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Citation for final published version:

Yu, Zizheng 2021. An empirical study of consumer video activism in China: protesting against businesses with short videos. *Chinese Journal of Communication* 14 (3) , pp. 297-312.  
10.1080/17544750.2020.1871390

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2020.1871390>

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# An empirical study of consumer video activism in China: protesting against businesses with short videos

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*Chinese Journal of Communication*

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores how Chinese consumers adopt short videos and short-video-based social media platforms (short-video-based [SVB] platforms) to safeguard their rights and interests. Bringing together the literature on SVB platforms and media practices and interviewing 56 interviewees in four groups that are involved in the consumer video activism process, I uncover the working mechanism behind this consumer video activism strategy: by uploading short video evidence to SVB platforms, Chinese consumers can bring increased attention—including that of the media and 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.

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**Keywords:** Consumer activism ; media practice ; SVB platform ; short video ; Douyin ; media coverage ; brand image ; Shui-Jun

Consumer activism provides an opportunity to correct the market imbalances that can arise for relatively powerless individual consumers and workers (Hawkins, 2010). Studies on consumer activism (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gabriel & Lang, 2015; Handelman, 2013; Hawkins, 2010; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Lekakis, 2013) have explored how various ad hoc or organized groups of consumers adopt various ways—boycott, buycott, culture jamming, protest on the scene, responsible investing and divestment, and so forth—to change the targets' (such as interest groups, commercial companies, political parties, national or local governments) policies or practices. These efforts are often directed at social injustices, environmental and animal protection issues, or the rights of minority groups. However, to date, there have been few discussions of how consumers use digital media to protest against businesses (e.g., Minocher, 2019) and protect themselves, especially in the context of China.

Today, short videos and short-video-based (SVB) platforms are emerging as a handy tool for Chinese consumers to safeguard their rights and interests. However, few studies have dealt with the interrelationship between these short videos, SVB platforms, and wider consumer activism in China. By drawing lessons from the “activist media practices” approach, the current article addresses the gaps in these research fields, exploring what the distinct contribution of short videos and SVB platforms is to consumers' fights against businesses in contemporary Chinese society. The present article asks how people perceive and use short videos and SVB platforms as a means for safeguarding their rights and interests and what the key obstacles of consumer video activism are based on the perceptions of consumers, media journalists, public relations (PR) officials, and relevant government officials in China.

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## Understanding the short video and SVB platform

Unlike the normal videos produced by media experts, which are potentially hours in length, with their professional experience and filming equipment, short videos are normally calculated in seconds and recorded and edited by ordinary people with their mobile phones. Short videos can be spread easily and instantly across spaces (from one SVB platform to another or from an online SVB platform to a television station) thanks to their small size.

Today, the emergence, growth, and development of SVB platforms in China cannot be separated from three specific factors: the new broadband cellular network technology, the competition among Chinese Internet companies, and social reasons for SVB popularity. 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). 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. There were 817 million “mobile netizens” (people who use the smartphone to access the Internet) and 648 million SVB platform users by the end of 2018<sup>1</sup>. These data indicate that the popularity of smartphones in China has contributed to the development of SVB platforms. In sum, 4 G 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.

Second, in China, the competition between Internet companies has triggered the growth and development of SVB platforms. Van Dijck (2013, p. 21) stated that “all social media platforms combined constitute the ecosystem of connective media (social media).” Within this ecosystem, Van Dijck explained that every collective media (social media) platform is sensitive to the changes of other competitive platforms. This statement applies equally to the development of the SVB platform in China. SVB platforms have gradually challenged the monopoly position of the traditional social media platform (Chen, 2018). “Douyin,” for instance, one of the most popular Chinese SVB platforms, was founded in 2016. According to Chen (2018), as of June 2018, Douyin had over 300 million domestic monthly active users and over 150 million daily active users. Many users of the more traditional social media platforms (such as WeChat and Weibo) have registered their own “Douyin” accounts since then. To capitalize on this short video trend, traditional social media companies in China started to integrate the short video feature into their products. For instance, on 30 December 2018, Tencent, WeChat’s mother company, added a new short video feature called “Time Capsule” to WeChat.

Third, 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).

In sum, in China today, the SVB platforms can be divided into two categories: first, there are “pure” SVB platforms, such as Douyin, Miaopai, Kuaishou, and others. In these pure platforms, the short video is the sole content; interactions between different users on pure platforms are almost exclusively confined to the short video. The second category is the “hybrid” SVB platform, such as Weibo, WeChat, and others. These hybrid platforms can be regarded as the upgraded version of those traditional social media platforms. In these hybrid platforms, users can share their pictures, text, audios, and short videos on the same platform, but text, pictures, and audios are still the main form of media.

## Adopting the media practice approach

Given the development of Web 2.0 technologies and the manifestations of their power across various social movements, the practice approach to media research has recently been adopted by social movements and media activism research, here with the goal of a better understanding of activists’ media practices, development of more nuanced analyses of the role of the media in movements for social and political changes, and an enhanced approach to the interrelationships between protest and media (Stephansen & Treré, 2019). More precisely, 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, 2018; Stephansen & Treré, 2019). The idea of adopting the media practice approach in the current consumer video activism research was mainly inspired by these arguments, along with the fact that other social movement studies have adopted the media practice approach (e.g., Askanius, 2019; Mattoni, 2012; Mattoni & Treré, 2014).

Before looking into the media practice approach, it is necessary to articulate what practice theory is. In the book *Theorising Media and Practice*, John Postill (2010) answered this question in detail by illustrating two generations of practice theorists and their thoughts: the first generation of the most influential practice theorists includes (but is not limited to) the likes of Bourdieu (1977), Foucault (1979), and Giddens (1984). Postill (2010) believed that their findings became the foundations of today’s practice theory; accordingly, the second generation of influential theorists (Ortner, 1984; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996, 2001, 2002; Warde, 2005) have applied the practice theory to various new areas or examined previous practice theories and made new extensions upon it. According to Gu (2018), there is a consensus regarding the practice theory among most relevant theorists; in general, they believe that the practice theory can dislodge the “dualism” in social science to a certain extent.

Based on this “antidualism” consensus among practice theorists, in his influential article “Theorising Media as Practice,” Couldry (2004) proposed a new framework in media research. This represented the first time that the practice theory was introduced into media studies. Media practices could be regarded as the “open set of practices relating to, or oriented around media” (Couldry, 2004, p. 117). In Couldry’s later research on media practices, he further distinguished between “acts aimed specifically at media, acts performed through media, and acts whose preconditions are media” (2012, p. 57). To better interpret the media practice framework, Couldry used the example of “watching football on television.” Couldry (2004) used 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 focus on the text or text-related issues. Instead, Couldry urged media researchers to focus on “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 media practice framework of Couldry has blazed a new path for media research by focusing on media practice —“to consider what people do with media” instead of “media texts or media institutions” (2004, pp. 118–119). More recently, the edited collection *Citizen Media and Practice: Currents, Connections, Challenges* (Stephansen & Treré, 2019) provided extensive articulation of the concerns and applications of the media practice approach across various backgrounds and experiences related to research on citizen and activist media; these range from research and discussion on “practice” by Latin American scholars who “shifted to practice” earlier than Couldry’s article in 2004 to the application of a media practice approach in fields related to activist and citizen media, including an exploration of the complex interactions between activist agency and the media technologies’ technological affordances. Also included are works examining video activism and video practices, highlighting various “acting on media” practices and building an understanding of the process of datafication and their consequences. For example, Askanius (2019, p. 137) proposed a practice-based framework in research related to video activism, in which she developed an understanding of video activism as “the things activists do, think and say in relation to video for social and political change.”

In media studies related to China, recent work shows that scholars have noticed and recognized 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. The current empirical study fills this gap, aiming to provide inspiration for more activist media practices in the future.

To elaborate on the short video activism practice of Chinese consumers further, I draw lessons from this “activist media practices” approach (Mattoni, 2012; Mattoni & Treré, 2014). In Mattoni’s research on the media practices of the precarious workers’ movement in Italy, she defined “activist media practices” as “routinized and creative social practices that ... include interactions with media objects (such as mobile phones, laptops, pieces of paper) and media subjects (such as journalists, PR managers, other activists)” (2012, p. 159). Comparing the “activist media practices” and Chinese consumers’ short video activism practices, I have found much in common between the two. The working principle of the consumer video activism strategy can be deconstructed into two similar interactions, here as part of “activist media practice.” First, interactions with “media objects”—Chinese consumers use their mobile phones to record short videos about their unsatisfactory consumption experiences (or any practices related to these experiences) and then upload these videos to any one of a number of SVB platforms. In this step, Chinese consumers are trans-



formed into media producers through the generation of rights protection short videos. The contents of these short videos usually relate to the product quality problem, poor service attitude, conflict between the consumer and business, or any other scenes, subjects, or spectacles that can emphasize the harmed rights of consumers.

Second, in the interactions with “media subjects,” here using those short videos they recorded, consumers interact with mainstream journalists, PR department officials, relevant government department officials, and the public. These four audiences are all “connected to the media realm” (Mattoni & Treré, 2014): for the public, they can use their own smartphones to generate similar short videos as other consumers and simply share the short videos they see on SVB platforms; for mainstream journalists, they are the core news producers. By interviewing the original producer of a certain short video and the business involved in that video, followed by reporting it via different media such as newspapers, radio, different online websites, or SVB platforms, journalists present a panorama of this consumer video activism case in front of the public at large. As soon as they notice the emergence of an influential short video, PR managers who work for the business involved will use different methods to reduce the impact of this consumer video activism on the brand image of the business, such as by negotiating with the consumer to solve the problem (and ask her/him to delete the short video), releasing official announcements, and telling those in the media with whom they have good relations not to report this incident or to delete the reported news. For relevant government department officials, they normally tolerate these consumer video activism cases if they “have not challenged authoritarian rule” (Liu, 2019) and follow media coverage on these cases. During this process, government officials will intervene to get consumers out of trouble by regulating the businesses involved according to the circumstances, requiring the businesses to solve the problems for consumers. It should be noted that all interactions are based on the premise that the legitimate rights of consumers are indeed being violated by these businesses.

Taken together, the concept of “activist media practices” offers an “antidualism” practicable paradigm for the current research, as other practice theories have done. It deconstructs activists’ media practices into two observable and significant interaction processes: interactions with “media objects” and “media subjects.” However, unlike the “activist media practices,” the consumers within the “consumer video activism practices” do not engage with the media subjects directly with their physical bodies. Rather, they 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 the consumers and media subjects.

## Method and data

To explore the working mechanism of the consumer video activism strategy, the current research adopts the method of individual semistructured interviews. The method includes four groups of respondents: consumers; mainstream media journalists; PR department officials; and government officials. There are 56 interview samples in the present research. All interviews were carried out between February 2019 and May 2019. All interviews were conducted in Chinese and then translated into English after the interviews had been finished. The respondents were recruited through the following methods: (1) snowball sampling; (2) friend or ex-colleague recommendations; and (3) active searching in different social media platforms, such as Weibo, Douyin, and others.

All interviewees are divided into four groups: (1) consumer (N = 15, from number 1 to 15), any consumers who encountered or witnessed consumer activism in their daily life before; (2) any journalists (N = 15, from number 16 to 30) who focus on the fields of consumer disputes, consumer activism and any other consumer-related issues in any mainstream media organizations; (3) PR department officials (N = 14, from number 31 to 44) in different large corporations; (4) government officials in any consumer rights departments (N = 12, from number 45 to 56). Each group contains three key informants. In the consumer group, the key informants are well-known and veteran consumer activists; 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 news chief editors; and in the government department official group, the key informants are secretary generals, spokesmen, and department directors.

Overall, the interviews focused on questions about interviewees’ subjective perceptions of the consumer video activism strategy. 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 this strategy, 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 normally deal with these consumer video activism cases.

The interviewee numbers for each group are equally and flexibly sized. Regarding the demographic data of the respondents, there is no gender bias in these samples; the male and female ratio is about equal among the 56 interviewees. All the interviewees have a bachelor's degree or higher, and all of them are comfortable and familiar with mobile phones and different social media apps (e.g., WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, etc.). The interviews were carried out in three cities—Beijing, Guangzhou, and Foshan in China—via face-to-face and telephone interviews. Getting access to government officials and PR officials presented the greatest difficulty during the interview process because their working positions require them not to make comments or statements related to their departments or companies without permission. As a result, the time of their interviews, which was about 30 to 60 minutes, was shorter than that of the other groups. The average interview time for the interviewees in other groups was about 60 to 120 minutes, and only a few interviewees had an interview time of 200 or more minutes.

## Consumer video activism practice

Svensson (2016) considered the digital revolution as having created new possibilities for ordinary people to record the social movement in which they are participating. This argument is also suitable for use in the context of consumer activism in China. The digital revolution (the developments of the mobile phone, broadband cellular network technology, and SVB platforms) has offered more possibilities for Chinese consumers in their activism practices. On the one hand, because of the technological advancements provided by the Internet, such as speed, convenience, anonymity, and virtual forms (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006), consumers can upload their activist short videos instantly. On the other hand, picturesque images and video captures could create solidarity and support for the people who are fighting for their legal rights and also make social struggles visible (Svensson, 2016).

Above all, the consumer video activism in the current research entails a practice in which a consumer uses their mobile phone to record the moment of their consumer interests being infringed upon before then uploading these short videos to different SVB platforms to draw the attention of the mass public, mainstream media, and government consumer rights protection departments.

Svensson (2016) stated that taking videos and then sharing and uploading them on social media has become an indispensable part of Chinese activists' schedules. The interview results of the current research show that the interviewees in the Chinese consumer group were willing to pick up their mobile phones as weapons to fight against the companies and the government departments to protect their consumer interests and urge the government to lay down clear and long-term regulations on specific markets. With rapid upgrades to the average mobile phone, broadband cellular network technology, and SVB platform, a group of consumers can be united by the same short video more quickly and conveniently than ever before.

## The strengths of short videos

Before discussing consumer video activism, it is necessary to highlight the strengths of short videos. After analyzing all the interviewees' (except for the government officials') perceptions of short videos in their daily lives and works, I discovered that short videos were seen to have the following characteristics:

- *Informative and efficient.* The short video contains more information, such as sound, than a text and picture. Consequently, short video users can capture and convey more information about something in less time.
- *Audio-visual and convincing.* Short videos are also audio-visual, which can strengthen the credibility of the information people acquire and communicate. Moreover, it is difficult to falsify short videos, especially for those short videos recorded as a "one-shot."
- *Low threshold.* As a user-friendly medium, the threshold for both using and understanding short videos is low. Short videos are easier to understand than rigid text and static pictures. Short videos are easy to use for certain groups of people, such as the elderly and less educated.

- *Eye-catching.* In terms of communication effects, short videos are more attractive to audiences and perform better than texts and pictures.

In sum, as a predominant medium today in China, these strengths of short videos help increase the efficiency and effectiveness of consumers' online activism actions, lowering the threshold for doing so (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Svensson, 2016). More specifically, 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 showing 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, attracting 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.

## Applying short videos to consumer activism

There is a saying in China that “the crying baby gets the milk,” which explains the situation of consumer activism in China. For the interviewees in the consumer group, their ultimate goal was to make businesses that infringe on their rights and interests compensate them accordingly. To achieve this, in most cases, the consumers must “*nao-da*” (a Chinese verb, meaning “to make a big deal out of something” or, in more colloquial English, “to make a fuss over”) their grievances and let more people hear their tearful voices, including businesses, media, and government officials. Recent studies have acknowledged that the “*nao-da*” phenomenon is widespread in current Chinese society because of its effectiveness (Han, 2012; Yu, 2020). In the current research, the word “*nao-da*” was constantly mentioned in the answers of many interviewees. All the interviewees in the Chinese consumer group believe that the consumer video activism strategy has the following positive features: *immersive, authentic, uncomplicated, and attractive*, which can “*nao-da*” consumers' grievances more effectively. All interviewees in the consumer group hold the view that short videos and SVB platforms provide consumers with a new form of consumer activism, while 14 interviewees believed that short videos and SVB platforms play a positive role in protecting the rights and interests of consumers.

Among these 14 interviewees, 12 people professed that combining short videos with text and pictures is the best way to “*nao-da*” their voices on SVB platforms. By adopting this “combination approach,” consumers can distribute their grievances more effectively across different SVB platforms and further increase the success rate of their activism practices. One of the key informants, Interviewee 14, a well-known online celebrity (or so-called veteran consumer activist) who has his own team and specializes in consumer activism in China, combines short video, text, and pictures in his product evaluation reports and other consumer-activism-related content to expand his audience reach. He stated, “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 the most. Although the majority of Chinese social media platforms have already evolved into SVB platforms, the reading habits of users still persist. Interviewee 14 stated, “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.”

## The role of mainstream media in consumer video activism

Studies have demonstrated that media coverage plays an important 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, 2008). As Liu (2019) indicated, the official coverage of contention legitimizes activism and provides successful and politically accepted samples for the public. In this case, as an important part of the short video activism practice of consumers, Chinese mainstream media plays a key role in bridging the gap between the claims of consumers and businesses' responses by reporting the short video practices of consumers and making it more “appealing” to the mass public, to relevant government departments, and to businesses. The 14 interviewees in the mainstream media journalist group agreed that the video activism practices of consumers are conducive to claiming compensation for their losses.

For most of the interviewees in the consumer group, the realization that Chinese media (including mainstream media journalists and media organizations) can play an important loudspeaker role in their “battles” against business has already come. At the same time, media actors also realize their own importance in the battles fought by consumers.

All interviewees in the mainstream media journalist group contended that mainstream media can indeed help consumers solve their problems to a large extent.

For the interviewees in the mainstream media journalist group, the short video activism practice of consumers has become one of their important sources of information. Fourteen interviewees expressed their view that short videos on various SVB platforms are becoming their most frequently used information sources. Meanwhile, most of the interviewees acknowledged that currently short videos offered by consumers can 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 chose to use short videos as their news evidence and include them in their coverage.

For these interviewees, there are three approaches to using short videos and SVB platforms as information sources: active searching, passive receiving, and a combination of the two methods. Active searching entails journalists taking the initiative in seeking out short videos worthy of investigation on different SVB platforms. As Interviewee 21 (news magazine journalist) revealed, his colleagues and him would often actively search news stories on different SVB platforms: “These platforms are our important news sources, and those short videos released by consumers are our news clues.” Passive receiving refers to how mainstream media organizations and journalists passively receive news clues and stories through different SVB platforms by setting up official accounts on SVB platforms and leaving news hotlines, email addresses, and other means of contact. As Interviewee 16 (key informant, former journalist in Fujian “BBT”<sup>2</sup>) 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.” Most interviewees combine the approaches of active searching and passive receiving.

### **The response of PR officials**

Many studies have shown that a company’s brand image has a significant influence on the buying behavior of consumers (e.g., Cretu & Brodie, 2007); furthermore, any antibrand practices that are harmful to the brand image can affect customer buying behavior and buying decisions (e.g., antibrand websites, Kucuk, 2008). Therefore, from the perspective of brand protection, all interviewees in the PR official group confessed that consumers could urge them to resolve problems more effectively by employing the short video activism strategy. They gave the following reasons for this: first, they all indicated that the short videos posted by consumers represent solid evidence of the faults of businesses. Therefore, on behalf of their business, they must find the consumers who post those short videos and solve their problems in a timely manner. Otherwise, the problem will finally become significant and undermine the image of the business in the eyes of the public (potential consumers).

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. Most interviewees in the PR official group articulated that the risk of further spreading the short videos caused by mainstream media coverage compels businesses in China to pay more attention to consumers’ short video activism practices and solve the problems of consumers faster than ever before.

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. In the eyes of businesses, the involvement of relevant government departments in consumers’ short video activism matters forces businesses to respond to consumers’ demands as fast as they can. More than half of the interviewees in the PR official group acknowledged this.

### **The self-protection strategies of businesses**

Although the consumer video activism strategy certainly works and can have a negative impact on companies’ brand images, these companies retain an arsenal of methods to reduce the impact of this. According to the interview results, there are at least two main strategies for Chinese businesses to suppress the spread of short videos. First, they may employ *24-hour-a-day monitoring*. Most interviewees in the PR official group explained that they have a specialized monitoring team to monitor short videos and any other negative content (such as text comments) related to their companies on different SVB platforms, which they could do 24 hours a day. Moreover, 12 interviewees mentioned that their businesses usually employed “Wang-luo-shui-jun” (a Chinese verb meaning “a group of Internet ghostwriters who are hired or paid to post comments with particular content” or, in more colloquial English, “Internet



water army”) to leave particular positive comments below any negative short videos and other content related to their companies found by the monitoring team. This 24-hour-a-day consumer opinion monitoring mechanism enables businesses to find out who uploaders are and respond to their demands promptly, thereby limiting further spread of these short videos.

Second, from the “media rent-seeking” phenomenon (e.g., Chen, 2005), paid news (e.g., Tsetsura, 2015) and “red-envelope taking” (e.g., Li, 2013), most Chinese businesses tend to have good relationships with Chinese mainstream media to better promote themselves and prevent negative publicity from being further disseminated. Twelve interviewees in the PR official group articulated how they have established good contacts with different mainstream media through various means. For example, as Interviewee 39 (brand specialist) put it, “We will find out what they like, caters for their interests, for example, we have given all female journalists we know a gift (scarves, cosmetics, etc.) on International Women’s Day.” The result of being friends with the journalists is that, as Interviewee 39 mentioned, “when they find any news stories related to us, positive or negative, they will inform us in advance before reporting it.”

Moreover, all 12 interviewees above asserted that their companies chose to strengthen their good “friendship” with the mainstream media by advertising. Besides paying advertising fees to media agencies, some interviewees indicated that they also privately give the journalists responsible for advertorials or the news stories related to these companies “red-envelope cash” to encourage them to write better or more positively. By building strong relationships with the mainstream media, Chinese businesses—especially those large corporations that seek to micromanage their brand images—can easily influence the content of media coverage.

## Government officials’ attitudes

When talking about consumer activism issues in China, the role of the relevant government department should not be ignored. The intervention of the Chinese government can speed up the process of resolving consumers’ problems (Han, 2012; Liu & Wu, 2016), especially when consumers adopt short videos and SVB platforms as their weapons. To understand whether the government will be affected by the consumer video activism strategy (and thus intervene in an incident), I interviewed 12 government officials from two core departments of consumer rights protection (MSA—Market Supervision Administration and CA—Consumers Association) in two cities. The interview results show that they all agree that the consumer video activism strategy can help consumers achieve their goals more effectively, but they also stress that this is not a correct and rational way for consumers to behave. As Interviewee 50 (key informant, CA spokesman) put it, “Consumers are free to use this tactic as long as the short video content posted by consumers does not involve illegal content. This tactic does work, and it is not illegal, but we [CA] don’t encourage it.”

The reason why the short video activism practice works is simple in the eyes of these officials: 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. As Interviewee 52 (key informant, MSA senior officer) mentioned, “In China, government departments follow a logic of ‘the crying baby gets the milk’ when handling people’s grievances in most cases, it [consumer video activism strategy] will certainly attract our attention.” Interviewee 53 (MSA officer) disclosed that they will speed up processes to solve the consumer’s problems as long as her/his short videos cause widespread public attention. So far, the vast majority of the interviewees (54 out of 56) in the four groups have recognized 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.*

There are four reasons why almost all the interviewees in the official government group did not encourage consumers to use this strategy to protect themselves:

1. It will create a “negative demonstration effect” across society, which will “induce the public to do the same thing, and reduce the credibility of reasonable dispute resolution methods<sup>3</sup> encouraged by the government in front of the public” (Interviewee 50);
2. Not all consumers’ complaints or claims are reasonable and legal: “[N]ot all consumers’ demands are reasonable and legal, so these people’s actions may harm the brand image of businesses” (Interviewee 46, CA senior officer);

3. Not all consumers who use this method will succeed, but everyone who uses this method will face the problem of losing their personal privacy; and
4. Certain small businesses and individual peddlers do not value their brand image (or they do not realize it at all), so the consumer's short video activism practice (media exposure, government department's mediation) does not affect them.

### Critical factors limiting the ability of consumer video activism

In April 2019, a short video about an angry female consumer sitting on the hood of a Mercedes car and tearfully protesting against the Mercedes dealership in Xi'an went viral on multiple SVB platforms. This short video successfully drew attention from the public, the media, the Mercedes PR department, and the local government consumer rights protection departments. Under the pressure of media exposure and government intervention, Mercedes China compensated this consumer fairly, suspended the franchise of the dealer in Xi'an, and issued a statement stating that it would investigate the customer service and business operations of its Chinese dealers. In this case, although the consumer successfully obtained compensation, the consumer herself was also adversely affected. The consumer's privacy was violated, and her personal information was continuously forwarded and discussed on different SVB platforms.

In addition to such privacy matters, there are several further critical factors limiting the efficacy of the consumer video activism strategy. First, more than half of the interviewees in the consumer group believed that businesses' countermeasures (such as "Shui-jun") will hinder them and other consumers from success. Second, for consumers, not everyone's story can be fortuitously selected and reported by the media. More than half of the interviewees in the consumer group agreed with this view. With the commercialization of the Chinese media industry, recent studies have shown that Chinese mainstream media no longer only focus on publicity for the government, but also on producing stories that attract online audience traffic (Guo, 2020; Hong, 2011). As some interviewees in the consumer group indicated, when reporting on consumer-related incidents, Chinese media agencies are more inclined to report on "click-bait" incidents that can attract more attention and bring higher advertising benefits.

Some interviewees in the consumer group also expressed the view that not all consumer-related topics will be covered by the mainstream media because of government control. Interviewee 3 believed the mainstream media tend not to report on some consumer-activism-related issues that will have a negative impact on the government. On January 9, 2019, the China Netcasting Services Association (CNSA) officially released two sets of regulations about online short videos and SVB platforms in China<sup>4</sup>. Under these regulations, 100 categories of short video content were banned on every Chinese SVB platform, such as those with content that disrupt social stability, including mass incidents affecting public order and safety. In response to these regulations, seven interviewees in the consumer group professed the view that these regulations may restrict consumers from using short videos to air their grievances and protect their rights and interests. These rules show that government departments **may** not only prevent the media from reporting on topics related to consumer activism, but also directly restrict consumers from using the short videos and SVB platforms to protest against a business.

### Discussion and conclusion

The current study explored the latest consumer video activism strategy and its impacts based on the perceptions of four groups of interviewees: Chinese consumers, mainstream media journalists, PR officials, and government officials. The findings indicate that the emergence of SVB platforms and short videos has offered a way for consumers to safeguard their rights and interests. By adopting this strategy, consumers can "*nao-da*" their grievances more effectively, and their chances of success will also increase. Mainstream media coverage can be a "loudspeaker" for consumers' grievances, making it possible for more people from different social bodies to hear their complaints.

Government departments recognize that the consumer video activism strategy is effective enough to draw their attention and prompt them to intervene in the incident, which can help consumers solve the problem quickly. Even so, they do not encourage consumers to use it. In response to this strategy, businesses must resolve consumer complaints effectively, especially among large companies that care deeply about their brand images; hence, they cannot ignore these "smoking guns" highlighting their faults, nor let such incidents continue to damage their reputations. However, as the stronger party in the contest, businesses have several ways to mitigate the negative impact of this consumer video activism strategy.

In the current study, the “activist media practices” approach was used to articulate the working mechanism of the “consumer video activism” strategy. By doing so, we avoid falling into the trap of media-centrism and dualism because our focus is no longer just the technological affordance of media technology itself, nor just the actor’s agency. Instead, the focus should be on consumer practices that include interactions with media objects (mobile phone, short videos, SVB platforms) and media subjects (mainstream journalists, PR officials, government officials). These “activist media practices” approach have offered a new way to examine consumers’ media practices, and the present study proves that this approach is feasible in the context of China.

The overall findings suggest that short videos and SVB platforms act as intermediaries between consumers and those media subjects mentioned above, providing consumers with a new form of approaching mainstream media, businesses, and government departments. However, this new road to the media, government, and businesses is not smooth for consumers, potentially entailing a loss of privacy, an absence of media coverage, countermeasures enacted by businesses, and government restrictions. These are the obstacles on the road. The Chinese government is still in the initial state of protecting consumers and supervising business operations. Hence, the consumer video activism strategy works, and the “*nao-da*” phenomenon prevails.

As rare empirical research on how consumers use digital media to protest against businesses in the context of China, the current article contributes to the research field of online consumer activism. Moreover, the present empirical study provides further insights into the important question of how to understand activists’ online strategies under the “activist media practices” approach in China. Future studies may shed light on the historical and practical reasons behind Chinese consumers’ use of this strategy, as well as its connection with media activism, video activism, and digital activism. More empirical research into Chinese consumers’ or activists’ other online activism strategies, especially their collective practices, under the media practice framework is welcomed in future studies.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author. AQ2

## Notes

<sup>1</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)

<sup>2</sup>. Bang Bang Tuan (BBT is a civic news program in Fujian aiming to resolve the problems between consumers and businesses. It had 2.66 million followers on Douyin by the end of August 2020)

<sup>3</sup>. See [http://gkml.samr.gov.cn/nsjg/fgs/201906/t20190625\\_302783.html](http://gkml.samr.gov.cn/nsjg/fgs/201906/t20190625_302783.html), the article 39 of the *Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Consumer Rights and Interests (2013 Amendment)*. (accessed 12 September 2020)

<sup>4</sup>. See [http://www.cnsa.cn/index.php/information/dynamic\\_details/id/68/type/2.html](http://www.cnsa.cn/index.php/information/dynamic_details/id/68/type/2.html), and [http://www.cnsa.cn/index.php/information/dynamic\\_details/id/69/type/2.html](http://www.cnsa.cn/index.php/information/dynamic_details/id/69/type/2.html) (accessed 5 September 2020).

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**C1 Author:** Dear editor, can i add a "Acknowledgments" before the "Disclosure statement"? Thank you so much for your help. Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions, and I would also like to thank my interviewees for participating in this research.;

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