


# Short Video Activism *With* and *on* Douyin: An Innovative Repertoire of Contention for Chinese Consumers

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## Abstract

This article examines consumer video activism tactics in China and their impact on Chinese consumers and society. Drawing upon 56 semistructured interviews and a case study analysis of Chinese online consumer protest in 2018, we argue that short-video-activism tactics have become an innovative repertoire of contention for Chinese consumers and Douyin, the “sister app” of TikTok, has become a real-time updated database of this repertoire. Using Douyin as a case study, we argue that it plays three key roles in mediating Chinese consumer activism: a techno-cultural construct that affords highly heterogeneous users to present everyday experiences via short videos; a multisided market that profoundly affects the tactics consumers choose to amplify their voices; and a governing entity that both moderates content for its users and simultaneously is subject to government regulations.

## Keywords

Douyin, TikTok, consumer activism, short video, repertoire of contention, China

## Introduction

In July 2018, a viral video of a poor-quality electric shaver triggered Chinese online protests against Pinduoduo, an emerging e-commerce Chinese company controversial for selling counterfeit and substandard goods. In the video, the electric shaver’s trimming head did not work normally and was shown rotating at a high speed. When the consumer gently shook the shaver, the head fell to the ground, spinning like a toy top. This amusing video of a poor-quality electrical product triggered viral discussions in Chinese cyberspace and led to a large number of short videos posted on Douyin with hashtags such as #CounterfeitGoods, #DoNotBuyAnythingOnPDD, and #IBoughtThisFromPDD. As a result, Pinduoduo’s reputation was severely damaged, and the company was required by the Chinese government to better accommodate consumers’ rights. This online protest shows that Douyin has become a common tool for consumer activism in China.

Chinese consumers learn to use Douyin to safeguard their legitimate interests, because consumer support and legal protection cannot keep up with the fast-paced and ever-changing consumer society in China. Previous studies investigating consumer activism and its relationship with digital media technologies focused mostly on the Anglo-American contexts

(e.g., Gabriel & Lang, 2015; Heldman, 2017; Lekakis, 2013). Very little research has been conducted to understand consumer activism in post-socialist China and how Chinese consumers protest against corporations on social media, with the exception of a small number of studies (Treré & Yu, 2021; Yu, 2021). To fill this gap, this article draws upon theoretical discussions within the field of social movement studies, particularly the concept of “repertoires of contention,” examining consumer video activism tactics in China and their impact on Chinese consumers and society. We argue that short-video-activism tactics have become an innovative repertoire of contention for Chinese consumers, and Douyin has become a real-time updated database of this repertoire of contention.

Over the past decade, short-video-based (SVB) social media platforms in China have evolved at a remarkable speed. On the one hand, text- and image-based social media networks like Sina Weibo (a popular Chinese microblogging

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website launched in 2009) and WeChat (a Chinese instant messaging and social media app developed by Tencent, released in 2011) have supplemented their platforms with short video functions. On the other hand, new SVB platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou (a Chinese short-video sharing app founded in 2011, which is the main rival of Douyin) have penetrated into almost every aspect of their users' everyday lives, including job seeking, setting-up businesses, entertainment, social interaction, and consumption (Hou & Zhang, 2022). Among the Chinese social media platforms with short video functions, Douyin is the most fully-fledged: it has a very large user base, while providing an ecosystem with diverse complementors and rich technological functions including livestreaming, e-commerce and digital entrepreneurship.

Douyin and TikTok are "sister apps" run by the same parent company, ByteDance (Abidin, 2020). They share similar features in functionality, design, and interface to enable users to create, share, and view short videos, especially those with playful filters and audio-visual effects (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). However, the two apps have different user bases and are governed by different forces (Kaye et al., 2021). Compared with TikTok, Douyin's users are more diverse in age and educational backgrounds. The platform proudly celebrates this diversity, claiming that its users range from teachers based in rural China who record the impoverished living conditions that many local children face, to laid-off Chinese workers making a living live-streaming, to academic researchers sharing scientific knowledge (Douyin, 2020). Douyin's intuitive interface and heterogeneous user base transform the platform into a "video encyclopedia" of clips of ordinary Chinese people's everyday experiences (Z. Zhang, 2021). Moreover, with the largest user base in China (over 600 million by the end of 2020), Douyin stands out among Chinese SVB platforms by encouraging its users to "*jilu meihao shenghuo*" (record a beautiful life; 记录美好生活). This pursuit is embedded throughout Douyin's design architecture, recommendation algorithm, and governing policies. For example, Douyin assumes that all users utilize beauty filters by default—when a user records a video with the app, it automatically adds beauty filters—and discourages the spread of unstylish, vulgar, harmful, and negative content through moderation (Douyin, 2022). This strategy not only coheres with the state's emphasis on "positive energy" (Chen et al., 2021) but also persuades users to prettify themselves and their everyday lives with commodities, advancing consumerism in contemporary China.

Acknowledging these differences helps to challenge the mischaracterization of Douyin as merely a Chinese version of TikTok. This study elucidates the ways in which Douyin shapes popular cultures and social movements in China. In line with van Dijck (2013) and Gillespie (2017), we consider Douyin as having three key roles in mediating Chinese consumer activism: a techno-cultural construct that affords highly heterogeneous users to present their everyday experiences

with short videos; a multisided market that profoundly affects the tactics consumers choose to amplify their voices; and a governing entity that both moderates content for its users and simultaneously is subject to government regulations. Keeping this in focus, this study aims to answer the following questions: Why has posting short videos on Douyin become a widely accepted tactic in Chinese consumer activism? How has it become an effective part of the repertoires of contention? Why does Douyin become the primary choice for Chinese consumers to protest for their rights? What kind of tactics do consumers use on Douyin and to what extent does the platform distort and discipline their expressions? How does the architecture of Douyin interact with and reshape users' agency, and vice versa, in the context of contemporary Chinese consumer activism?

This article begins by discussing the concept of "repertoires of contention" and reviewing the history of consumer activism in China. It then introduces the research methodology, which combines in-depth semistructured interviews with a case study analysis of the 2018 online consumer protest against Pinduoduo. The remainder presents the research findings, focusing on three key themes: first, Chinese consumers perceived that posting short videos on Douyin is an effective contentious repertoire and chose to use it to safeguard their rights, because of the opportunities of both short videos and the digital platform itself; second, Douyin, as a multisided market where multiple players can engage on the same platform with different motivations, shapes short video consumer activism with a particular "*naoda*" tactic (to make a fuss over; 闹大), which refers to Chinese consumers' strategic practices to achieve greater public visibility. This foregrounds attention and visibility as an essential element to utilize short videos as a contentious repertoire. Finally, Chinese short video consumer activism has been legitimized and simultaneously disciplined as an individual-oriented conflict between consumers and companies. This has arguably established Douyin as an objective intermediary and has transformed conventional media institutions and Chinese local/central authorities into stronger advocates for consumer rights.

## "Repertoires of Contention"

According to Tilly (1995), repertoires of contention refer to "a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice," which emerge from real-world struggle instead of political propaganda, abstract philosophy, or static social principles (p. 42). Repertoires, including contentious claim-making and performance, are always deeply embedded in specific historical and socio-cultural contexts (Khazraee & Losey, 2016). Investigating which repertoires activists chose in a specific context and their perception of a particular repertoire as being more or less effective than others can help us better understand the dialectic relation between actors and constantly reconfiguring societal structures. The development of

information communication technologies has rendered social movements with many new repertoires since the early 2000s (Rolfe, 2005). Specifically, Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010) divide these new repertoires into internet-supported and internet-based, arguing that consumer activism in Western democracies is best understood as being internet-supported, which tends to facilitate information diffusion and enhance mobilization from offline to online environments. The deep embeddedness of the internet in ordinary people's everyday lives continues to raise new questions about using the internet as a repertoire of contention.

In the Chinese context, Liu (2019) uses the “repertoires of contention” to explore the ways in which anti-petrochemical protesters perceived and employed different digital media technologies to make political claims and fight against powerful authorities—resisting a local governmental decision to build para-xylene (PX) chemical factories between 2007 and 2014. Liu (2019) argues that using “repertoires of contention” to understand how digital technologies have become an indispensable part of contentious collective actions in China can help researchers overcome the “technological-fascination bias” highlighted by Mattoni and Treré (2014). This bias tends to see the use of media technologies as a “movement in itself,” 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” (Liu, 2019, p. 333). Moreover, the concept of “repertoires of contention” can help us move beyond an event-based approach, which fails to recognize the history of digitally mediated political contention. With this in mind, this study focuses on the evolving repertoires of contention among Chinese consumers and their choice of Douyin to protest against corporations. We aim to unpack the power dynamics between consumers, social media platforms, conventional media institutions, corporations, and the Chinese government.

Generally, two views prevail of social media's influence on reforming social movements with new repertoires of contention (Allam, 2014). Those broadly positive see social media as emancipatory, because ordinary people can speak for their rights with alternative channels and tactics, demonstrate their demands, and in so doing civil society and the public sphere is strengthened (Shirky, 2011). Others are skeptical of the role of social media, arguing that it can be systematically incorporated into state repression (Morozov, 2011). This study aims to go beyond this. We argue that social media should not be seen as a homogeneous digital technology inspiring similar sets of repertoires of contention. Instead, with different features, business models, and governing policies, digital platforms serve as microsystems where activists may engage with different repertoires to claim and perform their contentions. Drawing upon Liu's (2020) critical observation that repertoires of contention grow out of media affordances and simultaneously act as a by-product of everyday experiences, our study concentrates

on Douyin. We look at how and why Chinese consumers not only use short videos and Douyin, but perceive them as effective digital repertoires to participate in online activism.

## **From Anti-American Boycott to Short Video Consumer Activism: A Brief Review of Consumer Activism in China**

Consumer activism has long been “an opportunity for the relatively powerless individual consumers and workers to redress the imbalance in the marketplace” (Hawkins, 2010, p. 123). It has been seen as activism with “low risk and cost”—participants are at low risk of personal injury or arrest and do not need to invest a lot of time, effort, and resources in these activities (McAdam, 1986; Treré & Yu, 2021). A large body of academic literature has investigated consumer activism from different disciplinary perspectives (e.g., Lekakis, 2013; Minocher, 2019; Yu, 2021). As Yu (2021) observes, the existing literature on consumer activism has demonstrated that consumers adopt different tactics of activism for different objectives. Consumer activism tends to have different forms and characteristics in different socio-cultural contexts. For example, in his analysis of how North American consumers use the petition website Change.org to resist corporations, Minocher (2019) points out that the aggregation of negative comments toward a particular brand can successfully challenge company's misbehavior, if it can engage a considerable number of participants and mainstream media attention. But in China, consumers are more likely to use social media platforms such as Sina Weibo to express dissatisfaction with companies and boycott them. This is because with the pervasive censorship of mainstream media in China, social media arguably allows more freedom of expression (Tsai & Men, 2014).

Even on the same digital platform, consumer activism can manifest in different ways across countries due to cultural, historical, political, and regulatory differences. Taking TikTok as an example, social media influencers in the United States have used the platform to boycott Amazon to oppose the company's anti-union attitudes (Bonaventure, 2022). In contrast to these consumers who tend to express their political attitudes by means of consumer activism or even cancel culture—a recent form of boycott with complicated relationships among fans/consumers, celebrities, and brands (Ng, 2022), consumer activism on Douyin is characterized by individuals' attempts to safeguard their personal interests. These differences cannot be fully understood without an exploration of the history of Chinese consumer activism.

In China, consumer activism has a long history, during which a variety of methods have been used to manifest and frame protests. As early as 1905, middle-class people in urban China had chosen to boycott American goods and protest on the streets against the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882—a U.S. federal law prohibiting immigration of Chinese

laborers. This is considered one of the earliest consumer activism movements in modern Chinese history, teaching Chinese consumers for the first time that their buying power matters. Another example of consumer activism before the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) occurred in the early 1930s as a response to Japan's aggression in Shanghai. Local business associations organized Chinese people to march onto the streets, demanding boycotts against Japanese-made products and encouraging consumers to support Chinese domestic brands. As these historical examples illustrate, boycotts and buycotts were the common repertoire of contention in the early history of Chinese consumer activism, but they also crystallized the intertwined relationship between nation/state, corporations, and consumers.

From the foundation of PRC in 1949 until 1978, China maintained a centrally planned economy. The state directed and controlled the economy, setting production goals, allocating resources, and controlling commodity prices. Chinese people wanting to buy certain commodities needed to provide corresponding coupons, in addition to paying for the goods. Arguably, there was no "consumer" in China during this period, only "demanders" and "suppliers." The concept of "consumer" was reborn in 1978, the year of China's economic reform. As a result, productivity and imports increased. More and more domestic and foreign commodities appeared on the market, and consequently, Chinese people enjoyed greater choice. Between 1994 and 2003, mainland China was the world's fastest-growing consumer market, and the buying power of Chinese consumers progressively increased. Corresponding laws and regulations to protect consumers began to be introduced by the government (Overby, 2006).

An appreciation of the Chinese Consumers Association (CCA) is essential in understanding the development of consumer activism in China. The CCA was founded in 1984 by the Chinese government with the purpose of protecting consumers' rights and interests. Although CCA's mission parallels its Anglo-American counterparts, it is important to note that it is not independent. The CCA is supported and regulated by the Chinese government, through which the government can exert control over consumer issues and policies (Overby, 2006). Therefore, unlike Anglo-American consumer organizations, it cannot confront the government or initiate a collective boycott or protest. As China's market economy has grown, the CCA has greatly expanded and developed its local branches across the country. At the same time, the "complaint caseload has steadily increased each year as consumers' awareness of their rights has risen" (Overby, 2006, p. 372). Since the 2010s, Chinese people have begun to assert their consumer rights and interests through various legal approaches, litigating and seeking help from the CCA and other governmental departments. The CCA has undoubtedly empowered Chinese consumers to protect their rights and interests. Nevertheless, due to the underdevelopment of China's consumer protection laws and regulations, the CCA's capacity is insufficient to meet the

dramatically increased needs and expectations of the ever-expanding population of Chinese consumers (Yu, 2021). Chinese consumers therefore seek alternative ways to protect and assert their rights.

With the development of information communication technologies, Chinese consumers have adopted online communication strategies to achieve the goals of their activism movements just like their Anglo-American counterparts (Handelman, 2013), giving rise to online consumer activism in China. Chinese online consumer activism can be understood as having generally taken place in three waves (Yu, 2021). The first wave started in the late 1990s, with the internet being introduced to China. Chinese consumers started to use online forums, the Bulletin Board System, as well as online petition websites to enact activism tactics. A well-known example of this is the "Toshiba Incident." In 2000, Toshiba refused to compensate Chinese purchasers for an alleged flaw in their laptops. Consequently, some angry consumers harshly criticized the brand and through online forums called for a boycott, causing the sales of Toshiba laptops to plummet.

The second wave started around the 2010s, with the rise of social media platforms. The emergence of Chinese social networking sites, such as Sina Weibo and WeChat, provided extensive new platforms for Chinese consumers. During the second wave, some Chinese celebrities and internet influencers started to join ordinary Chinese people in utilizing social media to organize and participate in online consumer activism, reporting and boycotting unscrupulous companies.

The third wave started in 2014, with the emergence of SVB social media platforms, such as Douyin and Kuaishou. Chinese consumers gained new ways to speak up for themselves, attract media attention, and consequently, pressure businesses to recompense them (Yu, 2021). Short videos, in particular those produced with mobile devices and lasting less than 60s, have become significant in mediating today's cultural production and online sociality, both in China and globally. A growing body of academic literature argues that TikTok and its predecessor Musical.ly, have profoundly reshaped people's (especially young people's) political expression and participation in social movements (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019), particularly regarding the issues of race (Zhao & Abidin, 2021), gender and sexuality (Simpson & Semaan, 2021), age (Zeng & Abidin, 2021), and climate change (Hautea et al., 2021). In terms of online consumer activism, Perera et al. (2022) point out that while consumer activists continue to adopt many of the same online strategies and tactics including digital petitions, e-funding, and exposure (disclosure of confidential information), "they capitalize on technological innovations and the growth of other platforms (i.e., Twitter, Instagram, TikTok) to further their causes" (p. 463). However, very little research has been conducted into understanding how people become engaged in meaningful activism through SVB social media, especially in the Chinese context, though 87.8% of the country's over 1

billion internet-accessible population use SVB social networking sites (CNNIC, 2021). This study attempts to fill this gap by exploring short video consumer activism on Douyin. For Chinese consumers, Douyin is not just an intermediary facilitating their online participation and expressions. It also acts as an important mediator that deeply shapes their micro-actions due to its functionality and architecture.

## Research Methodology

This study combines qualitative semistructured interviews with a case study examination of Chinese online consumer activism. First, we conducted qualitative interviews to examine how and why the posting of short videos on Douyin has become a widely accepted contentious repertoire in Chinese consumer activism. Each interview lasted an average of 60 min. They were conducted between February and May 2019. This period was chosen deliberately to coincide with World Consumer Rights Day on March 15, a major media event for Chinese consumers and companies. During this period, the Chinese public tends to pay extra attention to the issues of consumer rights protection and Chinese consumers are more willing to participate in discussions on relevant topics (Zhu, 2013). We interviewed 56 participants living in mainland China, recruited through both snowball and convenience sampling methods.

The interviewees engaged in short video consumer activism in four roles: Chinese consumers and consumer activists ( $N=15$ ), media practitioners ( $N=15$ ), branding and public relations professionals ( $N=14$ ), and local government officials ( $N=12$ ). Semistructured interviews are a deliberate integration of diverse experiences and perspectives (even conflictual perspectives) from people coming from different backgrounds to create a comprehensive understanding of how meanings are constructed (Dicks et al., 2006). While not all of the interviewees self-identified as consumer activists, all are familiar with SVB social media platforms and all have rich experiences in either participating or observing online consumer protests against companies. Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis method, we analyzed the interview data to identify initial themes, which led to a focus on the affordances of short video and Douyin, interviewees' perceptions and experiences of short video activism repertoires, and the overall working process of this tactic. In our analysis, pseudonyms are used to remove identifying information.

Second, we focused on a case study analysis of an online consumer protest against Pinduoduo in 2018. In contrast to other radical cases in China, for instance, "the protest of Chengdu homebuyers" investigated by Treré and Yu (2021), our case study focuses on a more common consumer practice where the tactics adopted are less risky, less costly, and less aggressive. Therefore, in line with scholars such as Wang (2019) who points out that Chinese millennials are experimenting with nonconfrontational activism in innovative ways,

we argue that activism does not always manifest with radical rebellion or direct opposition to state authorities, but can appear in low key, nonconfrontational, and even playful formats. The research method of case study, as Yin (2018) argues, can be used 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" (p. 23). We therefore consider the online consumer protest in question as an individual unit of the larger picture of Chinese online consumer activism. With detail, richness, and depth of understanding how different participants act during the process, our case study demonstrates the evolving trajectories of an individual SVB consumer protest. The data in this case study comes from archived information drawn from various publications and websites, including user-generated and professional videos, media outlets, online discussions and comments, corporate news releases, and government documents.

We also conducted online observations on Douyin between March and May 2019, to identify a suitable case. Daily observation processes were as follows: searching specific Chinese words on Douyin, such as "xiaofeizhe" (consumer; 消费者), "weiquan" (safeguard legal rights; 维权), "jianshang" (profiteer; 奸商), and recording results; observing trending hashtags and topics on Douyin; monitoring for texts, images, clips that are closely related to consumer activism, and following relevant users. As a result, the Pinduoduo case was selected, pursuant to the case selection criteria suggested by Treré and Yu (2021), namely, short video led, limited timeframe, cross-platform, media exposure, public concern, government response, and enterprise response. Data were primarily collected online through keyword searching on Douyin and Baidu (the largest Chinese-language search engine). We coded the data with observational notes, including "time" (i.e., when certain short videos appeared, when certain government departments and Pinduoduo responded to the consumers and the online protest), "news coverage" (i.e., news reports mentioning the online protest), "types of media" (i.e., local, regional, or central media organizations; whether they are using SVB social media platforms), "action" (i.e., how certain government departments and Pinduoduo responded to the online protest and their follow-up actions), and so on. We combined datasets in our analysis, situating them in a broader context of consumer activism in China that is constantly (re)shaped by social, political, cultural, and technological power dynamics.

## Short Videos on Douyin as an Effective Repertoire of Contention

Chinese consumers hoping to safeguard their interests choose their protest repertoire from the available stock, just like all other protesters (Liu, 2020). In contemporary Chinese society, where digital platforms infiltrate profoundly into everyday life, the practical constitution of repertoire grows out of the affordance of certain media and digital technologies

through people's everyday experiences (Crossley, 2002), especially when offline methods contribute little to protecting individual rights. We follow the basic definition of affordance here, using it to describe what media technologies allow people to do. We pay attention to two aspects of affordance: (1) the features or functions of both short videos and Douyin as a platform, and (2) the contextual structures that shaped these features (Bucher & Helmond, 2017). As affordance provides possibilities and opportunities for actions rather than prescribing a definite approach, we attempt to interpret it with the perspective of repertoire of contention in specific context among concrete agents (Liu, 2020). Particularly, we concentrate on how users perceive the process of posting short videos on Douyin and the use of certain socio-technical features of the platform. We also consider how these users' perceptions reconfigure their motivations, strategies, and actions in order to achieve separate goals.

Over half of interviewees believed that speaking out about unsatisfactory consumer experiences through media, especially social media, was the only way to protest against corporations. For instance, Liu (a consumer activist) observed that

Social media helps Chinese consumers resolve problems faster than other formal ways suggested by the government. It is very difficult to get a timely response when seeking help from government departments or directly negotiating with the businesses. Although social media platforms are not responsible for my financial loss, they allow and help me to spread my unfortunate stories. [...] Our problems are resolved much faster when we post these complaints on Sina Weibo.

Chinese consumers learn to post short videos on Douyin as a repertoire to protest against corporations, for two key reasons. First, with their authenticity, objectivity, attractiveness, and immersiveness, interviewees perceived short video as a powerful medium to communicate substandard consumer experiences to broader audiences. Interviewees generally considered Douyin's short videos as being authentic and objective, making the platform a new expressive medium, enabling Douyin to distinguish itself among Chinese microblogging social networking sites. For example, reflecting on his previous experience of using Sina Weibo to defend his rights as a consumer, Qiang (a professional photographer) argued that short videos on Douyin are more authentic than plain text and pictures on microblogging sites, and more importantly, they can be used as legal proof. According to China's Supreme People's Court (2019), electronic files such as videos can serve as trustworthy evidence in China. The short videos on Douyin are therefore used as legal evidence, as long as they are not falsified or artificially compiled.

Short videos on Douyin are not only an authentic record but can generate immediate impact and attract attention from a wide audience. As another interviewee, Zan (a website editor) indicated, "short videos filmed by the consumers are

very impressive. They are widely circulated and re-posted on Douyin and other social media, and consequently, more and more people start to pay attention." Moreover, viewing short videos on Douyin tends to create an immersive atmosphere, making some consumers realize that sharing the injustice they encountered on Douyin could be an effective activism method. For instance, Xian (an audio dubbing specialist) recalled his experience of watching a short video about local consumer activism:

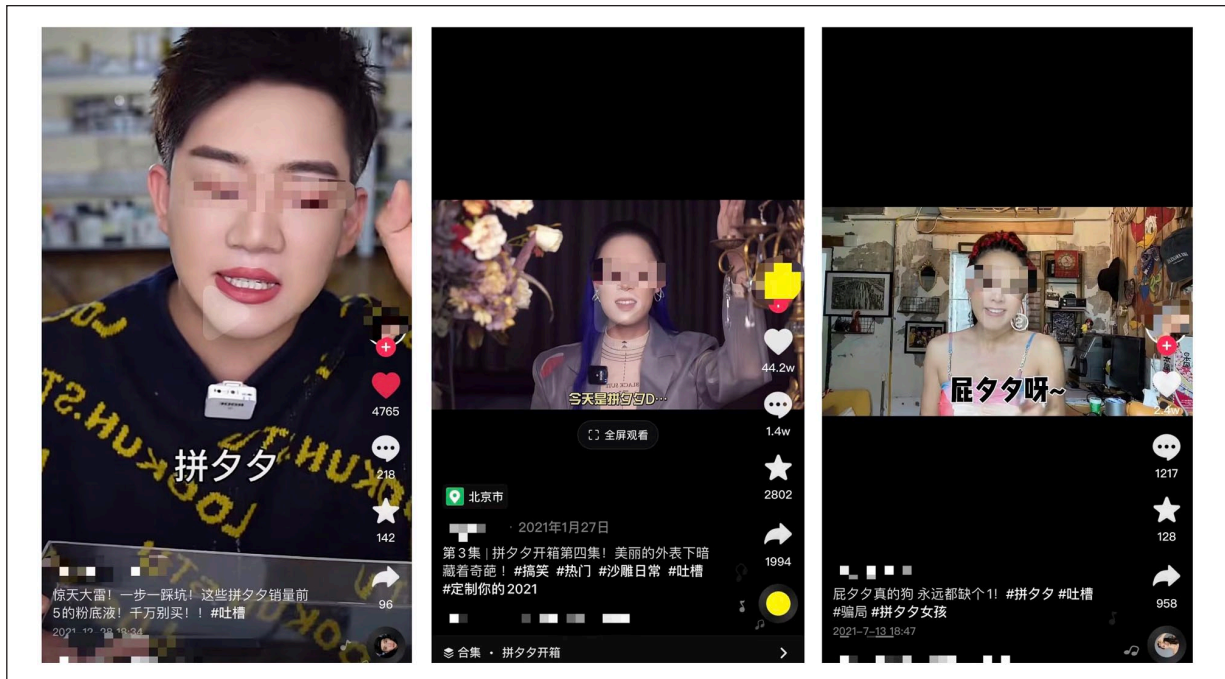
A group of landlords was blocking the entrance gate of the local government public service hall, yelling for the authority to help them recover their financial losses. I was deeply impressed by this video. I felt like I was there with them. I could feel their anger and grievances.

In this vein, short videos on Douyin not only allow its users to "be on the scene," but more importantly, enable them to empathize with other protesters and evoke solidarity.

Second, Douyin facilitates the contentious repertoire, particularly via its intuitive user experience, which simplifies creating and sharing videos for users who are from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. With over 600 million users, Douyin has become a "video encyclopedia" of clips of ordinary Chinese people's everyday experiences (Z. Zhang, 2021), including those who are older, not tech-savvy, and socio-economically disadvantaged. Many interviewees highlighted that for the elder generation, posting short videos on Douyin is a better choice, compared with using text to express dissatisfaction on microblogging sites, because the process is very straightforward. For instance, as Bing (a consumer) observed, "my parents know nothing about the internet, but they are able to record a short video with their phones and post it online."

Although this "video encyclopedia" serves as a profitable database from the company's perspective, it also becomes a useful source for Chinese consumers to seek information and practical knowledge (Lu & Lu, 2019). On the default "recommend" channel of Douyin (an equivalent to TikTok's "For You Page"), users engage with content of this "video encyclopedia," where consumer complaints are intertwined with news, educational information, commercials, life tips, and so on. Being deeply embedded in people's daily experiences, the short videos are more likely to be perceived as an effective repertoire once a viewer encounters similar problems. Therefore, Douyin stands out among SVB platforms in China for its ease of use, particularly among those who are not tech-savvy enough to engage with other digital tools. It also becomes a primary option when consumers try to safeguard their own interests, as the platform has already infiltrated users' everyday experiences (Morris & Murray, 2018).

More specifically, ordinary Chinese consumers learn Douyin's rich affordances from daily engagement with the platform. As Douyin becomes an essential part of the everyday media culture of many Chinese people (Z. Zhang, 2021),



**Figure 1.** Screenshot of Chinese consumers who complained of poor-quality skincare products sold on Pinduoduo, wearing make-up to “beautify” their videos to attract more attention on Douyin.

its users gradually get used to expressing all kinds of opinions on the platform, including their unsatisfactory experiences with brands and products. Specifically, consumers who are adept on Douyin often use various creative features to boost their visibility and amplify their voices so as to efficiently spread their complaints further in the algorithm-mediated environment. The most frequently used features include filters, effects, stickers, background music, hashtags and trending topics and locations. With these features, consumers often intentionally glamorize their videos in line with Douyin’s preferences, namely to “record a beautiful life,” and therefore, enhance the appeal of their user-generated short videos on the platform. For example, we observed that Douyin users, regardless of gender, wore make-up to stylize their videos and present themselves as qualified commenters when complaining of inferior skincare products sold on Pinduoduo (see Figure 1).

Both the perceived affordances of short videos—authenticity, objectivity, attractiveness, and immersiveness—and the everyday engagements on the platform establish sharing of experiences in short videos on Douyin as a feasible and effective repertoire. More importantly, once the short video repertoire is widely accepted, it constrains the effectiveness of other repertoires (Liu, 2020), such as seeking assistance from the CCA. For instance, Tan (a graduate student) argued that protesting online is more effective than doing it offline as the consumers’ stories can be seen by other consumers and the company in question: “once your story is successfully spread on the platform, the company that violates your rights

will notice you, and they will resolve your problem as soon as they can to protect their brand image.”

### Short Video Activism With a “Naoda” Tactic

With the affordances of authenticity, attractiveness, immersiveness, simplicity, and mundanity, consumers perceive posting short videos on Douyin as an effective contentious repertoire and employ it to safeguard their consumer rights. However, Douyin is not just a platform that facilitates activists’ protests, but also mediates and restructures this process. As a multisided market where many players can engage on the same platform with different motivations (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016), Douyin shapes short video activism with a particular “naoda” tactic, which seeks attention and visibility as essential elements to use short videos as an effective contentious repertoire. According to Treré and Yu (2021), “naoda” (闹大) refers to the practice of Chinese consumers uploading short videos about unsatisfactory consumer experiences, making a fuss over their grievances, letting as many people as possible hear their distress, to receive the maximum compensation from corporations. To “naoda” one’s story on Douyin, consumers need not only to expose their individual experiences to different stakeholders, including businesses, different types of media, and government officials but also to develop various tactics to sensationalize their experiences to grab public attention. Some government officials stated during our

interviews that based on their own working experience, consumers' *naoda* tactics will not be supported if they will damage the reputation of the government and social stability. Chinese consumers need to pay careful attention to this when "*naoda-ing*" their stories.

As Chinese consumers have noticed, many companies use Douyin to maintain their brand image, promote their products, and monitor consumer sentiment to promptly respond (J. Zhang, 2020). This particularly matters for large corporations as they tend to receive widespread media attention and perceive their public image as a crucial element for future development. As a member of the marketing team of her real estate company, Hei (a senior brand manager) described Douyin as an essential marketing tool to promote her company's products and brand image in China, arguing that "digital marketing on Douyin will continue to flourish in China over the next few years." Similar to consumer perception that digital activism methods are more effective to protect their own rights than traditional routes, companies believe that targeted advertising and live-commerce perform better than traditional media.

Chinese companies hunt for consumer complaints on Douyin to address them as quickly as possible. In the PR company where Kai (a brand manager) works, a team searches consumer complaints on Douyin 24 hours a day, and "once they discover a complaint, they will make every effort to solve it and then earnestly request the consumer to delete the video." Some companies believe that monitoring complaints on Douyin can help them discover product defects more effectively, and the process of solving consumers' complaints can also build up a responsible image. Nonetheless, what distinguishes short video activism as a more effective repertoire from the traditional consumer hotline is the visibility in front of various types of audiences. What worries these companies, especially their public relations teams, is not just the potential spread of negative information, but also whether the attitudes they used to deal with consumers' complaints are acceptable to the public or not. The highly surveillant environment where diverse audiences are constantly watching establishes short videos as an effective contentious repertoire for consumers to a certain extent.

In addition to individual end-users and corporations, influencers are very important on Douyin to connect brands with consumers, not only recommending commodities to targeted audiences but also unboxing and reviewing products. For example, Wei (a consumer activist and internet influencer), who co-founded a well-known influencer account on Douyin that has achieved a major impact regarding safety issues with children's products, observed that

Short videos are the developing trend of the communication medium, and it allows viewers to watch the programs conveniently on their smartphones, and they don't need to think carefully about the meaning of each word as they read newspapers . . . Our first video on Douyin won 100,000 views in just a few days. It was very difficult to obtain such an achievement before Douyin emerged.

In the 2018 online protest against Pinduoduo, where Chinese consumers complained about counterfeit products, influencers also intervened by sharing professional opinions via videos. This not only boosted their own visibility but also amplified the grassroots protests in China. For instance, in response to a protest on Douyin against "Vivi" smartphones (the counterfeit version of Vivo, a popular Chinese smartphone brand) on Pinduoduo, *Qiaowan keji* (playing with technology; 巧玩科技), a Chinese technology influencer, created a short video showcasing consumer feedback to demonstrate that Vivi performs poorly in all aspects, which further justified those consumers' complaints.

Conventional Chinese media institutions, both regionally and nationally, are the third important players in this multi-sided market as they simultaneously look for news and distribute content on Douyin. Amid the consumers' protests against Pinduoduo, the Politics and Law Program of Changsha Broadcast and Television Group, a local Chinese media group in Hunan Province, noticed the news value of this activism and posted a short video news report on Douyin. This short video criticized the proliferation of counterfeit goods on Pinduoduo, not only showcasing counterfeit goods but interviewing lawyers and scholars to receive their input on this case. Likewise, Chinese mainstream news organizations, such as *People's Daily* and Xinhua News Agency, also run accounts on Douyin. They are part of the governmental apparatus with the power to trigger higher regulatory entities to intervene.

Attracting attention from influencers and other media institutions can increase the reach of an individual consumer complaint on Douyin, but may also contribute to cross-platform visibility due to ByteDance's digital ecosystem. ByteDance owns not only Douyin and TikTok, but also a number of other SVB apps targeting user groups with different affordances (e.g., ByteDance owns Xigua Video, a Chinese online video-sharing platform with over 130 million active users that is famous for distributing professionally produced short or mid-length videos). While digital platforms run by different commercial institutions tend to be criticized as being a closed infrastructure, where their users are often discouraged to freely cross the boundaries (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013), this is not the case for ByteDance. ByteDance welcomes and encourages digital content transformation across the platforms it owns, as interplatform traffic can generate more profits (Liao, 2020). For Chinese consumer protesters, if their complaint could be re-posted and re-narrated by influencers or other media institutions on the multiple platforms owned by ByteDance, they can have more visibility, and therefore achieve their goals more effectively. It is therefore a win-win situation for both ByteDance and consumer protesters.

Repertoires, such as "*naoda*," are best understood as being modular, which may transfer across different contentious contexts (Tarrow, 1998). Thanks to its spreadability, the "*naoda*" tactic has been widely accepted in Chinese consumer activism. However, the repertoire can also achieve



new features under new circumstances with new media affordances. For example, in the above-mentioned 2018 protest against Pinduoduo, “*naoda*” features humorous viral memes to boost the visibility of individual consumer complaints.

## Disciplining Consumers’ Contentious Repertoires

Contentious repertoires are not just learned, shared, and enacted by individuals but shaped by structural social forces (Tilly, 1997). When Chinese consumers post short videos on Douyin to speak up for their rights, their contentious claim-makings and performances are also disciplined and regulated by three key structural actors: businesses as institutional platform users, Douyin as the seemingly objective platform, and different levels of government and public institutions. These three key actors manifest their disciplinary power according to different principles, while in some cases intertwining. This final section analyzes how these powerful social forces discipline consumers’ contentious repertoires on Douyin, particularly during Chinese consumers’ 2018 online protest against Pinduoduo.

As institutional users of Douyin, Chinese companies are keen to find consumers’ complaints and solve them as quickly as possible. However, when complaints move beyond individual-level interventions and start to form a collective online consumer activism, ordinary strategies employed by businesses may fail. For example, in the online protest against Pinduoduo in 2018, although the company held an urgent press conference to manage the crisis (at which most of the online consumer complaints were accused of being false), its response could not satisfy angry consumers and the circumstances went beyond Pinduoduo’s control. The escalated conflict between consumers and Pinduoduo soon attracted the attention of Chinese mainstream news media. As part of China’s political apparatus, several nationwide news organizations, including China News Agency and *The Worker’s Daily*, reported the issue (Yang, 2018). By criticizing Pinduoduo for selling counterfeit and poor-quality products, these news reports greatly justified the individual consumer’s complaints, and more importantly, triggered both central and local authorities (i.e., the Chinese State Administration for Market Regulation and Shanghai Bureau of Industry and Commerce) to intervene. This process not only legitimized Chinese consumers’ short video activism with a “*naoda*” strategy, but it has also disciplined their activism as an individual-oriented conflict between consumers and companies. The spread of consumer activism on Douyin particularly established it as an objective intermediary, making the media and the authorities more responsive to consumer’s concerns.

However, like other digital platforms, Douyin is not just taking increasing responsibilities to curate user-generated content and police users’ activities, but it is also facing a

wide array of restrictions via state and regional regulations (Gillespie, 2017). Operating in the Chinese context, Douyin has to follow Chinese laws, for example, to strictly prevent the spread of politically subversive information, especially content that may undermine the regime or overthrow the socialist system (Kaye et al., 2021). Therefore, when facilitating consumer activism online, Douyin must carefully moderate user-generated content, treading a fine line between the justified individual consumer’s pursuit and collective activism that may be perceived as negatively impacting social stability. In China, all SVB platforms including Douyin must carefully follow government regulations to prevent the spread of harmful information that may endanger social harmony (Xinhuanet, 2022). Keeping online consumer activism aligned with individual consumer’s pursuits will generate prosperous data-traffic and construct Douyin itself as a responsible company that stands together with users/consumers. However, if antagonism expands from businesses to state authorities, Douyin will face unpredictable political risks and regulatory punishments. For example, in response to the Chinese government’s internet clean-up campaigns, Douyin banned and deleted “harmful” accounts on the platform, though the detailed practices of Douyin’s moderation were never fully disclosed (Douyin, 2021).

In addition to state regulations, Douyin’s deep involvement in the overlapping areas of e-commerce, live-streaming, entertainment, and social networking arguably also reconfigures how it reacts to and disciplines consumer activism on the platform, especially toward competitors. This is evident in the 2018 online consumer protest against Pinduoduo on Douyin. With over 500 billion RMB gross merchandise value in 2020, Douyin has become a key competitor of Pinduoduo (1668 billion RMB) in the field of e-commerce. In contrast to TikTok, Douyin has become a fully-fledged live-commerce ecosystem endeavoring to transform users into digital entrepreneurs and consumers. Douyin’s users are not merely short video creators and viewers anymore, but are also self-employed e-commerce entrepreneurs and potential consumers.

Thus, unsurprisingly, it is rare to find Chinese consumers’ complaints about their shopping experiences on Douyin itself, whereas complaints about Pinduoduo are easily identified, though over 60% of products bought from both platforms failed to meet national product safety standards (She, 2021). The complex position of Douyin in the Chinese platform economy, especially as a Pinduoduo competitor, and its subsequent actions in disciplining consumer activism illustrates that although China-based platforms share similarities with global platforms to some extent, they are also deeply shaped by Chinese historical, socio-economic, and cultural elements (Wang & Lobato, 2019). Despite claiming to serve as an objective intermediary helping consumers safeguard their interests and rights, Douyin treads a fine line in balancing multiple intersecting and sometimes conflicting principles including state policies, the authorities’ administrative

power at different levels, its own economic interests, as well as the highly heterogeneous complementors.

## Conclusion

This article has examined consumer video activism tactics in China and their subsequent impact on Chinese consumers and society. Drawing upon interviews and case study analysis, we argue that short-video-activism tactics have become an innovative repertoire of contention for Chinese consumers, and Douyin has become a real-time updated database of the repertoire of contention for Chinese people. In doing so, this study has not only provided an understanding of consumer activism and its relation to digital media technologies in non-Western contexts, but it has added to the academic debate surrounding activism in general by casting a light on everyday and nonconfrontational activism in pursuit of consumer rights and interests.

The affordances of both short videos and Douyin have made Chinese consumers perceive the posting of short videos on the platform as an effective contentious repertoire for them to confront businesses and safeguard their rights. Moreover, the coexistence of individual consumers, corporations, influencers, and conventional media institutions on Douyin has shaped how consumers narrate their short videos: for influencers, Douyin is used to connect companies and consumers where they can recommend commodities to target audiences and review specific products; for Chinese companies, Douyin is used as a brand-maintenance tool to promote their products and monitor consumer sentiment to promptly respond; for conventional media institutions, Douyin is seen as both an essential news source and a key content distribution platform. Together, they foreground Douyin as a multisided market where multiple players can engage simultaneously for different purposes. Finally, Chinese short video consumer activism has been legitimized and disciplined as an individual-oriented conflict between consumers and companies, which constructs Douyin as an objective intermediary and incentivizes conventional media institutions and local/central authorities to be fairer negotiators.

Because of the nuanced dynamic between consumer, business, government and media in the Chinese context, all actors involved in short video consumer activism and SVB social media platforms like Douyin have to draw a fine line between legitimate nonconfrontational individual consumer pursuit and radical collective consumer activism. We close this article by calling for more empirical research on consumer activism in China and how Chinese consumers search for and use different emerging digital media technologies that help them achieve the goals of their activism.

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