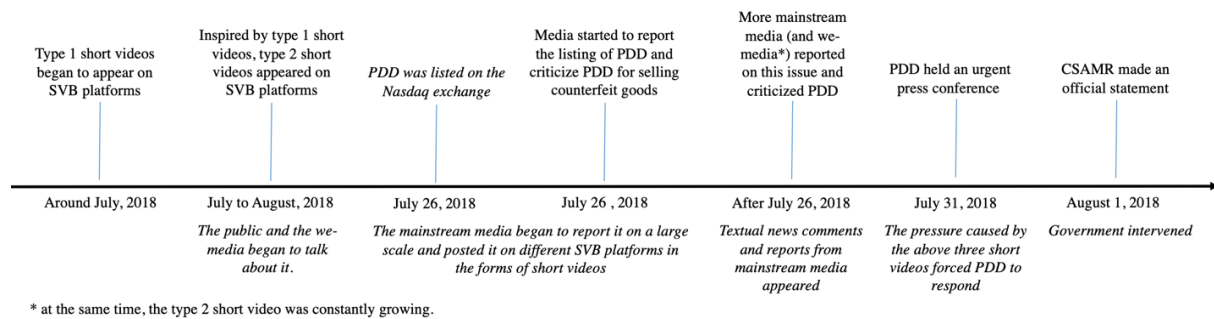


Figure 3.0: the timeline of the “Counterfeit goods on PDD” case

## 6.4 Tearful Protest on Mercedes Hood

### 6.4.1 Background

On April 11, 2019, a short video that was viral on various SVB platforms in China caught my eye: a female consumer was crying on the hood of a Mercedes car to make Mercedes compensate for her loss. The causes of this incident are as follows. Consumer Wang (pseudonym) purchased a Mercedes-Benz that cost her 660,000 Yuan (about 75712 Pounds) at a Mercedes-Benz car dealership in Xi’an called “利之星” (Li Zhi Xing, LZX later). Unfortunately, on March 27, 2019, the day of picking up the car, Wang found that the driving computer of her new car issued an alarm signal for engine oil leakage after she drove the car for less than one kilometre. Wang reported this situation to “LZX” and expected them to replace her with a new car or give her a full refund. However, “LZX” replied to Wang that according to the current Chinese “three guarantees”<sup>55</sup> policy, they could only replace the engine of Wang’s car and could not give her a refund or a new car.

After two weeks of fruitless negotiating with the “LZX”, On April 9, 2019, Wang complained to Shaanxi Provincial Market Supervision Bureau “12315” and Xi’an “12345” public service hotline, asking the government for help. However, relevant government departments did not give a satisfactory answer to Wang at that time<sup>56</sup>. Later, on the same day,

<sup>55</sup> The “Regulations on Responsibilities for the Repair, Replacement and Return of Household Auto Products” (so-called “three guarantees”) were introduced and implemented by the former General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine of the People’s Republic of China (AQSIQ) on October 1, 2013. See [http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2013-01/15/content\\_2312609.htm](http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2013-01/15/content_2312609.htm) (accessed November 14, 2020).

<sup>56</sup> On the evening of April 11, 2019, “LZX” stated that Wang’s problem had been already resolved on April 9, 2019. However, on April 12, 2019, Wang denied what the former said on April 11 and claimed that the problem

Wang went to “LZX” again, asking for a refund or a new car. The result this time was the same as before. Her reasonable request was still not accepted by the “LZX”. As a result, Wang chose to climb onto the hood of a Mercedes-Benz show car in the showroom on an impulse, crying loudly about her dissatisfaction and expecting that “LZX” could reconsider her demands. Her protest was recorded as a short video by a bystander at the scene and uploaded to SVB platforms<sup>57</sup>.

#### **6.4.2 “How can I accept this?”**

“Hey! The engine started to leak oil before I drove the car out of your store’s parking lot! I have been waiting for your solution for 15 days, but now you are forcing me to accept the ‘three guarantees’ policy (LZX was only willing to replace the engine of Wang’s car instead of giving her a refund or replacing her with a new car at that time), how can I accept it?” In a short video clip that went viral on various SVB platforms on April 11, 2019, we can see that Wang was sitting on the hood of a Mercedes-Benz car in a car showroom and yelling the above sentences to the staff of “LZX” in anger.

“You cannot treat us [consumers] this way. If I could negotiate with you normally, I would not take this step [here refers to sitting on the hood of the car and crying]. What I do now is very embarrassing, do you understand? In this Internet society today, what can I do if somebody records this [embarrassing scene] and puts it online? But you know what, now I do not care! All I want to do now is get an answer [and safeguard my consumer rights and interests]!” Wang shouted in that short video. Her crying protest on the hood of a Mercedes Car was recorded by a bystander that day, and Wang did not expect her words to become a reality after two days. On April 11, 2019, a short video about her crying protest on the hood of a Mercedes Car was uploaded to several SVB platforms and went viral instantly. By observing and recording this incident on Weibo<sup>58</sup>, I find that this key short video’s dissemination path is similar to the above two cases.

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remained unresolved. See the video news report of “陕西都市快报” (Shaanxi Metro Express) on April 12, 2019: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/9iflbcgmiYIySHLwq8ddXA> (accessed November 14, 2020).

<sup>57</sup> It should be noted that even though the short video that detonated the entire incident was not recorded and released by Wang (or her friends at the scene), we should not deny that this short video and various SVB platforms played a significant role in the entire incident, directly affecting the entire process of Wang’s protest against “LZX” and Mercedes.

<sup>58</sup> Compared with WeChat and Douyin, Weibo is more open; the content posted by Weibo users can be seen by its non-followers. There is also a search bar in Weibo that can set the search scope, which is convenient for researchers to search for the content they want.

In the very beginning, this crying protest short video was posted by several ordinary users on Weibo with simple text descriptions. For example, around 11 am on April 11, a Weibo user posted the short video and commented “The after-sales service of Xi’an Mercedes-Benz LZX is ‘great’.” (figure 3.1). After a few hours, more posts containing this short video appeared on Weibo (figure 3.2). These original short video posts that appeared in different SVB platforms did not attract the attention of the Mercedes-Benz, media and relevant government departments at this early stage. However, the role played by these initial short video posts should not be ignored, it gradually caught the attention of the general public. For example, starting from about 11 am on April 11, Weibo users who saw the initial short videos on SVB platforms began to leave angry comments against the “Xi’an LZX” and Mercedes-Benz under the latest post of the “Xi’an LZX Mercedes-Benz” (it is a repost posted on July 20, 2017; it is an advertisement about Mercedes-Benz posted by the official Weibo account of “Mercedes-Benz”, which has nothing to do with the crying protest incident), such as: “rubbish Mercedes-Benz and rubbish service”, “everyone take a look at this terrible car dealer”, and “it is shameful that you treat consumers like this” (figure 3.3). It should be noted that the public not only made angry comments after they saw the crying protest short video on SVB platforms, they also reposted this short video with their anger on different SVB platforms. At the same time, these short videos, which were continuously bred on various SVB platforms, became news clues for the we-media and mainstream media later.

According to my observation on Weibo, starting at about 1 pm on April 11, 2019, many local we-media in Xi’an started to post the crying protest short video with text descriptions on Weibo, explaining the cause and consequence of what happened in the short video. In order to find out whether these we-media were affected by the initial short videos posted, commented and reposted by the general public, I was fortunate enough to interview the operator of the we-media account “西安小秦人” (Xi’an Xiao Qin Ren)<sup>59</sup> who first posted the crying protest short video on Weibo<sup>60</sup>. The operator told me that he first saw someone (ordinary users located in Xi’an) posting this short video on several SVB platforms (such as Douyin, WeChat and Weibo). After he saw this short video, he thought that it could be posted on his Weibo account. “Many local Weibo we-media accounts posted this short video after they found it on various SVB

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<sup>59</sup> This we-media account mainly focuses on and reports on various news happening in Xi’an every day.

<sup>60</sup> I used the search bar of Weibo (website) to search the Weibo content that was published between April 10th and April 12, 2019 (the core short video first appeared on Weibo on April 11, 2019), containing the keywords “西安(Xi’an), 利之星(LZX), 奔驰(Mercedes-Benz), 女车主(Female car owner), 维权(rights protection)” and found the “Xi’an Xiao Qin Ren” was the first we media account to post the crying protest short video.

platforms, like WeChat, Douyin, ‘Xi’an Xiao Qin Ren’ was not the only one posting it at that time.” The operator of “Xi’an Xiao Qin Ren” said. His/her testimony can prove to a certain extent that Xi’an Weibo we-media obtained news clues about this crying protest incident from the initial short videos released by the common public on various SVB platforms. In the short video posts of these We-media accounts, I also find that some of these we-media also tagged the “西安利之星-奔驰世家” (the Weibo account of Xi’an Mercedes-Benz LZX dealership), “中国消费者协会” (the Weibo account of the Chinese consumers association) and “梅赛德斯-奔驰” (the Weibo account of Mercedes-Benz China) (figure 3.4). Unlike the initial short videos posted by common Weibo users, the short videos posted by We-media at this stage were commented on and reposted by more Weibo ordinary users and other we-media operators. For example, after “西安小秦人” posted that crying protest short video, “西安身边事” (What happens in Xi’an) posted that short video at 2:19 pm on April 11 with a detailed text description of the incident (“西安利之星-奔驰世家” and “梅赛德斯-奔驰” were tagged in this post). This post was reposted by Weibo users (including the ordinary users and we-media operators) over 8000 times and received over 6000 comments before May 12, 2019 (figure 3.5).

As these reposts and comments about the original crying protest short video continued to spread on different SVB platforms, they gradually attracted the attention of mainstream media. Again, according to my observation on Weibo, from about 3 pm on April 11, local mainstream media in Xi’an started to post the crying protest short video and short video news reports about this incident on their Weibo accounts. “西部网” (Shaanxi News Network) reposted the post of “西安身边事” at 3:29 pm (the same short video and text description)<sup>61</sup>; at 3:58 pm, “第一新闻” (The First News Column of Shaanxi Broadcasting Corporation) posted the crying protest short video on its Weibo account with its text reports, asking the public for their views on this incident<sup>62</sup>; at 4:12 pm, “新浪陕西” (SINA Shanxi) reposted the post of “第一新闻” (the same short video and text description)<sup>63</sup>; at 4:31 pm, “阳光报” (Sunshine Daily) reposted the post of “西安身边事”<sup>64</sup>.

After the fermentation of public opinion, we-media, and local mainstream media, from late on April 11 afternoon, national mainstream media (and mainstream media in other cities) started to report on this incident in the form of short video news and text reports and include

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<sup>61</sup> See <https://m.weibo.cn/1650414555/4359913095963692> (accessed November 24, 2020).

<sup>62</sup> See <https://m.weibo.cn/1909377960/4359920419430380> (accessed November 24, 2020).

<sup>63</sup> See <https://m.weibo.cn/2162541102/4359923926019895> (accessed November 24, 2020).

<sup>64</sup> See <https://m.weibo.cn/1940053632/4359928786755420> (accessed November 24, 2020).

their interviews with Mercedes-Benz China and “LZX” in their news reports. For example, “梨视频” (Pear Video<sup>65</sup>) posted a short video about the crying protest incident on its Weibo account and its mobile app around half past four<sup>66</sup>. There is a recording of a telephone interview with an employee of the Xi’an “LZX” on April 11 in this news short video. This employee told the reporter (or the video blogger) that Wang’s problem had already been resolved, but they would not disclose specific solutions in the interview. Because this short video news contains one of the earliest responses from Mercedes-Benz and “LZX”, it was used by many mainstream media later in their news reports, such as the “每日经济新闻” (National Business Daily). “新京报” (The Beijing News) and “澎湃新闻” (The Paper) also interviewed the Mercedes-Benz China and “LZX” and included the same interviewed results in their text reports and news short videos on the evening of April 11<sup>67</sup>, which showed that Wang’s problem had been resolved.

However, this was not the end of Wang’s story. On April 12, Shaanxi Metro Express (SME) posted a short video including the initial crying protest short video and their exclusive video interview with Wang on its WeChat official account<sup>68</sup> (they also posted this short video news on their Weibo account on April 13), confirming Wang’s problem had not been resolved. Many mainstream media quickly used this short video because the exclusive interview with Wang overturned the claims of “LZX” and Mercedes-Benz China one day ago, and it contributed to the further spread and influence of the entire incident on various SVB platforms. For example, on April 13, People Daily adopted SME’s news short video in its Weibo posts about the crying protest incident<sup>69</sup>. As more and more we-media, mainstream media and the public paid attention to this crying protest incident again, relevant government departments started to intervene actively. At the same time, Mercedes Benz had to make an official response to this matter.

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<sup>65</sup> One of the leading news short video platforms in China. Pear Video has its team of reporters responsible for producing news short videos (including shooting, interviewing and editing). Pear Video also allows the public to register at its platform and become a video blogger to upload newsworthy short videos to the Pear Video.

<sup>66</sup> See <https://m.weibo.cn/6004281123/4359930393775347> (accessed November 27, 2020).

<sup>67</sup> The Beijing News’ text report, see <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/news/2019/04/11/566812.html> (accessed November 27, 2020); The Paper’s text report and short video news, see [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_3288591](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_3288591), <https://m.weibo.cn/5044281310/4360006943712435> (accessed November 27, 2020).

<sup>68</sup> See <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/9iflbcgmiYIySHLwq8ddXA> (accessed November 28, 2020).

<sup>69</sup> See <https://m.weibo.cn/2803301701/4360564392815279> (accessed November 29, 2020).





Figure 3.1: a screenshot of the core short video in this incident posted by an ordinary user on Weibo



Figure 3.2: a screenshot of the short video posted by another ordinary user on Weibo (Unlike the above one, this user not only posted the original short video, but also described the cause and consequence of the incident briefly and tagged several Xi'an we-media and mainstream media)



Figure 3.3: a screenshot of the angry comments left by the common public



Figure 3.4: a screenshot of the post of “Xi’an Xiao Qin Ren” on Weibo. In this post, in addition to describing the incident briefly, this we-media tagged the “Xi’an LZX Mercedes-Benz” and “Chinese Consumers Association” intentionally



Figure 3.5: a screenshot of the short video post of “西安身边事”

### 6.4.3 Outcomes and lessons

According to the Xi'an Daily (2019, Xuanyuan), after the initial short video about the crying protest of Wang went viral on various SVB platforms on April 11, Xi'an Market Supervision Administration (MSA) went to Xi'an “LZX” to investigate what happened in the short video and contacted Wang for information about her experience. On April 12, Xi'an MSA held a special meeting and stated that it would set up an investigation team to investigate this case, and summoned the executives of “LZX” and required them to notify its headquarters (Mercedes-Benz China) to cooperate with the investigation of Xi'an MSA. On April 13, Mercedes-Benz China issued an official statement on its Weibo account<sup>70</sup>, apologizing to Wang and stating that a special working group had been sent to Xi'an to solve the problem on that day. On April 16, Wang and Xi'an “LZX” reached a settlement agreement on car replacement compensation. On May 10, the CSAMR issued a statement on its official website, stating that they had summoned the relevant persons in charge of Mercedes-Benz China and ordered them to “operate with integrity, respect consumers, and truly respect the law”. On May 23, according to Xinhua News Agency, Mercedes-Benz China and its dealerships in China issued a “service convention”, indicating that all Chinese Mercedes-Benz dealerships shall not charge fees in the name of Mercedes-Benz Auto Finance or for providing customers with Mercedes-Benz Auto

<sup>70</sup> See <https://m.weibo.cn/1666454854/4360671963020556> (accessed November 29, 2020).

Finance's financial services<sup>71</sup>. Mercedes-Benz China also launched a new car quality assurance policy: within 60 days from the date of issuance of the purchase invoice or within 3,000 kilometres of mileage (whichever comes first), if the main parts need to be replaced due to quality problems of the cars produced by Mercedes-Benz China, consumers can directly request a new car replacement for free. On May 27, Xi'an MSA fined "LZX" 1 million yuan<sup>72</sup> (about 113,944 Pounds) for the latter's violations. Later, on the same day, "LZX" issued a public announcement via its official WeChat account, expressing their acceptance of relevant punishments and sincere apologies to the public and consumers, according to the news report of "Guancha.cn".

In this case, the initial crying protest short video efficiently attracted the attention of the common public, we-media, local and national mainstream media, businesses involved and relevant local and national government departments in just a few days, and finally "helped" Wang get her deserved compensations (figure 3.6). Again, these facts directly prove the effectiveness of the consumer video activism tactics; and the findings of the semi-structured interview, such as the "nao-da" activism logic and the role of media in the tactics.

Besides that, during this process, we also observed more details about the consumer video activism tactics clearly in this case: as more and more media began to pay attention to Wang's crying protest, reports on this matter became more and more detailed. More specifically, public discussions (including reposting related short videos and commenting on the incident) continued to increase as more and more we-media reported (reposting the initial short video with text descriptions or comments) on this matter. By the same token, as the mainstream media continued to follow up and report on this matter, we-media reports continued to increase (the public discussion also increased). These increasing relevant public discussions, we-media and mainstream media coverages jointly forced the Mercedes-Benz China and Xi'an "LZX" (at the same time, these discussions and media coverages jointly forced relevant government departments to intervene in this matter, urging/supervising those

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<sup>71</sup> After her crying protest went viral on SVB platforms, Wang was told by the public online that she had been charged for an improper "financial services fee" (If a buyer wants to get a loan from Xi'an "LZX", he/she has to pay this fee, which is an illegal charge) of 15,000 Yuan (about 1690.55 Pounds). It irritated Wang further, so she also accused the "LZX" of charging an unwarranted charge in addition to the quality problems of her Mercedes-Benz car.

<sup>72</sup> On September 11, the penalty information published on the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission (CBIRC) official website showed that Mercedes-Benz Auto Finance was fined 800,000 yuan (about 911,36 Pounds) in total due to serious violations of laws and regulations on September 2, 2019. See <https://www.cbirc.gov.cn/cn/view/pages/ItemDetail.html?docId=844515&itemId=4114&generaltype=9> (accessed November 30, 2020).

companies involved to rectify mistakes) to make corrections and solve problems for consumer Wang.

According to my continuous online observation of comments and reposts related to this crying protest short video on Weibo, I also find out that these comments are similar to the comments and reposts in the Chengdu homebuyers' protest incident, and the findings of the semi-structured interviews in this thesis: first, the vast majority of comments and reposts at that time showed support and sympathy for Wang (the victim) by criticizing the "LZX" and Mercedes-Benz China (the business), reposting the initial short video, and tagging more we-media and mainstream media on SVB platforms; second, some Mercedes-Benz car owners described their similar encounters in comments and reposts related to this incident, hoping to get a "free ride" to solve their problems; third, many of these comments agreed with the "nao-da" logic (Section 5.4). Moreover, the final satisfactory result of this case "quickly" turned Wang's crying protest into a "repertoire of contention" (Chapter 7). In many cities across the countries, there have been many Mercedes-Benz car owners (and owners of other brands) who imitated Wang sitting on the hood of the car, crying and protesting, in order to resolve their disputes with businesses (automobile dealerships or car manufacturers)<sup>73</sup>.

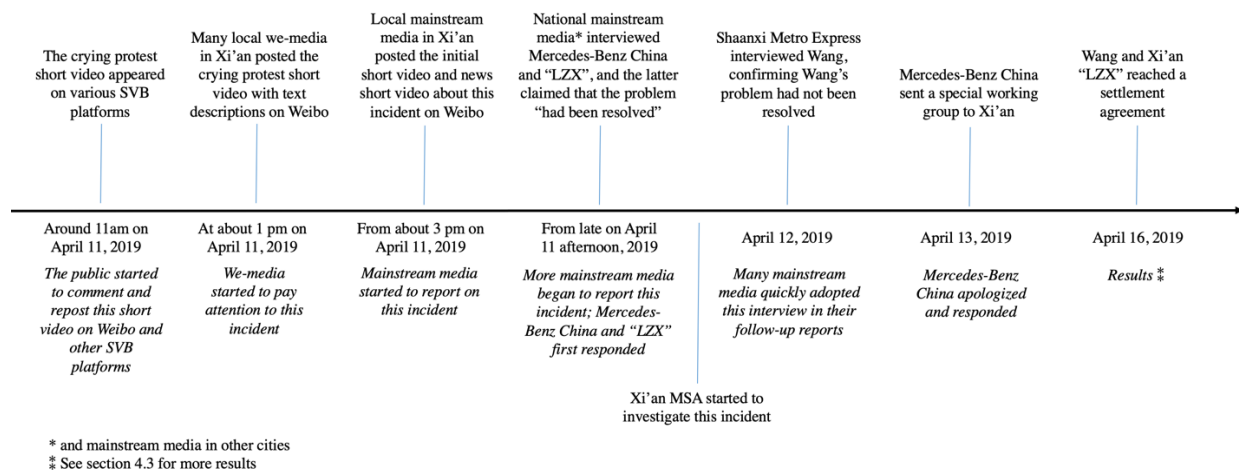


Figure 3.6: the timeline of the "Tearful Protest on Mercedes Hood" case

## 6.5 Special Case: Hygiene Scandal of Chinese Luxury Hotels

### 6.5.1 Background

<sup>73</sup> According to *The Beijing News*, following Wang's crying protest in Xi'an, similar incidents occurred one after another in Lanzhou (April 17, 2019), Changsha (April 18, 2019), Foshan (April 18, 2019) and other cities. See <https://www.bjnews.com.cn/detail/155567309114611.html> (accessed November 29, 2020).

Unlike the protagonists in the three cases above, the leading role of this case – “花总” (Hua Zong, from now on the Hua) is a we-media operator, not an ordinary user. Hua is known for a series of hot topics on the Internet in China, for example, the “watch appraisal” incident<sup>74</sup>. As an experienced online text content creator and someone who has deep connections with mainstream media<sup>75</sup>, Hua is familiar with media’s power, especially social media<sup>76</sup>. On October 19, 2020, Hua was invited by Weibo to give a speech about his transformation from a text content creator to a video content creator at the 2020 superstar on Weibo festival. In his speech, he emphasised that the strong influence of the short video “The secret of the glass” (the key short video in this hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels case) made him discover that the video has the power that text does not<sup>77</sup>. Even though this 11-minute video, “The secret of the glass”, is the longest video among the four cases in this study, it is not excluded by the SVB platforms. The length of this video did not prevent it from being spread on different SVB platforms (see the following subsection). Today, the length of short videos that can be accommodated in SVB platforms is gradually getting longer. Taking Douyin as an example, from January 2019, users are allowed to upload short videos with a maximum duration of 1 minute. Then on August 24, 2019<sup>78</sup>, Douyin announced that it would gradually allow users to upload short videos up to 15 minutes in the future. Up to now, more and more SVB platforms like Douyin have begun to allow users to upload videos of about 10-15 minutes.

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<sup>74</sup> In August 2012, Hua made a “watch appraisal” on the watches worn by the former Shaanxi Provincial Safety Supervision director Dacai Yang in public based on relevant photos Hua had collected online. Hua pointed out on Weibo that Yang had at least 11 luxury watches. Subsequently, more and more evidence found by the public appeared online, revealing that Yang owned many luxury glasses and belts. These pieces of evidence made some mainstream media shed light on Yang and prompted the Shaanxi Provincial Discipline Inspection Commission (SPDIC) to investigate Yang. As a result, SPDIC found that Yang had severe corruption and bribery problems. On February 22, 2013, the Shaanxi Provincial Government stated that after an investigation by the SPDIC, they decided to expel Yang from the Communist Party of China and transfer his suspected crime to the judicial authorities for handling by the law (Xun and Bian, 2013). On September 5, the Intermediate People’s Court of Xi’an City, Shaanxi province sentenced Yang to 14 years in prison and fined him 50,000 Yuan (about 5735 Pounds) (Lin, 2013).

<sup>75</sup> For example, in the spring of 2015, Hua went to Kokang, Myanmar with reporters from Southern Weekend to write a report on 125 refugee camps, see <http://www.infzm.com/content/108632> (accessed October 31, 2020); In May 2018, Hua published a graphic report on Southern Weekend, introducing his experience in Pyongyang, North Korea, see <http://www.infzm.com/content/136009> (accessed October 31, 2020).

<sup>76</sup> Hua’s Weibo account has 300,000 followers, see <https://weibo.com/hgszsj?from=profile&wvr=6> (accessed October 31, 2020), his Instagram account has 24,000 followers, see <http://instagram.com/huazong> (accessed October 31, 2020); Hua also has a WeChat official account, on November 14, 2018, he posted the short video “The secret of the glass” on it, which received at least 100,000 views, see <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/oZYVxi13fNBZ8CowvPm4Bg> (accessed October 31, 2020).

<sup>77</sup> See <https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/2020-10-19/doc-iiznezxr6863448.shtml> (accessed October 31, 2020).

<sup>78</sup> According to The Beijing News, on August 24, the short video platform Douyin announced that it would gradually allow creators to upload videos up to 15 minutes in length. See <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/finance/2019/08/24/619020.html> (accessed November 1, 2020).

Moreover, the characteristic of Hua himself as a we-media operator brings a valuable perspective to this thesis, enabling us to further understand how influential we-media operators use short videos to protest against businesses more effectively than ordinary people.

### ***6.5.2 “A Long-standing Problem in the Chinese Hotel Industry”***

On November 14, 2018, Hua released a short video clip<sup>79</sup> – “The secret of the glass” – about unhygienic cleaning practices of cleaners at 14 five-star luxury hotels in Beijing, Shanghai, Fujian, and Guizhou on Weibo and WeChat. In the short video, he claimed that he had spent over 2000 nights at over 147 five-star luxury and boutique hotels over the past six years in China and found a long-standing problem in the Chinese hotel industry. The short video clip released by Hua showed that cleaning staves in 14 five-star luxury hotels in Beijing, Shanghai and other cities used guests’ towels, but not specific cleaning cloths, to clean the guests’ cups, sinks and toilets (figure 3.7). Since this short video was released on Weibo, it was watched and reposted by Weibo users nearly 40 million times and 90 thousand times, respectively. On November 14, this short video received at least 100 thousand views on Hua’s WeChat official account.

On November 15, “The Economic Observer”, an independent weekly Chinese newspaper, interviewed Hua (Tong, 2018). Hua mentioned in the interview that he had made complaints to these hotels but received no conscientious replies from these hotels but only useless fudges. Hence, Hua decided to record those cleaning staves’ misconducts and expose it on Weibo and WeChat. By doing so, as Hua said in this interview, he aimed to urge these hotels to rectify via his exposure on their improper practices<sup>80</sup>. As Hua mentioned in “The secret of the glass”: “All hotel management groups have their room cleaning procedures and hygiene standards, and the [Chinese] government management department has also issued the ‘Operational Procedures for Decontamination of Cups in Hotel Guest Rooms’. However, most hotels I have stayed in these years have not implemented relevant standards and procedures so far”. Hua aimed to use this short video to call on the hotel industry to comply with relevant regulations regarding room hygiene and cleanliness and correct previous wrong practices.

As mentioned above, Hua has many followers (including ordinary users, we-media operators, mainstream media organisations and journalists) on several social media platforms.

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<sup>79</sup> In the short video, Hua mentioned that this short video was recorded by several hidden cameras set up by himself in different 5-star luxury hotel bathrooms. This short video was recorded and edited by Hua.

<sup>80</sup> Hua also indicated in The Beijing News’s video interview on November 14, 2018, that he did not want these hotels to punish those cleaners. Hua insisted that those hotels were responsible for this matter (See <https://m.weibo.cn/1644114654/4306366716320836>, accessed December 6, 2020).

Hence the content released by Hua can be directly seen by more people. Taking Weibo as an example, after Hua released the short video on its Weibo account, many we-media operators on Weibo reposted and commented, which further promoted the short video on Weibo. For example, a we-media operator (mobile Internet analyst) named “Lai Qu Zhi Jian” (Lai) reposted the short video “The secret of the glass” two minutes after Hua released it. Lai has 1.22 million followers on Weibo, and his repost was reposted 2453 times by his followers (figure 3.8). Among the most popular reposts of Hua’s video, 6 of the top ten were reposted on November 14th, 2018, and 5 of these six were posted by Weibo gold verify users – we-media operators with hundreds of thousands or even millions of followers on Weibo (figure 3.9). As a we-media operator with hundreds of thousands of followers, the online influence of Hua can be regarded as the catalyst for his short video to be reported by many mainstream media instantly and spread wildly on the Internet.

Unlike the dissemination process of the key short videos in the above three cases, after “The secret of the glass” was released, it also immediately attracted the attention of mainstream media. The Beijing News was the first mainstream media to report Hua and his short video. At 8:58 pm on November 14, 2018, the “We Video” column of the Beijing News released an around six-minute short video news (including a video interview with Hua and some clips from the short video “The secret of the glass”) about this case on its Weibo account “The Beijing News We Video”<sup>81</sup>. The Beijing News reposted this short video news on its Weibo account “The Beijing News”<sup>82</sup> at 9:14 pm (figure 4.0). Like “The secret of the glass”, this short video was also adopted by many mainstream media and we-media in their later reports or posts on different SVB platforms (such as WeChat, Weibo and Douyin), their official websites and their news apps. For example, “The Paper” reposted this news short video on the early morning of November 15, 2018, on its Weibo account<sup>83</sup>. Except for the Beijing News, most mainstream media reported on Hua’s short video on the second day or even later, like “The Paper” and the “The Economic Observer” mentioned above.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, Section 3 above, many mainstream media regard the SVB platforms as a new distribution channel for their news reports. In this case, Wenzhou Evening News, for example, cut the original short video “The secret of the glass” short, turned it into a short video of only one minute, and posted it on their Douyin account (figure 4.1). It should be

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<sup>81</sup> “The Beijing News We Video” has around 12.9 million followers on Weibo. See its Weibo homepage: [https://weibo.com/wevideo001?profile\\_ftype=1&is\\_all=1#\\_0](https://weibo.com/wevideo001?profile_ftype=1&is_all=1#_0) (accessed November 6, 2020).

<sup>82</sup> “The Beijing News” has around 43.4 million followers on Weibo. See its Weibo homepage: [https://weibo.com/xjb?profile\\_ftype=1&is\\_all=1#\\_0](https://weibo.com/xjb?profile_ftype=1&is_all=1#_0) (accessed November 6, 2020).

<sup>83</sup> See <https://m.weibo.cn/5044281310/4306523255425603> (accessed November 7, 2020).



noted that Wenzhou Evening News was not alone in cutting the original video short. To better spread Hua’s short video on SVB platforms, many mainstream media (and we-media) used the same way, treating the 11-minute long short video Hua released as original material and further condensed it into shorter short videos. For example, on November 15, 2018, in just one day, “The Paper” posted 18 news reports about this incident on its Weibo, 7 of which used the shortened version of “The secret of the glass” edited by them, 2 of which used the screenshots of Hua’s short video. As the number of reports and short video reports (from mainstream media and we-media) on this issue continued to increase, relevant government departments and hotels involved had to respond to this.



Figure 3.7: a screenshot of the short video “The secret of the glass” posted by Hua on his Weibo account. This short video was one of the hottest topics on that day, and it has received 43.77 million views




Figure 3.8: a screenshot of Lai reposting Hua’s post (top left); this repost was reposted 2453 times by his followers (top right)



Figure 3.9: a screenshot of the top ten reposts of Hua’s short video “The secret of the glass”.

The Chinese consumers association also reposted Hua’s short video (ranked first in the screenshot) and commented: “We think that our consumers are the noble God, but now we

find that we are the most hurt.” This repost is the most-likes of all reposts. The logo “

The image contains two side-by-side screenshots of Weibo posts. The left post is from the account '新京报我们视频' (Newspaper We Video), dated 2018-11-14 20:58. It features a video thumbnail showing a person's hands near a sink in a hotel bathroom. The text of the post discusses hygiene issues in five-star hotels, mentioning that a video by @HuaTongxiang (花总) exposed such practices in 20 hotels. The post has 88,941 reposts, 87,792 comments, and 253,072 likes. The right post is from the account '新京报' (Newspaper), dated 2018-11-14 21:14. It features a video thumbnail showing a person's hands near a sink. The text is identical to the left post. This post has 634 reposts, 467 comments, and 671 likes.

Figure 4.0: a screenshot of the six-minute news short video posted by “The Beijing News We Video” on their Weibo account (top left)<sup>85</sup>; a screenshot of the same news short video posted by the Beijing News on their Weibo account (top right)<sup>86</sup>.

<sup>84</sup> You need to have more than 10 million views of your own published content in the past 30 days and have more than 10,000 followers on Weibo to become a gold verification user, see <https://verified.weibo.com/verify/pc/goldverify> (accessed November 4, 2020).

<sup>85</sup> As of November 6, 2020, this post received 88,941 reposts, 87,792 comments and 253,072 likes, see <https://m.weibo.cn/6124642021/4306362487436671> (accessed November 6, 2020).

<sup>86</sup> As of November 6, 2020, this post received 634 reposts, 467 comments and 671 likes, see <https://m.weibo.cn/1644114654/4306366716320836> (accessed November 6, 2020).



Figure 4.1: a screenshot of the edited version of “The secret of the glass” short video posted by Wenzhou Evening News on its Douyin account

### 6.5.3 Outcomes and lessons

With the help of the short video “The secret of the glass” and media (mainstream media and we-media) coverages, Hua succeeded in getting the public and the government to pay attention to the hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels, forcing those hotels to respond – admitting their mistakes and making corrections. The whole process did not take too long (figure 4.2). Only one day after the short video was released by Hua, on November 15, 2018, relevant government departments and the hotel involved responded to the incident promptly. For example, Shanghai Tourism Administration stated in the interview with “The Paper” (Zou et al. 2018) that they would coordinate with law local enforcement divisions to punish these hotels and recommend the Chinese Hotel Rating Department to amend the Chinese hotel rating system for ensuring the overall service quality of the 5-star luxury hotel. On November 15, The Paper reported (Liu and Tao, 2018) that the Beijing Tourism Administration stated that they would conduct inquiries, warnings, and interviews with the four hotels involved instantly and require these four hotels to quickly verify the situation and correct mistakes within a time limit. The Paper also compiled the official responses of the fourteen hotels involved in the short video

as of 6 p.m. on November 15: ten of them apologised to consumers, admitted mistakes, and promised to correct their mistakes immediately<sup>87</sup>; according to the China National Radio, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China announced that they had already instructed the cultural and tourism authorities of five provinces and cities including Shanghai, Beijing, Fujian, Jiangxi, and Guizhou to conduct further investigations into these hotels and related situations.

As with the previous three cases, the working mechanisms of the consumer video activism tactics found in the interview findings was once again verified in this case. Besides, this case, together with the previous case (Wang’s tearful protest<sup>88</sup>), proves one of the shortcomings of using the tactics mentioned in the interview findings – the privacy matter. In Hua’s case, what cannot be ignored is that the tactics of using short videos and short video platforms to fight against those hotels caused Hua much harm, especially in terms of his privacy. On November 18, 2018, the Legal Evening News reported that on November 17, the personal information of Hua was leaked after he posted that short video and Hua was abused and insulted by different people on Weibo. In addition, Hua had received death threats at the same time<sup>89</sup>. About a month after Hua released the short video “The secret of the glass” on Weibo and WeChat, on December 24, in the interview program of the “We Video” column of the Beijing News, the host asked Hua: “If you knew the consequences of doing this in the beginning, would you still post this short video on Weibo?” To this question, Hua answered: “To be honest, I probably would not do that. I will not stir up a hornet’s nest anymore.”<sup>90</sup>

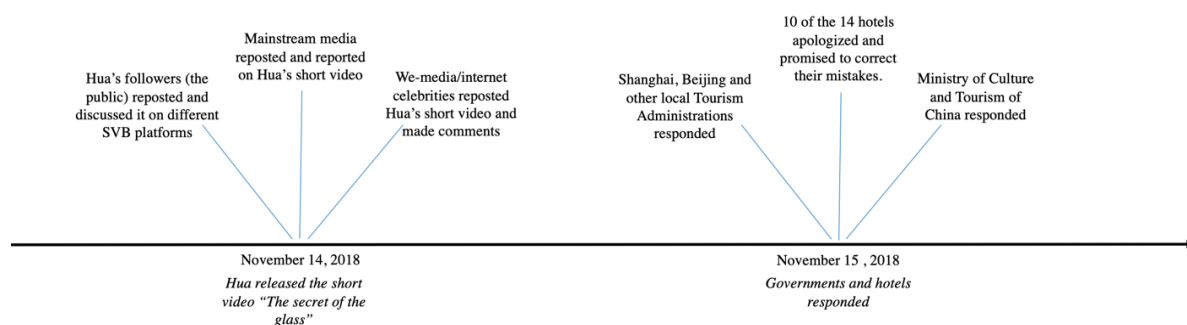


Figure 4.2: the timeline of the “hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels” case

<sup>87</sup> See [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_2637802](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2637802) (accessed November 8, 2020).

<sup>88</sup> According to my online observation, after the crying protest short video of Wang was released on SVB platforms, Wang’s privacy was leaked, and she began to be abused and intimidated by strange netizens. See [http://www.xinhuanet.com/2019-04/15/c\\_1124370447.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/2019-04/15/c_1124370447.htm) (accessed April 23, 2021).

<sup>89</sup> On December 15, 2018, according to “Guancha.cn”, Hua posted a screenshot on his Weibo on December 15, claiming that he had received death threats. See [https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2018\\_12\\_17\\_483545.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2018_12_17_483545.shtml) (accessed November 8, 2020).

<sup>90</sup> See <https://m.weibo.cn/6124642021/4320690947338682> (accessed November 8, 2020).

## 6.6 Two Dissemination Paths

By comparing the above four cases, I discover that the dissemination paths of these short videos are different, and the performance of the short video activism tactics used by ordinary consumers and highly influential we-media operators are different. For people like Hua, the dissemination path of their short videos on SVB platforms is as follows (figure 4.3): because of the influence they already have on the SVB platform, the short videos they post on these platforms can more easily and directly attract the attention of mainstream media, we-media and the mass public. At the same time, the strengths of short videos (Section 5.3) further promote the spread of their stories (mainstream media and we-media reports) online. As a result, the mainstream media and we-media reports on short videos and related public opinion jointly cause the government to intervene and force businesses to respond. However, ordinary consumers do not have the same influence as Hua on the SVB platforms. Although the emergence of short video and SVB platforms provide them with a new way to protest against businesses and can help them amplify their voices online, their short videos must first be “fermented” (reported and discussed) by the we-media and public opinion to attract the attention of mainstream media if they want to succeed (figure 4.4).

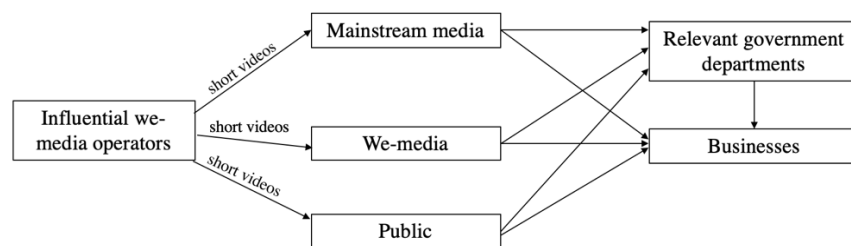


Figure 4.3: the dissemination path of short videos posted by influential we-media operators

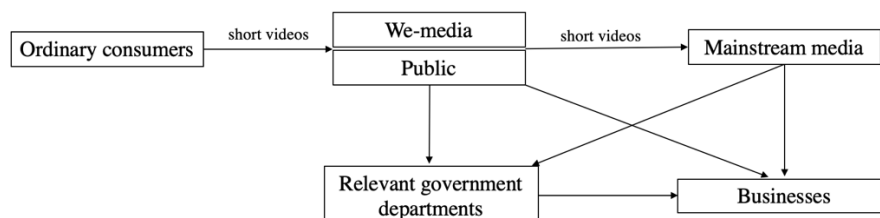


Figure 4.4: the dissemination path of short videos posted by ordinary consumers

## 6.7 Conclusion

According to the seven criteria listed in chapter 4 (Subsection 4.3.1.2), four latest cases of consumer video activism were selected: “Protest of Chengdu homebuyers”, “Counterfeit Goods on PDD”, “Tearful protest on Mercedes hood”, and the “Hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels”. These four empirical cases provide solid evidence for the findings of semi-structured interviews.

In this chapter, I have clearly articulated these four cases of consumer video activism, including the causes of the incident; how the key short video helped consumers establish “connections” with the media, relevant government departments and businesses involved, and safeguard their rights and interests; the outcomes and lessons of each incident. By doing so, I further prove the findings drawn through semi-structured interviews. First, the effectiveness of the consumer video activism tactics can be manifested through the final results of these four cases: by using these tactics, Chinese consumers can indeed make the business pay attention to their experience and demands and resolve their problems in a short time under the “supervision” of the public, media and relevant government departments (as mentioned in Section 5.4). However, consumers may face the risk of losing their privacy to a certain extent. Such as what “Wang” and “Hua” encountered after their “short videos” were exposed on various SVB platforms (Subsection 5.2.2). Second, why do Chinese consumers use the short video activism tactics to protest against businesses? Because they are dissatisfied with the inaction of business after-sales and the negligence of the government (Subsection 5.2.2). Third, if consumers want their short videos to be “viewed” by businesses and relevant government departments, the roles of the public, we-media and mainstream media are indispensable (Subsection 5.4.2).

Moreover, by exploring these four cases, we can see that SVB platforms bridge the consumer with the public, the media (we-media and mainstream media), the relevant government department and the business, and short videos are the vital messages that consumers want to convey to these four groups. By comparing these four cases, I find two types of dissemination paths: for ordinary consumers, their short videos need to be discovered and discussed by the we-media and the public on SVB platforms before the mainstream media notice them, relevant government departments and businesses; for influential we-media operators like Hua, their short videos can make the public, the we-media, the mainstream media notice their short videos at the same time. Compared with ordinary consumers, short videos posted by people like Hua on SVB platforms can usually attract the attention of relevant government departments and businesses more quickly and easily. I have listed the corresponding timeline in each case, clearly showing the key time points of each case. We can

better understand the working mechanisms of the consumer video activism tactics by looking into these timelines.

If I could interview these protagonists in these four cases, we would have a deeper understanding of these cases and the consumer video activism tactics. However, the reality is that most protagonists' contact information in these cases is complicated to find, and for those protagonists who have SVB accounts (where the contact information can be found), they declined my interview invitation.



## **Chapter 7: Discussions and Reflections**

### **7.1 Introduction**

I have outlined the findings from semi-structured interviews and four case studies in the last two chapters. These empirical evidences have answered the research questions raised at the beginning of this thesis to a certain extent. In this chapter, I zoom in on exploring the connection between these empirical findings and the literature review of the theories and concepts involved in this thesis. The chapter starts by reflecting on the evolutionary path of consumer activism in China and then associates it with the consumer video activism tactics. Then, from the perspective of video activism, this chapter explores the latest manifestations of video activism in Chinese society based on the overall research findings. Next, drawing lessons from social movement studies, this chapter focuses on two pair of connections: the connection between grievances generation theories and the underlying reasons of consumer video activism tactics; and the connection between the repertoire of contention and the design and results of this thesis. Next, this chapter explores the working mechanisms of the consumer video activism tactics under the approaches of media practice and activist media practices. The last section of this chapter illustrates a pragmatic “consumer sphere” based on the situation in China. The contributions of this study and suggestions for further studies are presented at the end of each section in this chapter.

### **7.2 From 1905 to the early 2020s: The Evolution of Consumer Activism in China**

From different waves of consumer activism to the situation of consumer activism moving online in the past decade in the global North countries, there have been many studies in the field of consumer activism. In contrast, I found that few scholars have paid attention to consumer activism in China, let alone review the development of the consumer activism in China. By contextualizing the consumer activism and online consumer activism in China within relevant literature and exploring the latest manifestation of consumer activism in China – the consumer video activism tactics – through interviews and case studies, this thesis has filled the gap.

More specifically, inspired by the four waves of consumer activism mentioned by Gabriel and Lang, by focusing on the evolutionary path of Chinese consumers’ activism tactics and exploring the latest short video activism tactics, I have shown a picture of consumer

activism in China from 1905 to the early 2020s<sup>91</sup>. It should be noted that, unlike the typical capitalist countries such as the UK and the US, China is a socialist country with Chinese characteristics that implements a capitalist market economy system. Hence, Chinese consumer activism must have its characteristics. The findings from interviews and case studies have shown that: (1) Chinese consumers have their considerations before enacting their activism tactics: personal interest considerations dominate their activism practices, including the damage extent, the ratio of success, and the privacy matters (Subsection 5.2.1); (2) Chinese consumers' activism practices are self-initiated, and there is no ad hoc group or organisation running behind their activism practices (Chapter 6, the four cases involved in this thesis are all self-initiated, unorganized events). Moreover, I also defined two main forms of consumer activism in China – “interest-oriented consumer activism” and “patriotic consumer activism” according to the objectives of Chinese consumers.

With the advent of different online communication technologies, how consumers adopt these technologies to achieve the goal of their activism movement has become a popular topic of interest in the field of consumer activism. From traditional Internet technologies (emails, online communities, websites, etc.), social media platforms, to a combination of the above technologies with offline actions, many scholars show how consumers outside of China use these technologies to achieve their goals. Inspired by these studies on online consumer activism outside of China, I have identified and illustrated three key phases of online consumer activism in the Chinese context (from the late 1990s to the early 2020s): First phase, *online forums and online petitions*. After the Internet was accessible to the public in China, consumers started to use the early online communication technologies such as online forums and petition websites to enact their activism tactics, for example, the well-known Toshiba incident; Second phase, *social media platforms*. With the emergence of social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat in the 2010s, Chinese consumers quickly used them to defend their interests, such as Luo Yonghao, Wang Xiaoshan, Ning Caishen mentioned above; Third phase, *SVB platforms*. With the upgrading of social media platforms and the emergence of SVB platforms, Chinese consumers have acquired a new way to protect their interests. By looking into the new consumer video activism tactics through the findings from interviews and case studies, I have shown the latest phase in the evolution of online consumer activism in China.

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<sup>91</sup> From the first anti-American boycott that happened in May 1905 to the latest short video activism tactics adopted by Chinese consumers in their cases in recent years.

Overall, by working on the latest phase of consumer activism – the consumer video activism tactics, this thesis has enriched the overall consumer activism and online consumer activism research and Chinese consumer activism research. The main focus of this thesis is on the interest-oriented and self-initiated activism tactics of Chinese consumers – short video activism tactics. Future studies may: shed light on other forms of consumer activism in China, such as the patriotic consumer activism; focus more on consumer activism cases initiated by ad hoc groups or organisations; discover more effective strategies and tactics harnessed by Chinese consumers in the past and present; establish a comparison with other situations/cases that were not as effective as the ones examined in this thesis.

### **7.3 The Fourth Phase: Video Activism in the Short Video Age**

SVB platform and short videos have provided people with new tools for video activism today. From the media-professional-led NDM, to the social documentaries made by social elites, public opinion leaders, and public welfare organisations that are disseminated through video hosting websites, most video activism studies in China regard the social documentary film as one of the most important manifestations and practical forms of video activism. These rare and valuable empirical and theoretical studies on the previous phases of video activism based on the actual social situation in China open a window for us to understand how Chinese people (including media professionals and the general public) use social documentary film to claim social justice and social reform, and the Chinese video activism concept. However, these studies stopped there and did not shed light on the mobile-based short video (and the SVB platform), a newborn communication medium, let alone the public-dominated video activism based on it in the context of China. By reviewing the literature on video activism in the context of China and empirically focusing on the consumer video activism tactics used by Chinese consumers, this thesis has filled this research gap and taken the video activism research a step further.

Since about 2014, with the emergence of the 4G broadband cellular network technology and the SVB platform and the increase of mobile phone users in China, SVB platforms and short videos have become popular for entertainment among Chinese people. By 2020, in just six years, entertainment is no longer the sole purpose of using short video and short video platforms. The overall interview results of this thesis show that Chinese people have come up with different purposes for using short videos and SVB platforms. Specifically speaking, in addition to using the SVB platform for entertainment, they also use the SVB platform to do

other things, such as watching video news reports and learning English. Short videos and SVB platforms have become a multifunctional tool in their hands.

For Chinese consumers, by recording short video evidence and uploading it to SVB platforms with their mobiles, they can draw more attention (the public, media and government) to their experiences and demands. With the help of these three actors, businesses have to admit their mistakes and solve problems for consumers. Although the interview results indicate that most Chinese consumers have many considerations (the damage extent, the ratio of success, privacy matters) related to their benefits before enacting their activism tactics, their activism practices can still promote social justice and social reform. The four case studies of consumer video activism mentioned in this thesis prove this point. Those Chengdu homebuyers in the case “Protest of Chengdu homebuyers”, their short video activism tactics not only helped them “win the battle” with those real estate companies but also prompted the local government to take regulatory and disciplinary actions against all local real estate companies’ violations. In the other three cases, by using the short video activism tactics, the initiators not only successfully urged the businesses to respond to their demands but also made them fundamentally correct their mistakes, ultimately benefiting consumers in the whole society.

These tactics can be regarded as one of the manifestations of the fourth phase of video activism – short video activism. Chinese consumers use this new type of “short video documentary” to express their grievances and gain the public’s attention, pushing the media and relevant government departments to protect their rights and interests while promoting social justice and social reform. Moreover, compared with the traditional social documentary mainly used by media professionals, social elites, and opinion leaders based on traditional television stations and video websites in the previous video activism phases in China, short videos based on SVB platforms have strengths that traditional social documentaries do not have. From the perspective of the initiator of the video activism, the findings of interviews and case studies show that as a user-friendly medium, short videos offer those who do not know how to make traditional social documentary films a simple and effective way to achieve their goals. Even for those media professionals, they can better use the short video to achieve their goals (e.g., in the “Hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels” case, Hua successfully used his short video “The secret of the glass” to expose the sanitation scandal of a five-star hotel in China).

By contextualizing the consumer video activism within the literature on video activism in the context of China, we can better understand the cause of the present surge of consumer video activism in China. Moreover, by focusing on these latest activism tactics of Chinese

consumers empirically, this thesis has explored the fourth phase of video activism – public-dominated short video activism, which contributes to the field of video activism in the context of China. Regarding the similarities and differences between the effects of short videos and traditional social documentaries in video activism, more research is needed in the future. Studying video activism from the perspective of consumer activism has provided a new way for future scholars who study video activism in China. Further studies focusing on video activism in the context of China can keep following this path or develop more new paths and angles.

## **7.4 Understanding the Consumer Video Activism Under the Social Movement Research Framework**

### ***7.4.1 Grievances-led Consumer Video Activism***

In social movement research, many scholars have illustrated the connections between consumer activism and social movement and conducted further studies on. In contrast, in consumer activism research, few studies have drawn theories, concepts and other experiences from the social movement research toolbox to further study consumer activism. Drawing lessons from grievances generation theories and the concept of repertoires of contention from social movement studies, this thesis has filled this gap and investigated the complex underlying reasons of the consumer video activism tactics in China and how have these tactics become an effective and widely-used activism way of protesting against businesses among Chinese consumers.

Grievances generation theories are an essential part of the social movement studies, even though it has been criticised and satirised in the field. As Simmons (2014) indicated, grievances can advance our understanding of social movement origins, dynamics and trajectories. In this thesis, to elaborate the underlying reasons of the short video activism tactics of Chinese consumers further, I have drawn lessons from three perspectives of grievances generation literature reviewed by Snow and Soule (2010): “grievances as a function of structural or material conditions” (p. 27), “grievances as a function of social-psychological factors” (p. 40) and “grievances as a function of interpretive framing processes” (p. 50). Comparing these studies with the finding of this thesis, I have found that activists in social movements and Chinese consumers in activism cases have a lot in common. Some concepts and theories used to explain the causes of social movements can also reasonably explain the causes of consumer video activism in China. The findings from interviews and case studies

indicate that the business's inaction-led grievance and the government's negligence-led grievance are the reasons why Chinese consumers turn to various activism tactics. Next, I further illustrate these two types of grievances according to partial grievances generation theories to better understand the underlying reasons of consumer activism in China.

First, *the business's inaction-led grievance*. This thesis indicates that Chinese consumers' activism tactics are initiated by the gaps between the quality of the product or service/after-sales service and consumers' expectations caused by the business to a certain extent. For example, in the case "hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels", there is a considerable gap between Hua's expectations of the high hygiene standard and the considerate attitude to solve problems of those luxury hotels, and the poor hygiene conditions and the irresponsible attitudes of those hotels he encountered. From the perspective of social-psychological factors, these widening gaps between what consumers want/expect in their minds (before they buy the product/service) and what consumers get can be regarded as the essential social-psychological factors that trigger their grievances. The interview results indicate that "deceptive advertising", "indistinct and imparity clause", and "illegal products and other violations" are the three ways businesses use to deceive consumers, which can be regarded as the underlying reasons for the above gaps. From the perspective of structural or material conditions, behind these gaps is a kind of "group conflict and/or inequality". The findings from interviews and case studies demonstrate that the relationship between businesses and consumers is unequal. Consumers are victims and generally in a weak position. Moreover, in terms of the "quotidian disruption" thesis, the interview results also show that consumers' daily routines are interrupted because of the disruptive variations caused by businesses. Such as the interviewee 4's daily arrangements were interrupted by the inaction of the fitness club, which causes her grievances against the fitness club.

Second, *the government's negligence-led grievance*. The interview results show that not all Chinese consumers believe in relevant government departments. Again, in terms of social-psychological factors, consumers' grievances against these departments are generated by the gap between their high expectations and the disappointing results they get after seeking help from them. For example, in the case "protest of Chengdu homebuyers", the grievance of Chengdu homebuyers was related to the inaction of local real estate companies and the subsequent negligence of the local government department.

Besides the "structural or material conditions" and the "social psychological factors", the framing process is another essential factor that leads to the formation of grievances of Chinese consumers. The interviews results and case studies indicate that by posting short video

evidence on SVB platforms, Chinese consumers can further “problematize” their losses caused by businesses and bring increased attention – including that of the public, the mainstream media and we-media, and government departments – to bear on their experiences and demands, and initiate a series of discussions and/or debates over it. During this process, Chinese consumers’ grievances against businesses and relevant government departments will be further formed or amplified by their own or other consumers’ “diagnostic framing” practices. For example, PDD users successfully problematized the counterfeit issue through their short videos and framed debates over it. In this way, the publishers of these short videos, other PDD users with similar experience, and potential victims’ grievances against PDD were further formed or amplified.

By examining consumer video activism from the perspective of the grievances generation process, this thesis has pointed out that the underlying reasons leading to the emergence of consumer video activism are not simple. The inaction of businesses and the negligence of relevant government departments, and the “framing” practice of posting short videos on SVB platforms, are the three essential factors that generate consumers’ grievances and lead to the consumer video activism. Future studies may find out more factors that cause consumer activism/consumer video activism in the context of China from other perspectives.

#### ***7.4.2 Consumer Video Activism: An Innovative Repertoire***

As Liu argues in his research, the concept of the repertoire of contention can overcome two limitations in social movement studies – “technological-fascination bias” (Mattoni and Treré, 2014) and the myopic effect of ICTs. Inspired by Liu’s (2016, 2019) use of the repertoire of contention in his research, while responding to Liu’s suggestions on the study of protest and resistance in China, I have applied the concept of the repertoire of contention to this thesis to analyze consumer video activism. Firstly, in addition to paying attention to the consumer video activism tactics themselves (Sections 7.2 and 7.3), this thesis has focused on four key actors’ (consumers, media journalists, PR officials, and government department officials) experiences and perceptions of these tactics and the short video technologies (short videos and SVB platforms) behind them (Section 5.4 and Section 7.5). Secondly, to examine these online short video activism tactics in the long term, this thesis has emphasised consumers’ protest experience before using the short video activism tactics to protest against businesses (see the section above). Moreover, this thesis has also explored four cases – “Protest of Chengdu homebuyers”, “Counterfeit goods on PDD”, “Tearful protest on Mercedes hood”, and “Hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels” – that occurred between July 2018 and April 2019,

to find out the potential long-term impact of the consumer video activism tactics on online consumer activism and society. It should be noted that by adding these four case studies, this thesis has not only avoided the myopic effects of ICTs but also corroborated the findings made through interviews.

As Liu (2019) states in his research on the evolving repertoire of contention in contemporary China: “[...] the official coverage of contention offers successful, politically accepted examples for people elsewhere to learn from, follow, and duplicate the use of digital media as repertoires of contention later” (p. 336), the interview results and case studies in this thesis prove his argument, showing that short videos and SVB platforms have gradually become an innovative format and database for spreading and storing the consumer video activism tactics. Chinese consumers have witnessed, recognised and learned the efficacy of these tactics and the corresponding “nao-da” logic (see the section below) through media reports and popular short videos on various SVB platforms. For example, Wang’s tearful protest on the hood of a Mercedes Benz car has succeeded in defending her rights and interests, with the help of media exposure, as well as the short video and the SVB platform, and it has also provided a successful activism example/repertoire – protesting on the hood of a Mercedes-Benz (or any other brand) car, recording this protesting process in a short video, and posting it to various SVB platforms – for consumers who have similar experiences to learn and imitate (Subsection 6.4.3).

By bringing the concept of the repertoire of contention in, this thesis has overcome two limitations – “technological-fascination bias” and the myopic effect of ICTs. This thesis has defined that the consumer video activism tactics have become an innovative repertoire of contention for Chinese consumers with the help of media coverage, short video technologies and SVB platforms. Meanwhile, this thesis has shown that short videos and SVB platforms have become a new format and a database for storing and spreading the repertoire of contention in the context of China. Further studies focusing on the strategies/tactics in consumer activism can explore how consumers evaluate the effectiveness of new strategies/tactics, and where do they find and learn these new “repertoires of contention”.

## **7.5 Beyond Short Videos and SVB Platforms: The Interactions with “Media Objects” and “Media Subjects”**

There are two reasons for using the media practice approach in the current consumer video activism research. First, it was mainly inspired by the significance and value of the media



practice approach. Social movements and media activism research have adopted the media practice approach to better understanding of activists' media practices, develop more nuanced analyses of the role of the media in movements for social and political changes, and interrelationships between protest and media (Stephansen & Treré, 2019). Moreover, the media practice approach has been proven to be an effective way to help researchers out of the dilemmas of media-centrism and the "one-medium fallacy" in social movements and media activism research (Treré, 2019; Stephansen & Treré, 2019). Second, the idea of adopting the media practice approach was aimed to fill the gaps in media practice research in the Chinese context. In media studies related to China, there are few empirical studies on media practices and activist media practices currently, and few scholars have noticed and recognised the significance and value of the "media practice framework" (e.g., Huang, 2015; Zhou & Li, 2017) recently, even some of them have put forward specific media practice research paradigms based on the situation in China (e.g., Gu, 2018).

To better elaborate on the short video activism practice of Chinese consumers, this thesis has drawn lessons from the "activist media practices" approach (Mattoni, 2012; Mattoni & Treré, 2014) developed from the media practice approach. In this thesis, the "activist media practices" approach was used to articulate the working mechanisms of the "consumer video activism" tactics. Following the guidance of "media practice" and "activist media practices" approaches, the focus of this thesis has gone beyond the short video and the SVB platform and their technological affordances, and consumers' agencies, focusing on consumers' activism tactics that include interactions with media objects (mobile phone, short videos, SVB platforms) and media subjects (media professionals, PR department officials, government officials).

First, interactions with "media objects". For Chinese consumers, the SVB platform is no longer a simple entertainment platform but a multifunctional platform that can be used for different purposes, as the findings of this thesis show that Chinese consumers are using the SVB platform to defend their rights and interests. Moreover, according to the interview results, as a new medium, short videos have the following strengths: *informative and efficient, audio-visual and convincing, low threshold, and eye-catching*, which are the backbones of the positive features (*immersive, authentic, uncomplicated, and attractive*) of the consumer video activism tactics. Hence, in terms of consumer video activism, consumers' short video posts can quickly grab the attention of the public, and deliver more information about the evidence that one's own or others' consumer rights have been violated than texts and pictures. At the same time, the audio-visual features of short videos increase the credibility of the short content, and attract the attention of the media, businesses and government departments more effectively.

Finally, the ease of operation of short videos allows more consumers to easily use this medium to protect their own rights and interests. Second, interactions with “media subjects”. The overall interview results show that consumers, media professionals, PR department officials, and government department officials, all recognise that Chinese consumers can “*nao-da*” their grievances more effectively and increase their chances of successfully defending their rights and interests by using the short video activism tactics. Moreover, Chinese consumers can “interact” efficiently with mainstream journalists/we-media operators, PR department officials, and relevant government department officials by using these activism tactics.

Recent studies have outlined that media coverage plays an essential role in the process of online consumer activism (Minocher, 2019). In China, attracting the attention of the mainstream media and seeking help from them is an important step for activists (Han, 2008a). The interview results show that Chinese media (including mainstream media and we-media) play a vital loudspeaker role in bridging the gap between the claims of consumers and businesses’ responses by reporting the short video tactics of consumers and making it more “appealing” to the mass public, to relevant government departments, and to businesses (Subsection 5.4.2). Moreover, short videos on various SVB platforms are becoming the most frequently used information sources of Chinese media. In terms of mainstream media journalists and we-media operators, short videos offered by consumers can effectively attract their attention because short videos can make it easier for them to understand the truth of the matter and attract more attention from the audience.

Many studies have shown that the company’s brand image has a significant impact on consumers’ buying behaviour (e.g., Cretu & Brodie, 2007); Besides, any anti-brand practice that is harmful to the brand image will affect customers’ buying behaviour and purchasing decisions (e.g., anti-brand websites, Kucuk, 2008). The interview results show that there are three reasons why consumers can urge businesses to resolve problems more effectively by employing the short video activism tactics (Subsection 5.4.3): first, short videos posted by consumers represent solid evidence of the faults of businesses; second, consumers’ short video activism practices can be easily adopted by the mainstream media in their news coverage, which can amplify the adverse influence of these short videos on a given business; third, given the complex relationship between the media and the relevant government department in consumer activism issues, consumers’ video activism practices can quickly lead to government involvement after the media reports on these videos. However, as the stronger party in the contest, businesses have several ways to mitigate the negative impact of these tactics, such as

24-hour-a-day monitoring, deploying “Shui-jun”, strengthening their “friendships” with the media by gifts-giving and advertising.

When studying consumer activism in China, the role of relevant government departments should not be ignored. Some Chinese scholars (Han, 2012; Liu & Wu, 2016) have already proved that the intervention of the Chinese government can speed up the process of resolving consumers’ problems. The interview results show that government department officials recognise the consumer video activism tactics are effective enough to draw their attention and prompt them to intervene in the incident, which can help consumers solve the problem quickly. These officials believe that short videos can effortlessly capture the public’s attention (including media coverage), and massive public attention is bound to urge the relevant government departments to press ahead with the proper resolution of the issue. Even so, they still do not encourage consumers to use these tactics (Subsection 5.4.4).

By examining the “consumer video activism” tactics under the “activist media practices” approach, the findings have also indicated that Chinese consumers may encounter many problems in the process of interacting with governments, businesses and the media through this new way, such as potentially entailing a loss of privacy, an absence of media coverage, countermeasures enacted by businesses, and government restrictions.

Taken together, by adopting the “activist media practices” approach, I have examined the latest activism tactics of Chinese consumers through two observable and significant interaction processes: interactions with “media objects” and “media subjects”. This approach has offered an “antidualism” practicable paradigm for this thesis, as other practice theories have done; and prevented us from falling into the dilemmas of media-centrism and “one-medium fallacy” (like the concept of the repertoire of contention, the approach also help this thesis to overcome the “technological-fascination bias”). This “activist media practices” approach has offered me a new way to explicate consumers’ media practices – short video activism tactics, and this thesis proves that this approach is feasible in the context of China. Further empirical studies focusing on the Chinese consumers’ or activists’ other online activism strategies/tactics, especially their collective practices, may draw more lessons from the media practice framework and the “activist media practices” approach.

## **7.6 From Public Sphere to “Consumer Sphere”: A Pragmatic Turn**

Since the controversial concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989a) was born, it has been embraced and challenged by many scholars at the same time. Just as Habermas himself defined

the term “utopia” in the conversation with Zhang (2000), we should not ignore the value of the public sphere completely because of its utopian nature. On the contrary, we can use the public sphere concept and relevant research as a starting point for more practical research, exploring deeper discussions in light of the actual conditions of different countries and regions.

As the first scholar to define that the ideal public sphere of Habermas is inappropriate for China, Huang (1993) proposes a “third realm” concept that is more in line with the actual conditions of Chinese society. Inspired by the “third realm” theory of Huang (1993), Yang and Calhoun’s (2007) and Sun et al’s (2018, 2020) research on “green public sphere”, the “environmental protection public sphere” proposed by Guo (2013) based on Huang’s theory and other relevant discussions (e.g., Xia and Huang, 2008; Huang, 2009; Feng, 2015), this thesis has illustrated a “consumer sphere” model based on SVB platforms and short videos in the context of China, by exploring the working mechanisms of the consumer video activism tactics used by Chinese consumers empirically. The findings from interviews and case studies show that interactions between Chinese consumers, mainstream media and we-media, PR officials and relevant government department officials based on short videos and SVB platforms are gradually forming a workable but abnormal “consumer sphere” (Figure 5.0):

First, the arrival of the short video technologies (short videos and SVB platforms) creates an accessible and user-friendly online “consumer sphere” for all consumers who need to protect their rights and interests and care about consumer activism issues. For example, the interview findings show that the low threshold of short videos allows consumers, regardless of their education level and age, to easily express their grievances and join discussions on consumer rights protection issues on SVB platforms (Subsection 5.3.2). In the “consumer sphere”, consumers occupy the centre of the entire sphere. By using the short video activism tactics, consumers can draw the attention of, and interact with the media, government departments and businesses more effectively than using traditional rights methods (such as negotiating with the business directly, calling the “12315” hotline, asking help from the local MSA and CA). Thus, consumers can defend their rights and interests more effectively. In short, by posting the short video evidence on SVB platforms, consumers can get timely media coverage on their experiences; can promptly get relevant government departments to intervene in their conflicts with businesses and get their help; can force the business to take responsibility and compensate consumers timely.

Second, media (including mainstream media and we-media) play a significant role in the “consumer sphere”. By obtaining short video evidence provided by consumers on SVB platforms and reporting on it, the media can further influence the speed and attitude of relevant

government departments and businesses to deal with the problems raised by consumers. Specifically, in the eyes of relevant government departments, the media works as an important information source and an effective weapon for regulating the business for them. On the one hand, these government departments are forced to intervene in the conflicts between consumers and businesses and solve problems. Moreover, for these departments, they expect that the media can play the informant's role. That is, once the media finds any issue related to consumer activism, consumer complaints and grievances, they will immediately notify the relevant departments so that they can deal with them accordingly. On the other hand, these departments actively cooperate with the media to make the media expose the unfair, deceptive and fraudulent practices of the businesses they know to regulate the market and protect the rights and interests of consumers. For business, media coverage on consumers' short video evidence can influence/damage their brand images, so they have to solve problems for consumers as soon as possible and make official responses to relevant media reports to reduce the impact.

Third, relevant government departments are another important part of the "consumer sphere" besides media. Once they notice the short video evidence posted by the consumer with the "help" of media exposures, they will intervene in the incident. The specific intervention methods of these departments include in-depth investigations, summoning the businesses involved and ordering them to rectify immediately, and issuing relevant laws and regulations to regulate the market and protect consumers' rights and interests further.

Finally, as the "hitting target" in the "consumer sphere", after being "hit" by consumers assisted by the media and relevant government departments, businesses must solve problems for consumers, respond to the media coverage, and accept government punishments and make corrections, in order to maintain their brand image in front of the public (potential consumers).

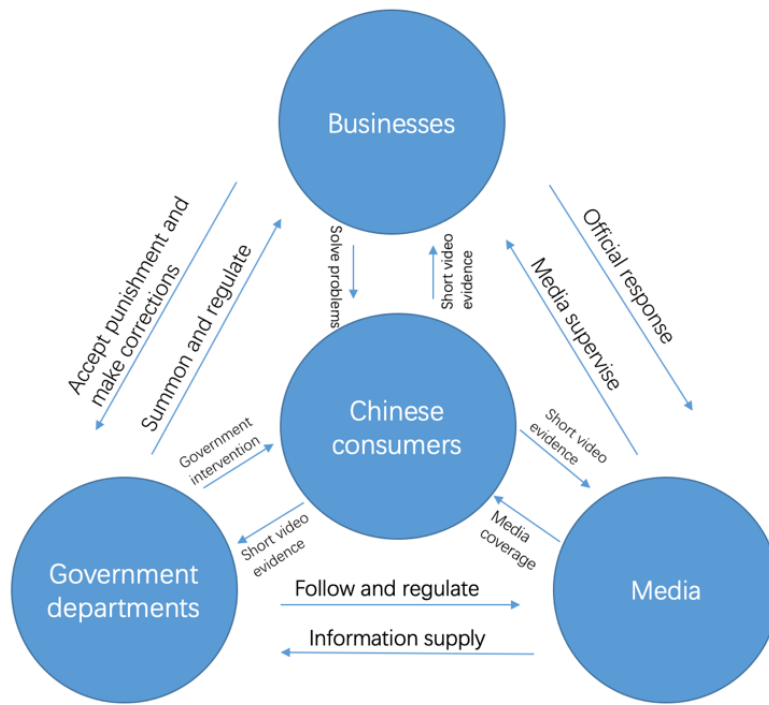


Figure 5.0: the “consumer sphere” model based on short video technologies (short videos and SVB platforms)

Even though the findings of this thesis prove that the fundamental reason behind consumers’ use of short video and SVB platforms is to protect their rights and interests (Subsection 5.2.1 and Section 7.2), we should not ignore that their self-interest-oriented activism practices can benefit other consumers and the entire society. Here is a quote from key informant 6 (CC group): “Personal interests are actually public interests.” He insists that a business does not serve only one consumer. On the contrary, it serves the entire society. In other words, if a consumer’s rights protection practice can prompt the company to make corrections and changes, then other consumers and the whole society will benefit from it. The “consumer sphere” shown in this thesis proves that this kind of statement is not a wild talk. The findings from four case studies show that within the “consumer sphere”, Chinese consumers can not only safeguard their rights and interests by using the consumer video activism tactics but also prompt the government to reform relevant laws and regulations to strengthen the supervision of businesses (it also promotes businesses to correct their wrongdoings). Moreover, consumers’ short video activism tactics can increase media coverage of consumer rights and interests, which not only provides an innovative repertoire for other consumers (Subsection 7.4.2) but may also awaken the public’s awareness of self-interest

protection (see the “interest-related index” mentioned in Section 5.2). As a result, the entire society will benefit from these consumers’ self-interest-oriented activism practices.

Although the emergence of the “consumer sphere” has provided consumers with new opportunities to express their dissatisfactions and to protect their rights and interests, as well as a new place to influence government decisions and protect the interests of the public, this “consumer sphere” is not perfect. The findings from interviews and case studies show that the overall effectiveness of the “consumer sphere” is limited by the following factors. First, the role played by all forms of media (we-media and mainstream media) in the “consumer sphere” is restrained by the government and businesses. They are subject to government departments or businesses restrictions (Subsection 5.4.3.2) to avoid reporting specific stories related to consumer activism (or delete stories that have already been reported). Moreover, the media has not promised to report all short video stories posted by consumers on SVB platforms even if these contents are allowed to be reported by the government, and the media is more inclined to report incidents with more advertising value and newsworthy (Subsection 5.4.1.2). Second, Chinese consumers’ short video activism tactics are limited by the relevant regulations released by government departments and the self-protection strategies (*24-hour-a-day monitoring*) of businesses (for more details on the first and second factors, see Section 5.4). Third, even if the “consumer sphere” is accessible to everyone, different consumers using short video activism tactics within the “consumer sphere” can get different results. For ordinary consumers, the effect of using these tactics is not as good as those influencers who have thousands of followers on SVB platforms like Hua in the “hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels” case (Section 6.5). This inequality between ordinary users and influencers on SVB platforms reduces the accessibility of the “consumer sphere” to a certain extent. Fourth, stepping into the “consumer sphere”, no matter the final result is success or failure, consumers will face the problem of losing their privacy.

Taking the public sphere concept and relevant studies as the starting point and drawing lessons from Huang’s “third realm”, Yang and Calhoun’s and Sun et al’s research on “green public sphere”, and Guo’s “environmental protection public sphere” concepts, this thesis has illustrated a pragmatic “consumer sphere” model in today’s Chinese society. In sum, this “consumer sphere” model can provide a new direction for the future research of Chinese scholars who focus on the “public sphere” in media and communication studies. Moreover, by studying the short video activism tactics of Chinese consumers from the perspective of public sphere research, we can further understand the interactions between businesses, media and government departments within the tactics more comprehensively.

## **7.7 Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, I have shown the multiple implications of examining the consumer video activism tactics from different theoretical perspectives. First, I have outlined that the consumer video activism is the latest phase of online consumer activism in China, and then have defined the fourth public-dominated phase of video activism and illustrated it in detail. Then, I have focused on the relation between grievances generation theories and underlying reasons of consumer video activism, defining three factors – businesses’ inactions and relevant government departments’ negligence, and consumers’ practices of posting short video evidence on SVB platforms – that generate consumers’ grievances and lead to the occurrence of the consumers’ short video activism tactics. I have also defined the consumer video activism tactics as an inventive repertoire of contention for Chinese consumers. I have explored the working mechanisms of the consumer video activism tactics through two observable interaction processes – interactions with “media objects” and “media subjects” under the approaches of “media practice” and “activist media practices”. Finally, I have illustrated the “consumer sphere” that is more in line with the actual conditions of Chinese society. In each section of this chapter, in addition to demonstrating the contributions of doing so, I have also stated suggestions for further research (for more about the implication of this thesis, see section 8.5 in the conclusion chapter).



## Chapter 8: Conclusion

### 8.1 Introduction

By combining in-depth semi-structured interviews with detailed case studies, this thesis has explored the latest representative form of online consumer activism in China – the consumer video activism tactics based on SVB platforms and short videos, regarding its historical ties, working mechanisms, underlying reasons and implications for Chinese consumers, media, businesses and relevant government departments (Chapters 5 and 6). This thesis was built on the following research questions: Key questions (1) How do the Chinese people involved in this study use short videos and SVB platforms to safeguard their rights and interests as consumers? (2) What motivates these consumers to adopt such tactics in their pursuit of compensation from businesses, rather than accepting more traditional forms of mitigation? (3) How do the study's respondents in the business, media and relevant government departments perceive the relative effectiveness (advantages and disadvantages) and significance of these tactics? Sub-questions (1) For Chinese consumers using short videos and SVB platforms to protect their interests against businesses, what are the key challenges? (2) How do these consumers evaluate the influence of their actions on businesses, as well as the wider impact on social change?

The findings of this thesis fully answered these research questions. I found that the Chinese people involved in this study recognise the effectiveness of the short video activism tactics, to safeguard their rights and interests as consumers, due to the strengths of short videos (*informative and efficient, audio-visual and convincing, low threshold, and eye-catching*), they can use their mobiles to record short videos about their unsatisfied consumption experiences or any practice related to these experiences, then upload them to SVB platforms. It should be noted that these short videos usually concern the product quality problem or poor service attitude, or conflict between the consumer and business, or any other spectacle that can emphasise the vulnerable status of consumers. By doing so, they can attract the attention of and interact with media practitioners, PR department officials, government department officials and the mass public (who are consumers as well), “nao-da” their grievances and increase their chances of success in safeguarding their rights and interests with the aid of media coverage and government intervention. The media coverage and government intervention still play an important role in the short video activism tactics, and the short videos and SVB platforms create a creative, practicable and efficient way for consumers to engage with media and government departments in China. The motivations behind the short video activism tactics adopted by these

Chinese consumers are complex. The findings show that traditional forms of mitigation are ineffective and untrustworthy in the eyes of the Chinese people involved in this study. But even so, most of them still try to negotiate with the business and seek help from government departments directly, before turning to the short video activism tactics. General speaking, businesses' inactions – ignoring and not handling direct complaints from consumers, relevant government departments' negligence – handling reports from consumers passively, and consumers' practices of posting short videos on SVB platforms – diagnostic framing, co-generate Chinese consumers' grievances and lead them to adopt the short video activism tactics to safeguard self-rights and self-interests.

For the media practitioners involved in this study, they acknowledged that the short video activism tactics of consumers have become one of their important information sources, and more than half of them chose to use short videos as news evidence in their coverage (I have discovered three approaches for them to use short videos and SVB platforms as information sources: *active searching, passive receiving and a combination of the two*). All of them contended that the media play an important role in the short video activism tactics and media can indeed help them in their fights against businesses to a large extent. In the eyes of the PR officials who participated in this research, they confessed that consumers could urge them to resolve problems more effectively by employing the short video activism tactics for three reasons: first, the short videos posted by consumers are solid evidence of businesses' faults; second, these tactics can be easily adopted by media in their news reports, which can further adversely affect businesses; third, these tactics can quickly lead to government involvement because of the media coverage and public opinion. The government department officials involved in this study all agreed that these tactics can capture the attention of the media and the public, which can urge them to press ahead with the resolution of consumers' issues, but they discourage consumers from doing so.

Although most of the respondents in these three groups acknowledged the advantages of the short video activism tactics and the underlying “nao-da” logic of the success of these tactics, they pointed out the disadvantages of these tactics and claimed that these tactics are not a panacea for everyone. Media practitioners indicated that not everyone's short videos can be fortunately selected and reported by them because of business impact and government control, which can decrease the effectiveness of these tactics. PR officials agreed that their self-protection strategies (*24-hour-a-day-monitoring, Shui jun, building strong relationships with media practitioners*) can minimize the impact (or effectiveness) of consumers' short video activism tactics on them. Government officials indicated that not all consumers' complaints are

reasonable and legal, and small or individual businesses will not be affected by the short video activism tactics (because they do not realize or value their brand image). Moreover, these tactics may reduce the credibility of legal and reasonable dispute resolution methods and have the risk of losing the users' privacy. These disadvantages of the short video activism tactics have created challenges for consumers to use short videos and SVB platforms to protect their interests. The overall findings of this study reveal that the nature of short video activism tactics is self-interest-oriented, more specifically, the original intention of most consumers involved in this study using these tactics is to protect their rights and interests. For these consumers, if companies can respond to their demands promptly after they use these tactics, it will be a success. However, the findings also demonstrate that some consumers realized that their tactics can benefit all consumers (*comrades and potential victims*) and their actions can have a wider impact on businesses – make them admit their mistakes and correct them to avoid damage to more consumers' rights and interests, and social change – urge relevant government departments to launch or advance relevant policies and regulations to regulate businesses and better protect the rights and interests of the public.

To address the research questions, I attempted to join an ongoing effort in the “practice turn” discussion to surpass the “dualism of structure and agency, determinism and voluntarism” (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson, 2012, p. 3) in the social sciences, and regarded the consumer video activism tactics adopted by Chinese consumers as a media practice based on Couldry's “media practice approach” which focuses on “what people do with media” instead of “media texts or media institutions” (2004, p. 118-119). More specifically, I focused on the practice of Chinese consumers using short videos and SVB platforms to protect their rights and interests, rather than the short videos uploaded or reposted by consumers and the SVB platforms they use. By doing so, I uncovered the dynamics behind the consumer video activism tactics; the reasons why Chinese consumers adopt these tactics; the impacts of these tactics on Chinese consumers, businesses, media and relevant government departments; the challenges in using these tactics. As the purchasing power of Chinese consumers continues to increase, the number of consumer activism issues is also increasing, and the tactics or even strategies they use are also constantly changing. However, related research focusing on consumer activism in China is still insufficient (Section 1.2). Inspired by extensive research on consumer activism in the global North, including Gabriel and Lang's work (2015) on the four waves of consumer activism that occurred in chronological order in the UK, the US and other global North countries (Section 2.2), and literature on three overlapping concepts – media activism, digital activism and video activism (Section 2.3), I drew on the instances of consumer activism in

China and relevant studies, Han's (2008a) and scholars' works on media activism, digital activism (Section 2.4) and video activism (Section 2.5) in China to tease out the evolutionary path of consumer activism in China from 1905 to 2020 for the first time in the consumer activism research field, with emphasis on the period from 1949 to 2020, as well as three phases of online consumer activism and four phases of video activism.

As a low-risk and cost-effective activism form, consumer activism has recently become a widespread strategy of resistance and protest among activists in social and political movements (Subsections 2.2.1 and 3.2.1). In addition to exploring the consumer video activism tactics from the above perspectives to find out the historical origins of these tactics, I used grievances generation theories (Subsection 3.2.2) and the repertoire of contention concept (Subsection 3.2.3) to further analyse the empirical data, showing there are three underlying reasons why Chinese consumers use these tactics: inaction of businesses, negligence of relevant government departments, and the "framing" practice; these tactics have become an innovative repertoire of contention for consumers, and short videos and SVB platforms have become a new format and a database for storing new repertoires of contention in China. To further investigate the wider impact of the consumer video activism tactics on social change in China, I drew on the "green public sphere" (Yang and Calhoun, 2007; Sun et al, 2018, 2020), the "environmental protection public sphere" (Guo, 2013), by analysing the empirical findings of this thesis, I illustrated a "consumer sphere" model based on short videos and SVB platforms that is more in line with China's actual conditions in response to Huang's (1993) appeal for the "third realm". The accessibility of the "consumer sphere" and the role of media (we-media and mainstream media) played in it were discussed to help us to better understand this online sphere supported by the short video technologies.

In total, I interviewed 56 individuals (excluding 6 pilot interviewees) in four groups (Chinese consumers, mainstream media journalists/we-media operators, PR department officials, government department officials) that were mainly involved in the process of consumer video activism tactics. The interview design was inspired by the "activist media practices" approach (Mattoni, 2012; Mattoni & Treré, 2014) derived from Couldry's media practice approach (Section 3.3 and Section 4.2). The "activist media practices" approach" deconstructs activists' media practices into two interaction processes – interactions with "media objects" and "media subjects". Adopting this approach, I deconstructed the consumer video activism tactics into the elastic mutual interaction processes between the Chinese consumers, media objects (short videos and SVB platforms), and media subjects (the public, public relations department officials, mainstream media journalists/we-media operators, and

government department officials). Informed by Yin (2018)'s definition of the case study research, I adopted four latest consumer video activism cases in China (protest of Chengdu homebuyers, counterfeit goods on PDD, tearful protest on Mercedes hood, and the hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels) and analysed them based on the grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2014) in this thesis to enrich and corroborate findings obtained through semi-structured interviews, thereby presenting a detailed picture of the consumer video activism tactics in contemporary China.

In general, this thesis makes a contribution to a cross-section of social media, media activism and consumer activism studies, and social movement, media practice and public sphere discussions. Specifically, it provides a more comprehensive and operable framework to investigate online consumer activism in China (*to avoid repetition and ensure fluency, the contributions of this research and suggestions for further research are introduced at the end of each section in the last chapter*). In the following sections, I summarise the findings of this thesis and relate them to the historical and theoretical literature mentioned above to further explain how this study answers the research questions. I point out the limitations of this thesis, define the implications for future studies.

## **8.2 The Evolutionary Path of Chinese Consumer Activism**

This thesis started with the definitions, four main historical waves, and the online evolution of consumer activism in global North countries (Section 2.2) to better understand the development progress of the consumer video activism tactics and the general situation of consumer activism in China. In the field of consumer activism, most research is centred on the strategies used by consumers. After reviewing an amount of relevant literature, I summarised that based on the social context of global North countries, consumer activism refers to ad hoc or organised groups of consumers employ various strategies or tactics – boycott, buycott, protest on the scene or online, responsible investing and divestment, etc., to change the targets' (such as interest groups, commercial companies, political parties, national or local governments) overall quality of their products/services, policies or actions directed towards social injustices; environment and animal protection issues; rights of minority groups such as ethnic minorities, LGBTQ people, etc; "boycott" and "buycott" are the two more representative strategies/tactics adopted by consumers in the global North countries. Moreover, based on Hawkins's (2010) findings, I further pointed out that most of the current research on consumer activism only focuses on the situation in the global North countries and these studies have been dominated

by scholars from these countries. In contrast, few studies have focused on consumer activism that occurs outside of these places, which precisely illustrates the narrowness of the current research on consumer activism.

As I showed in Chapter 2, along with the implementation of China's reform and opening-up policy in 1978, the consumer's identity reappeared in Chinese society; simultaneously, related consumer activism cases were also reoccurred, which directly promoted the establishment of the CCA. Recently, facing the situation that more and more consumers choose to protect their rights and interests by using various alternative tactics (e.g., the case of Luo Yonghao mentioned in Chapter 2; four cases mentioned in Chapter 6), only a few scholars have worked on these issues from the perspective of legal studies, let alone focus on the origins, dynamics, and impacts of Chinese consumers' alternative tactics.

In sections 2.3 and 7.2, inspired by the four waves of consumer activism summarized by Gabriel and Lang (2015) chronologically, based on relevant literature on media activism, digital activism and video activism, and the empirical findings of this thesis, I teased out the evolutionary path of consumer activism in China from the 1900s to the 2020s; shed light on three key phases of online consumer activism within this period – online forums and online petitions, social media platforms, SVB platforms; defined two main forms of consumer activism in China – “interest-oriented consumer activism” and “patriotic consumer activism” in combing and studying the historical context of consumer activism in China and according to the objectives of Chinese consumers<sup>92</sup>; and summarized four phases of video activism in China. These findings on the one hand expanded the research scope of consumer activism, directly bringing the practical experience of Chinese consumers to the field. On the other hand, they explicated the complex origins and evolutionary path behind the consumer video activism tactics, filling the gaps in the study of consumer activism in China. Below, I break down these findings.

### ***8.2.1 Chinese Consumers and Media activism***

After the CCA was founded in late 1984 in China, as the purchasing power of Chinese consumers has gradually increased, the number of complaints received by CCA has steadily increased year by year (Subsection 2.4.1), and has gradually exceeded the number of cases that

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<sup>92</sup> I found that “interest-oriented consumer activism” is the mainstream form of consumer activism in today's Chinese society. Given that there have been few discussions of consumer activism in China, I decided to mainly focus on one of the representation forms of “interest-oriented consumer activism” – consumer video activism – in this thesis. The empirical findings of this thesis show that consumer video activism can be regarded as “interest-oriented consumer activism”.

CCA can handle. Under these circumstances, Chinese consumers have to find other ways to safeguard their rights and interests. By reviewing relevant consumer activism instances from 1978 to 2020 and literature on media activism and digital activism in the context of China, I found that Chinese consumers' activism strategies/tactics are closely related to the media activism summarized by Han (2008a). Unlike the classical media activism research based on two analytical frameworks – RMT and NSM – that emphasise the connection between media activism and political intervention, anti-hegemonic, public and group interests (Section 2.3), media activism in China has the following characteristics - it is a way of social resistance or a tool of action in a specific field, usually deliberately avoiding or reducing political confrontation with the government, and at the same time, it is a disorganised, occasional, amateur short-term action usually initiated out of individual interests (Han, 2008a).

Based on the five main tactics of media activism used by the Chinese as of 2008 (Subsection 2.4.2) summarized by Han (one of the few scholars who pay attention to Chinese media activism), I investigated the correlation between Chinese consumer activism and media activism. By reviewing literature and cases related to Chinese media activism and consumer activism in chronological order, I found that Chinese consumers also adopted all or part of those media activism tactics mentioned by Han in their protests against businesses. As exemplified by the case of Wang Hai, by breaking the news (e.g., merchants' practices of selling fakes) to various mainstream media, Wang successfully forced the merchants to compensate him actively with the help of media exposure. After entering the Internet age, as those activists, mentioned in literature on digital media activism – a new form of media activism (Subsections 2.3.3 and 2.4.2), have started to adopt various digital tactics to achieve their social or political transformational goals, after reviewing representative instances of online consumer activism, I found that Chinese consumers have also started to use these technologies to protest against businesses and safeguard their rights and interests. As shown in the “Toshiba incident”, many Chinese consumers, including those who bought Toshiba products and bystanders, discussed information about the Toshiba incident on various online forums to attract media attention, and actively broke the news to mainstream media, thereby moulding public opinion and forcing the Toshiba to admit their faults and compensate Chinese consumers accordingly.

The development of various Internet technologies has also promoted the development of digital media activism in China (Subsection 2.4.2.1), prompting a new phase of online consumer activism, and Chinese consumers have started to use various new online activism strategies/tactics. From the cases of Luo Yonghao, Wang Xiaoshan in 2011 to the case of

boycotting Fengchao in 2020, Chinese consumers have gradually realized the power of mobile social media platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, etc (Subsection 2.4.2.2). By posting their experience and critical comments, breaking the news to the mainstream media and calling on the public to boycott certain companies and their products on these social media platforms, Chinese consumers can urge businesses to respond to their demands (e.g., compensations, apologies, corrections, etc.). The findings of this thesis show that with the emergence, growth and development of SVB platforms in China, Chinese online consumer activism has entered a new stage once again, Chinese consumers today can use short videos and SVB platforms to safeguard their rights and interests more efficiently. From the perspective of the online strategies/tactics used by consumers, I summarised three key phases in the development of online consumer activism (from the late 1990s to the early 2020s): first phase – online forums and online petitions (such as the Toshiba incident); second phase – social media platforms (such as Luo Yonghao, Wang Xiaoshan and others safeguarded their consumer rights on Weibo); third phase – SVB platforms (the focus of this thesis).

By teasing out the evolutionary path of Chinese consumer activism from the perspective of media activism, this thesis makes contributions to the Chinese consumer activism research from two perspectives. On the one hand, it allows us to better understand the historical background of the current surge of consumer video activism tactics, and let us know these tactics did not come out of thin air, but have experienced two phases of evolution. On the other hand, it shows us that Chinese consumer activism is inseparable from the assistance of the media. The consumer video activism tactics is essentially an upgraded digital media activism.

### ***8.2.2 Short Video Activism***

Following the idea of exploring Chinese consumer activism from the perspective of media activism, I further investigated the consumer video activism tactics from the perspective of video activism. To highlight the particularity of Chinese video activism, I reviewed the changes and development of video activism in the global North context from a historical perspective (Subsection 2.3.4). In the context of China, as an essential part of Chinese media activism (Han, 2008a), I found that video activism has been closely connected with the Chinese social documentary, and has gone through three phases since the late 1980s according to different forms of expression and medium carriers. The first phase, the NDM. By shedding light on the subaltern and their daily lives, filmmakers in the NDM tried their best to let these people act and speak in their films, so as to advance social justice and social reform at that time. As one



of the few Chinese scholars who focus on Chinese video activism, Han (2008a) and Xinyu (2003) both agree that the NDM symbolizes the starting point of video activism in China. Chinese researchers such as Han and Xinyu L believe that the NDM represents the starting point of video activism in China. The second phase, mainstream television programs started using video footage contributed by the public in their shows. By submitting news materials to mainstream TV stations in the form of videos, ordinary people at that time gained a new way to voice their voices and defend their rights. The third phase, based on commercial video hosting websites, social elites, public opinion leaders, and public welfare organisations began to use social documentaries and other videos to advocate social justice and social reform. After sorting out these three phases, combined with the findings of this thesis on consumer video activism, I defined that the public-dominated short video activism – short videos produced by the general public and published and forwarded on SVB platforms (the consumer video activism tactics are one of the manifestations of this phase) as the fourth phase of video activism in China (Section 7.3).

### **8.3 Protest through Short Videos and SVB Platforms**

After illustrating the historical origins of the consumer video activism tactics from the perspectives of consumer activism, media activism and video activism, this thesis then begins to investigate the origins, dynamics, and impacts of these tactics based on short videos and SVB platforms. The topic of consumer activism has been largely discussed within the scope of social movement research, but in turn, few consumer activism scholars have drawn lessons from the social movement research toolbox and taken the initiative to make any connection between consumer activism and social movement. Inspired by Snow and Soule's (2010) summary of the grievances generation theories, I regained the value of these theories as Simmons (2014) called for. By drawing lessons from these theories, I showed the fundamental reasons why Chinese consumers use short video technologies (short videos and SVB platforms) to protest against businesses. The repertoire of contention "is culturally inscribed and socially communicated" (Tarrow, 2011, p. 29). Hence, I paid more attention to consumers' perception of the short video activism tactics as a means of protest against businesses in broader society in the long term to show the impact of these tactics. This thesis next adopts the media practice approach as the starting point to understand the short video activism tactics used by Chinese consumers. As mentioned in Chapter 3 and 7, the media practice approach proposed by Couldry (2004) has opened a new road in media studies and inspired research on social movements and

media activism, such as the “activist media practices” approach (Mattoni, 2012; Mattoni & Treré, 2014) adopted in this thesis. Based on these studies, I deconstructed Chinese consumers’ short video activism tactics into two observable parts: “interactions with media objects” and “interactions with media subjects” to observe the working mechanism of these tactics. Taking Habermas’s (1989a) public sphere and relevant studies as a point of departure, by illustrating the “consumer sphere” model, I further explored the impact of the consumer video activism tactics based on short videos and SVB platforms. Below, I break down these findings.

### ***8.3.1 Chinese Consumers’ Grievances***

As I showed in Chapters 3 (3.4.1) and 7 (7.4.1), by cross comparing three sets of grievances generation theories sorted by Snow and Soule (2010) – “grievances as a function of structural or material conditions” (p. 27), “grievances as a function of social-psychological factors” (p. 40) and “grievances as a function of interpretive framing processes” (p. 50) – and the root causes of consumer video activism tactics discovered from the empirical findings, I indicated that Chinese consumers’ tactics are also caused by various grievances. The findings indicate that businesses’ inactions, relevant government departments’ negligence, and consumers’ practices of posting short videos on SVB platforms are three fundamental factors that generate Chinese consumers’ grievances and lead them to use the short video activism tactics (Section 7.4). Moreover, when investigating the underlying reasons of consumer video activism, as a bonus, I found that Chinese consumers adopt a clear three-step strategy in their “fights” against businesses: first, negotiating with the business directly and claiming for compensations; second (if the previous step fails), seeking help from government departments; third, (if previous rational methods all fail), then turning to other alternative strategies and tactics, such as the short video activism tactics (Section 5.2). The damage extent, success ratio and privacy matters are the three concerns that Chinese consumers have before deciding to implement the short video activism tactics.

As Tarrow (2011, p. 29) observes, the changes of the repertoire of contention are constrained by “enduring cultural expectations that resist transformation”, “economic or regime change,” and “people’s personal knowledge and resources”. Just as Liu (2016, 2019) used the repertoire of contention concept to explore how anti-petrochemical (PX) protesters perceive and use digital media to resist the decision of the local government to build the PX project (Subsection 3.2.3), I used it to analysis the impact of the consumer video activism tactics. With the help of media exposure, short video technologies and SVB platforms, these

tactics have become an innovative repertoire of contention used by Chinese consumers to fight against businesses (Subsection 7.4.2). Meanwhile, short videos and SVB platforms have become a new format and a database for storing and spreading the repertoire of contention among Chinese consumers (Subsection 6.4.3). Liu (2019) indicates that to lower the risk of “technological-fascination bias” and overcome the myopic effect of ICTs when studying ICTs in contentious collective actions, scholars should shed light on activists’ personal “knowledge and perception” of ICTs as means of protest under various circumstances and take a long-term perspective, rather than looking at the sporadic use of digital media for contention. These suggestions resonated with the method design of this thesis.

### **8.3.2 The “Nao-da” Logic**

The concept of “activist media practices” (Mattoni, 2012; Mattoni and Treré; 2014) offers an “anti-dualism” practicable paradigm to this thesis. I deconstructed consumers’ short video activism tactics into two observable and significant interaction processes – interactions with “media objects” and “media subjects”. By studying the two “interactions”, we can better understand the origins, dynamics, and impacts of the consumer video activism tactics (for more theoretical benefits of adopting the media practice approach, see Section 7.5). These two parts inspired the design of the research method of this thesis: this study adopted semi-structured interviews and case studies as the main and auxiliary research methods (Chapter 4). By looking into Chinese consumers’ interactions with “media objects”, I found that the short video is an *informative and efficient, audio-visual and convincing, low threshold, and eye-catching* medium compared with still pictures and texts in the eyes of consumers (Section 5.3). These positive features of the short video make the consumer video activism tactics *immersive, authentic, uncomplicated, and attractive* (Section 5.4). Thanks to the emergence and popularity of the SVB platform (Section 2.6), Chinese consumers currently can use it as a multifunctional platform: they use it for entertainment, for watching the news, for learning English, for shopping, etc. Of course, they also use it to safeguard their rights and interests if necessary. Chinese media and businesses have also discovered the potential of the SVB platforms. For the Chinese media, they use it as a new way to distribute their news content and regard it as significant news sources; for businesses, they use the SVB platform as a new tool for maintaining their brand images in front of the public (Section 5.3).

Next, the interactions with “media subjects”. The interview results and four cases all show that the working mechanisms of the consumer video activism are as follows: by recording

short video evidence via mobiles and uploading them to SVB platforms, consumers can “nao-da” their grievances and bring increased attention – including that of the media, businesses involved and government departments – to bear on their experiences and demands. Thus, with the help of media coverage and government intervention, those businesses involved are forced to admit their faults and make compensations to consumers accordingly. In Section 5.4, looking further into these interactions with “media subjects”, we can see that mainstream media and we-media play an essential role in the “nao-da”/consumer video activism tactics and consumers are aware of this (businesses and government departments also aware of it); for the media (especially for the we-media), they participate in this show because they regard these short video platforms and short videos as very important news sources and evidence; for the business, they admit that the short video evidence posted by consumers is strong evidence of businesses’ faults and can quickly draw the attention of media and government departments, so they have to solve consumers’ problems efficiently if they want to maintain the brand image in front of the public (potential consumers); for relevant government departments, they agree that short videos posted by consumers can easily attract the attention of the media and the public, which can prompt relevant government departments to intervene and help consumers solve problems as soon as possible.

### ***8.3.3 The “Consumer Sphere”***

Taking Habermas’s (1989a) public sphere and relevant studies as a point of departure, and drawing lessons from Huang’s third realm (1993), Yang and Calhoun’s (2007) and Sun et al’s (2018, 2020) research on “green public sphere”, and Guo’s (2013) “environmental protection public sphere” concept, this thesis proposed and illustrated a “consumer sphere” model based on China’s national conditions (Section 3.4; Section 7.6). I visualised the interactions between Chinese consumers and media, businesses and relevant government departments (interactions with media subjects), and the interrelationships between the media, businesses and government departments within the consumer video activism tactics. These complex interactions support the operation of the consumer video activism tactics (and the consumer sphere).

The overall findings suggest that short video technologies (short videos and SVB platforms) increases the accessibility of the “consumer sphere”. In terms of the consumer, they sit at the centre of the consumer sphere. By posting the short video evidence on SVB platforms, consumers can obtain timely media coverages about their experiences; prevent businesses from refusing to admit mistakes and correct them; prompt relevant government departments to

intervene in their disputes with the business and help consumers solve problems (consumers' interactions with "media subjects").

Within the consumer sphere model, media, businesses and government departments are connected by the short videos posted by consumers and therefore interact with each other in different ways. As an essential part of the "consumer sphere", by reporting the short video evidence they obtained from consumers/through their active search, in their shows or accounts on SVB platforms, *the media* (we-media and mainstream media) can amplify consumers' grievances and demands, and form a kind of media supervision on the businesses involved, and force them to solve problems for consumers more quickly. At the same time, their news reports also provide the government with timely information, allowing the government to intervene in the incident more quickly. *For government departments*, when dealing with consumer video activism incidents, they pay attention to and follow relevant media coverages and therefore intervene in handling the incident more quickly. However, at the same time, they also exercise a certain degree of control over these media (will be mentioned in the following Subsection). After government departments intervene in the incident, they usually hold the business accountable and impose corresponding penalties. *For businesses*, to reduce the negative impact of media coverage on their brands, they actively solve consumer problems and make official responses through the media (businesses also use other means to reduce the negative impact of media reports, which will be covered in the following subsection). In addition, to quell the crisis as soon as possible, businesses usually actively accept government punishments, such as actively correcting their faults and paying corresponding fines.

Although the self-interest-oriented consumer video activism tactics are the beginning of the whole "consumer sphere", the overall empirical findings demonstrate that these tactics can lead to a public-concerned consumer activism incident through two logics of change ("*comrade logic*" and "*potential victim logic*"), benefit all consumers (*comrades and potential victims*) in society, by having a wider impact on businesses (making them admit their mistakes and correct them to avoid damage to more consumers' rights and interests) and social change (urging relevant government departments to launch or advance relevant policies and regulations to regulate businesses and better protect the rights and interests of the public).

Similar to the public sphere, which is restrained by political, commercial and other practical factors, the "consumer sphere" illustrated in this thesis is also limited by various practical factors (see the following subsection). However, we should regard it as an accessible, running, and hopeful utopia, rather than seeing it as an "illusion" that can never be realized (Zhang, 2000).

### **8.3.4 Obstacles**

It is undeniable that the above complex interactions among consumers, media, businesses, and government departments are the basis for the operation of the consumer video activism tactics (and the consumer sphere model). However, this thesis found that some of their interactions will hinder the operation of the tactics (and the model) to a certain extent. As mentioned above, media play an essential role in the consumer sphere/consumer video activism tactics, but the findings of this thesis indicate that the media has been “influenced” by the government and the business to a certain extent. Specifically, media are asked not to cover specific topics related to consumer activism or to remove their corresponding news reports by relevant government departments (Section 5.4). To be able to influence media reports (e.g., better promote themselves and prevent negative publicity from being disseminated), Chinese businesses tend to build good relationships with Chinese media through different means (e.g., advertising cooperation, red-envelope cash, gifts) (Section 5.4).

Besides, this thesis also found that the consumer video activism tactics have their shortcomings. First, using short videos to protest against businesses means giving up personal privacy. For example, Wang and Hua, although they successfully defended their rights through short videos, they completely lost their privacy at last (Sections 6.4 and 6.5). Second, not everyone’s story can be reported by the media. This thesis found that Chinese media are more inclined to report consumer activism events that attract more attention and bring higher advertising revenue. Third, businesses’ countermeasures (such as “Shui-jun” and 24-hour-a-day monitoring) will hinder the performance of the model (and the tactics) (Section 5.4). Fourth, the government’s control of short video content affects consumers’ willingness to use the tactics of short video activism (e.g., 100 categories of short video content are banned on SVB platforms, Section 5.4) to cry out their grievances and protect their rights and interests.

## **8.4 Limitations**

Due to the limitations in time, funding and word count, I only briefly touched on online consumer activism and short video activism in China, which deserve further research in the future. The empirical findings of this thesis are only based on interviews with a limited number of consumers, media, PR officials, and relevant government department officials in three relatively developed cities in China and four cases that occurred in different regions of the country. Hence, these data can only interpret the dynamics behind the short video activism

tactics adopted by today's Chinese consumers (the "interest-oriented consumer activism") to a certain extent, rather than the overall situation of consumer activism (e.g., another form of consumer activism defined in this thesis – the "patriotic consumer activism" cannot be explained by the findings of this thesis and remains to be studied) in the whole of or other parts (e.g., undeveloped area) of China. More empirical research into consumer activism in China is welcome in future studies.

## 8.5 Implications for Future Studies

The implication of my thesis for consumer activism studies is the necessity to break the monopoly of scholars from the global North (especially American scholars) in the field mentioned by Hawkins (2010), pay more attention to the instances that happened outside these places, and acknowledge the multiplicity of consumer activism in the world. For Chinese consumers, their initial goal of initiating or joining activism movements such as boycotting a certain product or company is not always for the benefit of the general public, but for safeguarding their rights and interests<sup>93</sup>. Even so, the consumer activism events initiated or joined by them can sometimes still bring benefits to the general public, such as the four cases presented in this thesis. While the thesis joins an ongoing effort to improve the understanding of consumer activism, I identify with Gabriel and Lang's (2015) argument that consumers' wealth, growing purchasing power and consumer activism instances are positively correlated. From a macro perspective, in Chinese society, consumer activism is also positively correlated with level of economic development. With the increasing purchasing power and social status of Chinese consumers, various consumer activism cases have continued to emerge in recent years, such as the large-scale boycott happened in March 2021 – consumers boycotted HM, Nike and other Western brands that joined the Better Cotton Initiative (BSI) and boycotted cotton from Xinjiang, it was the biggest boycott since 2012<sup>94</sup> in China. I deem it essential to pay close attention to these patriotic consumer activism instances, as well as those interest-oriented consumer activism instances that this thesis focuses on. Given the lack of attention to Chinese consumer activism, future scholars should pay more attention to it and develop their understanding of consumer activism that is more in line with China's national conditions.

With the decline of neoliberalism (Peters, 2020) and the rise of authoritarianism and nationalism (Bieber, 2020) in recent years in the world, especially under the influence of the

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<sup>93</sup> Sometimes, as exemplified in this thesis, the consumer activism instances initiated or joined by Chinese consumers are caused by pure patriotism and national sentiments.

<sup>94</sup> See <https://view.ctee.com.tw/economic/28410.html> (accessed August 23, 2021).

global pandemic, governments around the world are increasingly intervening in individual lives in new ways. In terms of social movements, they are increasingly “restricting and constraining movement repertoires and discourse, limiting freedom of expression, and ultimately attempting to delegitimize social movement activism and public protest” (Maddison and Martin, 2010, p. 112). Against this backdrop, as a kind of low risk and cost activism (McAdam, 1986) or “moderate civil action” (Yang, 2016b), consumer activism deserves more attention in social movement studies. Moreover, to better understand how consumer activism works, emerges, impacts, it is necessary to draw lessons from the social movement research toolbox to study it as this thesis did. Especially with the assistance of the Internet and new means of communication, online consumer activism (see Heldman, 2017; Kampf, 2018; Minocher, 2019) has been proven its ability to break the “curse” of slacktivism (Morozov, 2009).

For those scholars who focus on the Chinese Internet studies, the consumer video activism tactics and the achievement of these tactics this thesis has presented is a timely corrective to overly simple portrayals of Chinese citizens have no outlets for their grievances at all under the powerful government surveillance (Postill, Lasa and Zhang, 2020). As Yang (2009b) points out, the Chinese central government may tolerate grassroots protests that do not directly challenge their legitimacy, hence, consumer activism issues will not be limited by the government as long as these collective actions are not anti-state and anti-party (Herold, 2008). Moreover, as Svensson (2016) proposes, the growing Chinese middle class (with strong purchasing power) nowadays are also trying to find ways to express and safeguard their interests without opposing the party-state apparently, and “[they] are increasingly attracted to more personalised and interested-based ways of networking and forms of civic engagement” (Svensson, 2016, p. 57). In sum, I argue that from the perspective of the Chinese people, the consumption (consumer rights protection) area tolerated by the government is a low-risk sphere for them to participate in civic life, which creates an essential objective foundation for the “consumer sphere” model. This model derived from the consumer video activism tactics discussed in this thesis represents a new practicable way of civic engagement for Chinese people, even though there are stumbling blocks (Section 8.1) along the way. Within the “consumer sphere”, in addition to being able to safeguard their consumer rights and interests, by enacting the short video activism tactics, Chinese people can prompt the government to reform relevant laws and regulations to strengthen the supervision of businesses as a consumer. Moreover, as Zhu (2017) argues in her case study of the anti-PX Protests in Maoming, the successful short video activism cases can provide innovative repertoires of contention for the public and legitimize these tactics with the aid of media coverage, awaken the public’s



awareness of self-interest protection, and increase their expectations for success. In other words, this “consumer sphere” has the potential to become an alternative space for consumers to both take part in more public-concerned issues and safeguard their rights and interests at the same time, to contribute to the growth of people’s consumer rights and other individual rights consciousness, and to give them “a range of ‘learning experiences’ in locating and using avenues to exercise those rights” (Hooper, 2005, p. 17).

Moreover, the existence of the “consumer sphere” and the “consumer video activism” repertoire implies that consumers’ rights and interests in Chinese society are not well-protected due to incomplete relevant laws and regulations and the lack of effective communication channels, which needs more studies in the future. This model responds to the concept of “third realm” proposed by Huang (1993), and is in line with other “public sphere” models discussed by Yang and Calhoun’s (2007), Sun et al’s (2018, 2020) and Guo’s (2013), suggesting that future research on the public sphere must further “break out of the old conceptual habits of postulating a simple binary opposition between state and society” and pay more attention to various social arenas – “third realm” – where the state and society meet and harmonize. Moreover, this thesis identifies with Yang and Calhoun’s (2007) research on the “green public sphere”, indicating that the “consumer sphere” is not homogeneous, but consists of multiple actors, multiple media and multiple discourses.

One of my key contentions is that the roles of digital media and ICTs should not be overrated in consumer video activism (or any other) tactics. This thesis shows the efficiency of the activist media practices approach (Mattoni, 2012; Mattoni & Treré, 2014) derived from the media practice framework (Couldry, 2004). By investigating the consumer video activism tactics from two interaction parts (interactions with media objects and media subjects), this thesis stands in with the “anti-dualism” consensus (Schatzki, 2002), and avoids falling into the dilemmas of media-centrism and the “one-medium fallacy” and the “technological-fascination bias” (Treré, 2019; Stephansen and Treré, 2019). To avoid falling into these mistakes, critical scholars in the future should draw lessons from the media practice approach when studying various activism strategies/tactics related to digital media and ICTs. For the power of short videos and SVB platforms behind the consumer video activism tactics, similar to Guo’s (2021) argument, I also argue that these digital media and ICTs are not able to provoke democratic revolution at the structural level, but have the liberating power to opens up symbolic spaces for consumers, citizens, and the public to express their voices in contemporary China (e.g., the consumer sphere mentioned above).

Finally, as consumer activism involves a diffuse and diverse group of consumers (Glickman, 2009), such as consumer rights, civil rights, anti-immigrant, and ethical consumption groups, this inclusiveness demonstrates the potential of consumer activism (Lightfoot, 2019). This thesis shows the positive activist quality of Chinese consumers, they actively use different tools to fight against social injustice and promote policies and even social reforms. Although the consumer activism cases in this thesis are mostly self-interest-oriented, we should not ignore that these cases can transform into public-interest-related consumer activism events. What lies behind their short video activism tactics is their desire to engage with civic life. It shows that citizenship and consumer identity are entangled with each other in Chinese society. “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” (Cohen, 1993, p. 373). The emergence of these tactics proved the existence of certain cracks in contemporary China, which shows that there is a chance to break the routine, there is an opportunity to put things right, and there is hope for change.

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## Abbreviations

AQSIQ	The Chinese General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine
BBS	bulletin board system
BSI	Better Cotton Initiative
CA	Consumer Association
CBTG	Changsha Broadcast and Television Group
CC	Chinese consumer
CCA	Chinese Consumer Association
CCTV	China Central Television
China Unicom	China United Network Communications Group
China Telecom	China Telecommunications Corporation
CMCC	China Mobile Communications Corporation
CSAMR	Chinese State Administration for Market Regulation
CSSCI	Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index
FDC	floppy disk controllers
GO	government department officials
ICT	information and communication technologies
LZX	Li Zhi Xing
LGBTQ	Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer or Questioning
MIIT	Ministry of Industry and Information Technology
MJ/WO	mainstream media journalist/we-media operator
MSA	Market Supervision Administration
NDM	New Documentary Movement
NGOs	non-governmental organisations
NPU	non-professional (ordinary) user
NSMs	New Social Movements
PDD	PinDuoDuo
PGC	professionally generated content
PLP	Politics and Law Program
PPM	Political Process Model
PR	public relations department officials
PRC	People's Republic of China
PU	professional user
SME	Shaanxi Metro Express
RMT	Resources Mobilization Theory
SMOs	social movement organisations
SPDIC	Shaanxi Provincial Discipline Inspection Commission
SVB	short-video-based social media
UGC	user-generated content
4G	the fourth generation of broadband cellular network technology

## Appendix

### Appendix 1.1 Semi-Structured Interview Question Sheet

*(English translation of the original Chinese version, translated by the author)*

#### **1. Interview Questions for SVB Users:**

##### *Part 1: Personal Experience on Consumer Activism*

1. Have your legitimate consumer interests been violated before? Or have you witnessed anybody's consumer right been violated in your daily life? What will you (they) do if you (they) believe your (their) legitimate consumer interests have been violated?
2. What do you think of the present situation of consumer activism in China according to your personal experience and those three consumer video activism cases? How difficult/easy will it be to safeguard your legitimate consumer interests in China?
3. Normally, what are the reasons you choose to safeguard your consumer interests?
4. Negotiating with the sellers directly, approaching the China consumers association (CCA) for help; dialling the "12315" consumer complaint telephone hotline, and protesting online (e.g., exposing personal experience on social media)/offline (e.g., Protesting in front of the store), etc., from your personal perspective, which methods will you choose to protect your own legitimate consumer interests?
5. Have you ever tried to safeguard your legitimate consumer interests via SVB platforms? If the answer is yes, which platform you have chosen to use and what is happening as a result? Why did you choose this method? Did you receive any responses from the companies/government departments/mainstream and other media journalists?

##### *Part 2: Understanding the Power of Short Video*

6. What is your first reaction to the short video and various SVB platforms in China? What are the general content characteristics of the short videos you have watched before?
7. From your personal experience, why short videos and these SVB platforms are so popular in China?
8. Have you ever recorded any short videos by yourself? Have you ever shared any short videos with your friends or reposted them on your SVB account? What are the general content characteristics of these short videos?
9. Static text, picture or short video, which one is the most efficient and powerful information circulation way in those SVB platforms?
10. If you want to give your audience a complete picture of an event, static text, picture or short video, which one is the most efficient and powerful mode of information disseminator for you?

##### *Part 3: Understanding the Power of Consumer Video Activism*

11. Apart from drawing the power of SVB platforms, do you know any other new and efficient methods of consumer protection in China?
12. Have you ever witnessed any consumers who used short videos to protect their own consumer interests? If the answer is yes, in which platform and how efficacy did it work? Any examples?

13. What do you think of the role of the SVB platform towards Chinese consumer and its impact on consumer activism?
14. As far as you know, during the process of consumers fighting for their legitimate interests and interests online, static text, pictures and short videos, which is the most effective disseminator for them? Why?
15. Static text, picture or short video, which disseminator you prefer to use if you want to safeguard your own legitimate consumer interests? Why?

*Part 4: The Possible and Incoming “Consumer Sphere”*

16. Have you ever encountered or noticed the existence of the commercial “*Shui jun*” comments on different SVB platforms? Do you think these “*Shui jun*” comments will bother you or other consumers to reclaim your/their legitimate consumer interests back via these SVB platforms?
17. What is your opinion on the impact of Chinese mainstream/we-media in those consumer video activism movements? Positive or negative?
18. To what extent the causes of consumer activism movements you have witnessed are more relevant to consumer’s personal issues rather than public issues?
19. What is your opinion on the function of the Chinese relevant government department in those consumer video activism tactics? Have you noticed that the latest 100 regulations on Short video launched by the Chinese government? How do you feel about it?
20. Will you expect any instant and effective responses from the companies/government departments/mainstream and other media journalists after you protest via SVB platforms? What do you think of the future of consumer interests in China with the help of SVB and other Internet communication technologies?

**2. *Additional Interview Questions for Public Relations Department Official:***

1. From the perspective of the commercial institution, what do you think of those four consumer video activism cases? How does the public relations department deal with consumer video activism (consumers use short videos to protect their own consumer interests)?
2. From the perspective of the commercial institution, have you ever noticed any apparent pressures and critics from the government and the media after the consumers’ online/offline protest? Normally, under what circumstances will the consumers’ online/offline protest lead to these external pressures?
3. How does the public relations department deal with government inquiries about consumer video activism normally? Would you describe more about the specific processing steps?
4. How does the public relations department deal with the critical media reports about consumer video activism normally? Would you describe more about the specific processing steps?
5. As a public relations department official, what do you think of the impact of short videos and SVB platforms? How does it affect your daily job (positively and negatively)? Are these methods useful for consumers to draw the company’s attention and claim their interests?

Notice: The public relations department officials also need to answer the interview questions for SVB users.

### ***3. Additional Interview Questions for Mainstream Media Journalist and We-Media Operator:***

1. From the perspective of the media journalist, what do you think of those four consumer video activism cases? Will you regard the short videos and SVB platforms as your news sources?
2. From the perspective of the media journalist, what do you think about consumer video activism? Compared with other methods, do you think it is an effective method for consumers to draw mainstream media's attention?
3. What do you think about the news topic of consumer activism under the current media environment in China? Will you inform the relevant companies or government departments before making a news report on these topics?
4. When you or your colleagues reported on the topic of consumer activism in the past, did you encounter internal or external resistance? (If the journalist has never covered any news stories about consumer activism, then ask him/her the following question: What kinds of obstacles will disturb journalist's reporting on consumer activism?) What are the stumbling blocks?

Note: The Mainstream media journalists/we-media operators also need to answer the interview questions for SVB users.

### ***4. Additional Interview Questions for Government Officials:***

1. From the perspective of government officials, what do you think of those four consumer video activism cases?
2. From the perspective of government officials, how does the relevant government official deals with consumer activism normally?
3. When faced with the consumers and the company, what will you/they do respectively? Would you please describe more about the specific processing steps?
4. From the perspective of Chinese government officials, what do you think about consumer video activism? Do you think it is an effective method for consumers to draw relevant government departments' attention?
5. How does the relevant government official deal with the mainstream media journalists/we-media operators report on consumer activism?

**Interviewee 7, Female, Consumer**

**Y:** Have you ever personally encountered or witnessed any consumer activism cases before?

**7:** My husband and I had previously been extorted a sum of money by our former landlord when we were in Shanghai. At first, we found a flat through an agency and then after a year of renting it, the landlord took the initiative to approach us and asked if we wanted to renew the lease, we thought the flat was great at the time, so we decided to renew the lease. The landlord then said that if we wanted to renew the lease, we could just talk to him privately and that we didn't need to sign a contract with an agent. Then we took the landlord's advice. At the end of the second year, we had to move due to a job transfer. At this point, the landlord said that he could not refund our deposit because we had damaged a lot of furniture in the house. However, the landlord could not produce any evidence to prove which furniture we had damaged, nor did we have any evidence to prove which furniture was broken in the first place, and we were in a hurry to move, so we had to give up our deposit and move out.

**Y:** What were the reasons you chose not to get back your deposit?

**7:** I am a person who is rather afraid of trouble. In fact, at first, we intended to get our deposit back and defend our rights, we called the "12315" hotline, but we got no response. Then we thought it was too much of a waste of time and effort to get our money back, so we eventually gave up and just admitted our bad luck.

**Y:** Under what circumstances would you choose to protect your legal rights?

**7:** First of all, if the government points out a clear and effective path for consumers to protect their rights, I will follow it. Just like the first thing you do when you are in danger is to dial 110 (call the police), there should be a clear path for you to follow when your consumer rights are violated. But at the moment I am not quite sure what I should do when my rights and interests are infringed. Secondly, **if a company infringes my rights very seriously, such as causing me huge financial loss, or physical and mental damage, I will definitely use various tactics to defend my rights.**

**Y:** Generally speaking, what logic do you follow to defend your consumer rights?

**7:** I would first contact the merchant in the first instance. If I fail to negotiate with the merchant, I will choose to call some helpline, such as the "12315", or contact the consumer association. If these departments cannot help me solve the problem, I may choose to use the short video tactics.

**Y:** When we mention short videos or short video platforms, what is the first thing that comes to your mind?

**7:** I think short videos are more appealing to the human eye than images and text. But I think that text and pictures are more efficient in conveying information. Especially in rural areas with poor signal, it may take longer to wait for a short video to load because it requires more traffic. While the text may not take up much traffic, you can read articles faster on your phone.



**Y:** You just mentioned the difference between the text, images and short videos, which do you think is the most efficient medium to use on social media or short video platforms?

**7:** Text.

**Y:** Suppose your consumer rights are violated and you want to describe your experience on these platforms, which medium would you choose to use?

**7:** I would choose to use a picture with text, making short videos is too troublesome for me.

**Y:** What do you think of consumers using short video tactics to defend their rights?

**7:** I often see these short videos on various short video platforms online. For example, many homeowners posted short videos online of their houses leaking, claiming that the houses sold to them by developers had serious quality problems. By uploading these short videos to these platforms and tagging them with various mainstream media, they hoped to get media coverage and public attention, and thus demanded compensation from developers.

They did it because they wanted to make their grievances visible to more people, especially to the media and the government. But I don't think everyone who does this will be seen by the media or the government. In my personal experience, unless the person who uses these tactics is already very influential, short videos posted by ordinary people are hard to be seen by the media and the government. Many people have tried to post short videos on various short video platforms, but because their personal influence was too weak, the media and the government simply could not discover what they posted.

**Y:** If consumers want to share their misfortunes or grievances on social media platforms, text, pictures and short videos, which medium do you think is best for them?

**7:** Not everyone can write proficiently with text. I've seen a lot of people posting articles complaining about merchants infringing on their rights, the narrative logic in these articles is very unclear, and the reason for the whole thing is not stated in the text at all, making people wonder what the point of the whole thing is. I think short videos may be easier for the general public than text. But if you're good at writing, I think it's better to use text because, as I said, it conveys information more effectively.

**Y:** Do you think the cause of most consumer activism incidents in China at present is related to the private interests of consumers or to the interests of society at large?

**7:** The cause of most of the consumer activism incidents in China is that the personal rights and interests of consumers have been violated by businesses. Of course, it cannot be denied that there are consumers who choose to come forward because they do not want others to be deceived or harmed by the business as she or he was before. Moreover, I think **the reasons why the public pays attention to these consumer activism events are that they also care for their own interests and they want to avoid becoming the next victim.**

**Y:** Have you noticed the latest 100 regulations on Short video launched by the Chinese government? How do you feel about it? Do you think these rules will have an impact on consumers using short videos to defend their rights and interests?

7: According to those 100 regulations, many short videos posted by consumers today are definitely not allowed to be posted on short video platforms. So yes, **these regulations on short videos and SVB platforms will further restrict consumers' use of short videos to protect their interests.**

Y: With the development of short video technologies and short video platforms, and more new media technologies in the future, how do you see them in relation to consumer activism in China?

7: In fact, these new technologies are simply facilitating the speed of information dissemination. I think essentially that the rationale behind the activism tactics adopted by Chinese consumers has not changed. Since ancient times in China, if you want your problem to be resolved, then you have to get more people to know about your grievances and get more people to speak up for you and stand up for you through various methods. In other words, you have to know how to “nao-da” your grievances.

Y: From a media practitioner's point of view, do you use short videos as your news source, or do you use them as news evidence in your stories?

7: Yes. I've tried using short videos as news leads recently. When I'm actively looking for news topics, I actively look for short videos on short video platforms and I have also tried to include short videos in some of my stories as evidence.

## **Interviewee 19, Male, Newspaper journalist**

**Y:** For the time being how difficult is it for Chinese consumers to protect their rights?

**19:** I think this issue is very complex and cannot be clarified in a sentence or two. Firstly, some consumers are reluctant to argue with businesses over a small amount of their losses. There is an old Chinese saying that “the less trouble, the better”. Most Chinese consumers will not go to the trouble of defending their rights over the loss of a pair of shoes or a packet of cigarettes. Most Chinese consumers are largely reluctant to safeguard their rights when their rights are violated, making it difficult for us to identify and help those in need. This is a problem for us in the media. We often encounter consumers who are reluctant to argue with businesses or seek help from the media or relevant authorities, but in turn need us (the media) to persuade them to defend their legal rights and interests. Secondly, even if consumers are willing to approach the media to defend their rights, it is very difficult for them to successfully recover their losses or defend their rights by doing so. This is because, on the one hand, the media will not report on all consumer cases, but will be selective in their coverage of these cases. On the other hand, not all media institutions are powerful. If consumers contact media that are not very influential, then even if these media report on their cases, these reports will not ultimately have much impact on the business. Overall, these two points are the reasons why it is so difficult for Chinese consumers to successfully defend their legal rights and interests.

**Y:** You just said that consumers will come to you and ask you to cover their stories. Generally, when these consumers reach out to you, do they try other channels before finding you?

**19:** Generally speaking, consumers usually come to us, the media or relevant government departments for help after negotiating with merchants to no avail. If they negotiated with the merchant in the first place, they wouldn't need our help.

**Y:** You just said that the media will be selective in reporting these consumer rights cases, can you elaborate on what kind of cases you generally choose to report?

**19:** The cases we select must have a social commonality. Or rather, we have to choose cases that are newsworthy to report. When selecting cases, we will consider three main points. The first point is that the violations involved in the cases are socially harmful, and the second point is that these businesses have indeed violated the legitimate rights and interests of consumers. The third focus is to select consumer-representative cases, such as consumer fraud cases specifically targeting the elderly. As always, the case must be newsworthy.

**Y:** In your opinion, how should consumers protect their legitimate rights and interests after being infringed?

**19:** Overall, it is important to encourage consumers to protect their rights rationally. People should not assert their rights through illegal and illegal means such as protests and demonstrations in front of businesses or governments. In general, consumers should try to negotiate amicably with the merchant first. If this is unsuccessful, consumers may consider seeking help from the appropriate authorities, for example by contacting a consumer association. If none of these attempts resolve the issue, the consumer may then choose to contact the media to defend his or her rights. As always, I am opposed to offline protests and demonstrations, which are not rational or legal.

**Y:** Many consumers are currently safeguarding their rights through short videos and short video platforms, have you seen any?

**19:** I have seen many of these short videos on different platforms. This is an unprecedented new form of consumer activism strategy. In the earliest days, before the internet became popular, consumers would contact the media directly if they wanted to defend their rights. Then later, when the internet was popular but social media was not as developed as it is now, many consumers would use forums or blogs to express their grievances. I was responsible for the management and maintenance of some of the forums, and at that time we had a special section for consumer activism, where consumers would post their grievances in a combination of text and pictures. But at that time, our forum was not very influential and did not attract much social attention. Nowadays, Weibo and Douyin are very popular and these new technologies provide new platforms for consumers to defend their rights. Short videos are spreading very fast and short videos posted by consumers can attract a lot of attention in a very short period of time.

**Y:** How do you see the role of short videos and short video platforms in consumer activism in China today?

**19:** This question needs to be answered from two perspectives. From the consumer's point of view, they are definitely playing an active role. Short videos are able to attract the attention of the public and the media to a certain extent, thus helping consumers to solve their problems, which is a very good thing. Put differently, short videos and short video platforms provide a new and effective channel for consumers. At the same time, the emergence of these short videos is actually a reminder to businesses that their products and services are still flawed and need further improvement. If a company's products are of good quality, there will be no such cases. But on the other hand, this is not the right way to enforce your rights. Some of the short videos posted by consumers may affect the social order, reduce the credibility of government departments and cause other consumers to follow suit. From this perspective, these tactics are negative. My advice to consumers who want to defend their rights is that if their legitimate rights are infringed by a business, they should contact the media or the relevant government department, such as a consumer association, to defend their rights rationally.

**Y:** Do you think that most of the current consumer activism incidents in China are caused by the general interest of the society or by the personal interest of the consumers?

**19:** At the moment, I think that consumers are currently choosing to defend their rights more for their benefit. Most of the cases I have seen are because consumers have been harmed. However, in many cases, although a consumer was safeguarding his or her interests, what he or she was doing was actually helpful to many consumers and even to society as a whole. These cases can raise society's awareness of certain types of incidents, help government departments in their management, and promote progress in society as a whole.

**Y:** What do you think about the role of relevant government departments in the process of consumers protecting their rights and interests?

**19:** Government departments certainly play an important role in this process. Whether it is consumer associations or market supervision departments, they were set up to better protect the legitimate rights of consumers and they were set up to help solve consumers' problems. If these departments do not help consumers to solve their problems, then there is no point in them continuing to exist. Every year we report on the annual summaries of the work of these

departments and we sort out how many problems they have solved for consumers in the course of the year. In my opinion, they have all done well so far.

**Y:** How do you see the role of media played in consumer activism?

**19:** It is undeniable that media intervention can help consumers solve many problems. This is because media exposure can quickly draw the attention of the relevant government departments. But sometimes media intervention can also have certain side effects. For example, after the media has reported on the irregularities of a business, it can cause the public to resent the whole industry in which the business operates. This actually hurts the legitimate businesses in the same industry as the business being exposed. For example, if we expose a hotel's irregularities, this may lead to a distrust of the entire hotel industry by consumers. So, media exposure is a double-edged sword. While it can solve problems for consumers, it can also harm legitimate businesses.

**Y:** Do you use the short videos posted by consumers as news leads in your work? Or do you use the videos they post as evidence for your stories?

**19:** Generally speaking, I would use the short videos posted by consumers as news leads, and I would use them as an entry point for a news report.

**Y:** Do you think it is more effective for consumers to defend their rights by using short video tactics? Is this more effective at attracting media attention?

**19:** Posting short videos on these platforms is actually an effective way to reach the media, just as effective as the traditional calling a tip line, tweeting and blogging. But for the moment, short videos are currently more popular, so they are a better channel compared to other channels.

**Y:** Have you encountered any obstruction from the relevant government departments in the course of reporting on consumer activism cases?

**19:** This does not normally happen.

**Y:** Have you encountered any obstacles from businesses or companies in the course of reporting on consumer activism cases in the past?

**19:** I encounter this situation quite often. Because now all official media institutions in China are no longer receiving financial support from the state, we need to run our own business and be self-sustainable. Under this premise, we need to engage in some commercial cooperation with companies, for example, to promote their products or services. When we report on consumer activism cases, we sometimes encounter situations where the company that the consumer is complaining about happens to be one of our advertisers, in which case it is not easy for us to report on such cases. However, we do pass on the consumer's demands to our clients so that they can resolve the consumer's problem as soon as possible.

### **Interviewee 39, Female, Brand Specialist**

**Y:** Have you encountered any cases of consumer activism at work? How difficult do you think it is for consumers to successfully safeguard their rights and get compensation from businesses?

**39:** From my point of view, I think it is really difficult for consumers to defend their rights nowadays, especially when they are in disputes with large corporations. I think there are two reasons for this situation, first, there are too few channels for consumers to legally and effectively protect their rights, and it is difficult for consumers to find these channels. As ordinary people, when their consumer rights and interests are violated, they really don't know which department to contact. Even if you can find the responsible government department, you don't really know if and when your problem will be solved. From my perspective as a PR officer, many of the ways in which companies handle such consumer complaints actually discourage consumers from safeguarding their rights and interests.

For example, we have a very good relationship with the media, and this partnership can hinder consumers from getting help from the media. In general, many consumers who are unable to resolve their problems through the relevant authorities will go to the media in the hope that they can get the media to report on their misfortune, thereby drawing the attention of public opinion and using it to put pressure on companies and the government to resolve their problems. However, large companies such as ours generally have very good relationships with the media, so the media are generally reluctant to report on disputes that occur between consumers and us, which results in consumers not being able to get help from the media. This happens all the time.

**Y:** Why are short videos and short video platforms, such as Douyin, so popular?

**39:** In the era of information explosion, everyone has a lot of channels to obtain information. The dynamic images in short videos coupled with addictive music can attract people's attention in a short period of time. Especially nowadays, people have a lot of fragmented time, which in turn creates opportunities for the popularity of short videos.

**Y:** Among the different social media platforms and short video platforms, which do you think is the most efficient medium to disseminate information, text, pictures or short videos?

**39:** Short videos. Like I just said, short videos catch everyone's attention quickly. Nowadays on social media, if you want to make something clear, you should definitely have short videos in your posts in addition to using text and pictures.

**Y:** From a professional PR official perspective, how do you see the role of short video platforms in Chinese consumer activism?

**39:** I think it's positive. Like I just said, at present, it is still very difficult for Chinese consumers to defend their rights. Short video platforms, short videos, these new technologies actually give consumers a new tool, they can use this tool to amplify their voices. Short videos can be used as good evidence to show the experience of consumers to society. When your consumer rights are violated, you can take out your phone and record your experience. This kind of short video without post-editing is very convincing.

**Y:** Have you ever encountered "shuijun" on social media platforms?

**39:** Of course.

**Y:** Do you think these “shuijun” will prevent people from knowing the truth? Or in other words, do you think these “shuijun” will prevent consumers from defending their rights?

**39:** Sure, I think the influence of the “shuijun” is quite strong.

**Y:** Will your company use “shuijun” to maintain your company’s brand image?

**39:** Yes, we will.

**Y:** What do you think of the role the media played in Chinese consumer activism incidents?

**39:** The media plays a very important role in these cases. The mainstream media, in particular. Consumers’ problems will be quickly solved if they are reported by the mainstream media. The media exposure will make consumers’ unfortunate stories known to more and more people, and the companies involved in these stories will have to step in and respond to consumers’ demands. This is often the case with us.

**Y:** Apart from the “shuijun” you just mentioned, what other ways does your company use to reduce the adverse effects of such incidents on your company?

**39:** Our company has a 24-hour-a-day consumer opinion monitoring team, they will proactively search for content related to our company on various social media platforms, including those short video platforms, once they find some negative content, like short videos posted by a consumer about our company, they will let us know then we will contact the consumer first and ask her to actively delete the short video she posted, at the same time we will also contact our after-sales team and ask them to resolve the problem for the consumer. We have observed that most of the videos posted by consumers are similar in content. They usually film quality issues with the renovations in their homes, and while doing so, they explain to the viewer what the problems are inside their homes and ask why our company has not solved these problems for them. These short videos do get our attention because they are valid proof that our company’s products do have quality issues.

**Y:** If there is a media report on a consumer activism case related to your company, will you be pressured by the relevant government departments?

**39:** Definitely. If the problems encountered by consumers are indeed due to our business, then we will be criticised by the media and the relevant government departments. These government departments sometimes even specify that we are in breach of certain business practices, and we will be penalised. Whether it is a financial or administrative penalty imposed on us by the government department, we will be very active in co-operating, accepting the penalty, carrying out rectification and solving the consumer’s problem. You definitely don’t want to go against the government. **When local government departments and the media are both paying attention to it [short video evidence posted by consumers], we will solve their [consumers’] problems more actively than before.**

**Y:** You said earlier that the company you work for has a very good relationship with the media, in what ways do you usually maintain a good relationship between your company and the media?

**39:** We want to be friends with journalists. We invite them to dinners and parties, and we take the initiative to inquire or ask about their hobbies and topics of interest. We will find out what they like, cater for their interests. We also invite them to events that they are interested in. In addition to this, we gave all female journalists we know a gift on the international women's day, we invited journalists and their children to participate in our free summer vacation parent-child tourism activities.

**By doing this, we are able to build a closer relationship with media professionals, which makes it easier for us to maintain our company's brand image. For example, when they find news stories related to us, positive or negative, they will inform us in advance before reporting it, and we are then able to proactively contact these consumers to resolve the issues raised by them.**

If the media has to report on these consumer stories, we will contact them and ask them to "tuomin", which means that they will try not to mention our company's name or the names of our products when reporting on these stories, so as to minimise the damage to our company's brand image caused by these news reports. After all, there is a Chinese saying that "good news goes on crutches, bad news travels fast", and companies certainly don't want the media to spread bad news about them.

**Y:** How do you feel about consumers using short videos as tactics to defend their rights?

**39:** I think these short video tactics that consumers are using has changed the way we work to a certain extent, we used to not be proactive about the complaints that consumers were making about our business on social media platforms. But now we are proactively monitoring the various platforms to identify these consumers' grievances and try to address them before they are brought to the attention of the media and the public. In fact, these short video tactics adopted by consumers are to a certain extent driving our own development, forcing us to focus more on the quality of our products. **Because only when problems are found can they be solved. The emergence of a [complaining] short video notices us that our products or management must be problematic, it helps us to locate the problems we do not know.** At the same time, our companies can also use the short video platform to better promote our products and services.

If the content of the short videos posted by consumers is true, then more or less these contents will damage the brand image of the company, **because the short video itself spreads fast, and it can attract media attention easily. We do not want to see this happen because potential consumers may not buy our products if they see the news.** Actually, I think the short video strategy adopted by consumers is actually lacking in regulation. We have come across a lot of inaccurate short video content posted by consumers. Even if we finally came forward to clarify that the situation shown in the short videos was not true, these short videos did a lot of damage to our corporate brand image.



**Interviewee 50, Male, Key informant, spokesman (CA)**

**Y:** Can you tell us how you help consumers to protect their legal rights? Can you give a brief overview of your workflow?

**50:** Receiving complaints from consumers is an important job function given to us by the Consumer Rights Protection Law. Our Guangdong Consumers' Association, including those in Guangdong's prefecture-level cities, all have this responsibility to receive complaints from consumers and help them solve their problems.

Today, the channels through which consumer associations receive complaints from consumers are very diverse. In some economically developed places, such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou, consumer associations have their websites and mobile phone apps where consumers can lodge complaints. Of course, we also have complaint hotlines. Currently, in Guangdong province, about 80% to 90% of complaints come from websites and mobile apps.

**Y:** I understand that many cities' consumer associations have now opened accounts on various short video platforms, what do you think of this situation?

**50:** Some provincial and municipal consumer associations have indeed done these, such as the Nanjing Consumer Association. However, the main role of their accounts is to educate consumers, for example by reminding them which products are harmful, or by introducing them to new consumer scams and reminding them not to fall into these kinds of online traps. The content of these short videos is of more interest to consumers as they are more appealing to consumers than pictures or text.

**Y:** What do you think about the previous Mercedes incident (the "Tearful Protest on Mercedes Hood" case) and the latest short video activism tactics adopted by many consumers?

**50:** They use short videos to attract more attention, with the ultimate aim of using public opinion to pressure businesses to achieve their own goals or to alert other consumers to such consumer traps. Consumers are free to use these tactics to defend their rights, and we do not prevent consumers from doing so.

However, we do not encourage people to use these tactics to defend their rights. **Because these tactics induce the public to do the same thing, and reduce the credibility of reasonable dispute resolution methods encouraged by the government in front of the public.** Or in other words, they should post short videos on Douyin, instead of contacting us. In fact, we recommend that consumers go through the officially recommended channels to safeguard their rights. We have been advocating for years that people should defend their rights rationally, but this incident has given people a bad example of how to defend their rights. In fact, when we help consumers solve their problems, we generally help them in accordance with legal procedures, rather than encouraging them to imitate female Mercedes-Benz owners and irrationally defend their rights. However, as I said at the beginning, consumers are free to choose whether to assert their rights in this way. **It does work, consumers successfully get what they want [by adopting the short video activism tactics], consumers are free to use these tactics as long as the short video content posted by consumers does not involve illegal content. These tactics are not illegal, but we [CA] do not encourage Chinese consumers to use them.**

**Y:** Just now you said that these tactics do work, does it mean that these tactics adopted by the consumer can attract the attention of consumer associations and relevant government departments?

**50:** They do indeed get our attention. Because these short videos can easily attract public attention. Governments everywhere are now taking public opinion very seriously. Especially public opinion in the consumer sector. Because once such an incident occurs in a certain city, this can have a very bad impact on the local government. Therefore, it is inevitable that a case like the Mercedes-Benz incident will attract the attention of the relevant government departments. Especially when it involves some important local enterprises or the image of the local government, the government will definitely pay special attention to it. Each city in Guangdong Province has its public opinion monitoring department, which will immediately report to the government once relevant situations are discovered.

**Y:** What do you think are the reasons behind the short video activism tactics used by consumers, from the perspective of the relevant government departments?

**50:** Our country's consumption is currently developing very rapidly, and the scale of consumption, and the structure of consumption, is changing every day. In addition to traditional offline consumption patterns, the emergence of online shopping has also brought about a large number of consumer complaints, and in 2018, consumer complaints arising from online shopping accounted for a very large proportion of all the complaints we received throughout the year. Resolving these complaints can consume considerable time for the relevant local authorities. This is a direct result of the fact that consumers often do not get an effective response in a timely manner when they asking help from official channels. In addition, the reason behind the short video activism tactics has to do with the entire set-up of government departments in our country. There are now two main departments dealing with consumer complaints: one is the newly formed market supervision administration, and the other is our consumer association. As a result of the streamlining of government departments, our consumer associations have more things to deal with, but our manpower has not been increased in response. The market supervision administrations are in the same position. After the streamlining and reform of government departments, they actually do not have a dedicated department to take up this area of consumer complaints. The department that used to specialise in handling consumer complaints has been abolished and they have even fewer staff to be able to handle these consumer complaints. In some cities, the consumer association is just an empty shell with no dedicated staff.

In addition, one of the main tools shared by market supervision administrations and consumer associations when dealing with consumer complaints is called "mediation". Mediation means that the consumer association acts as an intermediary to bring the business and the consumer together and then allows them to negotiate with each other on how to resolve the problem. During the mediation process, the consumer association will determine which party is at fault, based on the evidence provided by the consumer and the business, and suggest that the party at fault should respond to and compensate the complainant. If the parties are successful in their negotiations, a mediation agreement will be signed in the presence of the Consumer Association and this will represent a successful mediation. If the parties are not successful, then the consumer association will have no recourse but to advise the consumer to pursue his or her rights through legal proceedings.

There is, of course, a special case: if a business has caused significant damage to a consumer and has a bad attitude, refuses to admit fault and does not cooperate with the consumer association, the consumer association may choose to expose the business's faults to the media and use public pressure to force the business to admit its fault. However, this approach only affects those merchants who care about their corporate image. For businesses that don't care about their public image at all, this approach has no impact on them.

Having consumers go to court to sue businesses is not really a particularly good way, as it is very costly for consumers. Suing takes up a very large amount of your time and energy. This also leads to why consumers choose to use short videos to defend their rights rather than going through the legal route. By doing so, they can get the support of the public opinion, or the media, which can help consumers to resolve their problems more quickly.

**Y:** How do you see the role of media played in consumer activism?

**50:** As I said earlier, we also approach the media to expose unscrupulous businesses that do not cooperate with mediation. The media is our best comrade and our consumer association has always worked very well with the media.

The control of public opinion is now much stricter, so it is a little more difficult for us to work with the media than before. Because the state is now supporting the development of private enterprises, it is not easy for us to use the media to expose those unscrupulous enterprises. Once these enterprises are exposed, their operations will definitely be affected. But you should know that **“media exposure/coverage is one of the significant ways for us [CA] to make businesses admit their faults and to protect consumers from being deceived by businesses. Normally, businesses choose to immediately admit their mistakes and make compensation to consumers after we ask the media to expose their offences in most of the cases.** “Media exposure” is a very important tool for us to help consumers defend their rights and we have helped many consumers successfully defend their rights by doing so in the past. After companies' faults were exposed by the media, they immediately took consumers' complaints seriously and solved the problems raised by consumers as soon as possible. In fact, the consumer rights protection law mentions that “media exposure” is an important tool for consumer associations, in other words, this tool is protected by the consumer rights protection law, but now we cannot use this method to help consumers to defend their rights.

**Y:** In the light of your work experience, are most of the consumer complaints received by consumer associations still related to consumers' interests?

**50:** For the time being, most consumers tend to focus on their interests. In fact, when many consumers are protecting their rights now, they don't realize that their actions are not just helping themselves, they are actually speaking for all consumers in society. For example, if a consumer encounters a problem when buying a house and comes to the consumer association to complain, this consumer actually represents all consumers who have similar experiences with him. While he is helping himself, he is actually helping them safeguard their rights and interests.

**Y:** Do you encounter any obstacles from the companies when dealing with consumer complaints involving some of the larger companies? Do they actively cooperate with you?

**50:** Generally, the PR teams of large companies are afraid to argue with us or other relevant government departments. If they get into a dispute with us, it's actually very bad for them. For example, constant disputes with consumer associations or consumers can actually damage a company's corporate image in the public eye. In most cases, if consumer associations or other government departments contact these large companies and ask them to solve problems for consumers, large companies that care about the corporate image will be more active in their efforts to deal with these things.

**Y:** Do you think that short videos and various short video technologies will have an impact on the way consumers defend their rights and interests? From the perspective of the relevant government departments, how do you see these new technologies?

**50:** These new technologies undoubtedly help consumers to safeguard their legitimate rights and interests. These short video tactics, for example, can help consumers to solve their problems more efficiently. Now it's not just consumers, we are also trying to use short videos, live streaming technology and short video platforms to better enhance our work. But at the same time, the emergence of new technologies still needs to be backed up by supporting laws, regulations and systems. How do we respond to consumers who use these short video technologies to fulfil their unreasonable claims? What if the short videos posted by consumers are fake? How do we deal with it? Therefore, we must further improve the relevant laws and regulations so that new technologies and tools can help consumers solve their problems and we can also use these new technologies and tools to improve our work efficiency.