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Douyin, storytelling, and national discourse

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Abstract Following its debut in China, TikTok has become the first short video platform to gain global popularity. The world's obsession with TikTok can be attributed to its creative methods for content generation and dissemination. These attributes heralded the arrival of a new era in which, with the rise of grassroots creators on short video platforms, cultural production and consumption have been profoundly changed. Through examining Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), this study delves into the important but under-investigated consensus-building function of TikTok/Douyin to unveil how social media can be used to create a citizens' platform for unity and cohesion. TikTok has led a new generation of global culture not through content innovation but through technology innovation; this has improved China's soft power through strengthening its digital power. This paper provides insights onto the role of digital innovation in national discourse.

Keywords TikTok · Douyin · Social media · National discourse · Technology innovation

Introduction

Developed by the Chinese Internet and technology company ByteDance in 2016, TikTok is the first short video platform to gain global popularity in a short period. In the past four years, the TikTok application has accumulated more than 2 billion downloads, with more than 1.29 billion monthly active users in 141 countries/regions and more than 100 million monthly users in the United States alone.

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TikTok reported that it reached 1 billion users in September 2021 (Lyons 2021). In 2022, TikTok earned $4 billion in advertising revenue (The Economist 2022). As a more and more important source of social entertainment and culture consumption, the consumption of short videos generated and disseminated on social media platforms has become a new type of normal communication. In the era of media convergence (Jenkins 2004), Internet users take an active part in generating media content through an online identity using the Web 2.0 network as a platform. The characteristics of Web 2.0 have attracted young people around the world to participate in the production and circulation of media content. TikTok is a short video community that focuses on and appeals to young people: on TikTok, younger users can engage in a variety of activities such as creating short videos and building social networks, allowing them to fully bring their subjective creativity into play.

Existing scholarship on TikTok mainly examines its entertainment functions (e.g., Zhang 2021; Tang et al. 2021), social media/networking functions (e.g., Yang 2022; Yang and Ha 2021), or its education functions (e.g., Logrieco et al. 2021). So far, little attention has been paid to the citizenry function of TikTok. However, TikTok is a Chinese application that has unprecedently received warm welcome among a global audience in a short time; this provides important insights for future research onto explorations of countries' overseas influence. In recent years, the Chinese government has been making use of TikTok to exert influence: as early as in 2018, there were more than 500 Chinese government agencies and official Chinese media outlets on the Douyin platform. In 2020, figures released in *Douyin White Paper* show that videos related to government accounts on the platform have been played more than 1.6 billion times. Reports show that the frequency of "believing" the authorities and "insisting" the current direction of the government increases with frequent use of Douyin (ByteDance 2021).

How should we guide digital media to promote national cultural and economic development in a positive way? This study intends to explicate an under-investigated but important function of Douyin: it aims to explore the consensus-building function of Douyin, and most importantly, how social media can be used to create a citizens' platform for national unity and cohesion.

The importance of user-generated content

TikTok, the international version of Douyin, is a short video platform that hosts various genres of short videos lasting from 15 seconds to 10 minutes. It is characterized by the low threshold of content production, quick dissemination of information, and blurred boundaries between producers and consumers (Kong 2018). The content on TikTok is user-generated, which is different from what is known as professionally generated content: that is, content that is dominated by elite groups and disseminated in a top-down way. On TikTok, participatory and creative users take advantage of interactive opportunities to generate independent content that forms a grassroots culture that, in turn, affects mass media and the global audience.

The emergence of Web 2.0 resulted in vast quantities of user-generated content (UGC; Ayeh et al. 2013). UGC refers to social media shared by users and the

metadata associated with this content, collectively. The concept of UGC highlights the importance of authorship; it can also be defined as online content that is publicly available and created by end-users in creative ways (Dennhardt 2014). In the age of social media, Internet usage features the decentralization of online information, the majority of which is comprised of large quantities of real-time UGC produced and contributed by common users in a bottom-up way (Jin 2012). UGC originated with networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube (Moens et al. 2014). The driving factor of deeper user engagement with UGC websites is still a crucial area of investigation for many in the UGC community (Altounian 2014). The rise of UGC marked a shift among media organizations from producing content themselves to providing facilities for media users to generate their own content (Berthon et al. 2015). The role of the audience has been transformed from one of passive receivers of information into one of active participants or even creators of media content in the flourishing of UGC on online platforms (Jenkins 2004). The creation and propagation of UGC owes to the booming of social media, which has also generated new opportunities for widespread applications (Ma 2018). In UGC networks, content is generated by individuals and firms (Lanz et al. 2019).

As a ubiquitous phenomenon on the Internet, UGC informs, entertains, and facilitates conversation among Internet users (Huang 2017). Dylko and McCluskey (2012) examined five core attributes of UGC that are important for comprehending its nature and effects: search efficiency, customization, manipulability, cost reduction, and community orientation. Amateur users make use of the convenience and accessibility of social media platforms such as YouTube to participate in the production, distribution, consumption, and feedback of media content; in this process, the nature of these media users changes from that of passive audience to active creator (Kim 2010). The business models of UGC creation on social media also provide a fascinating avenue for the exploration of the role of online social influence. For example, the networked structure of interactions and the tremendous variation in the success of content creators and corporations on social media platforms such as YouTube makes these platforms a worthwhile subject for inquiry into the role of social influence (Oh 2010). Large quantities of UGC websites such as social networking, online travel communities, and review sites have also attracted increasing public attention to the application of social media for the hospitality and tourism domain (Ayeh and Law 2013). UGC is a powerful marketing tool since it engages one of the most invaluable marketing strategies: verbal communication marketing from consumer to consumer, also known as "word of mouth" marketing (Macon 2017).

As an important information source, the wide variety and volume of UGC gives firms the opportunity to become more informed about consumers (Kwark and Raghunathan 2018). Recent studies reveal that people from various cultural backgrounds express their views on purchases in different ways, and information acquired from the narrative content in UGC can offer firms insights about markets (Fu 2020). For example, Koivisto and Mattila (2020) addressed UGC within experiential marketing events by delving into how a branded exhibition can facilitate the co-creation of visual content and its dissemination on social media. Experiential marketing events provide brands with a platform for co-creating content with customers, this engages customers in the dissemination of the brand value proposition. In a word, UGC

based on consumers' experiences and comments has become a bountiful resource for marketing strategies (Cheng et al. 2021).

As a UGC platform, the content on TikTok is not produced by companies but by netizens. Most content on TikTok cannot be defined as popular culture; instead, it mainly contains visual short messages created with non-traditional storytelling. Creators on TikTok have their audience, or fans/followers, to whom the content that they create is distributed through algorithms. Compared with the content produced by other major official media, the UGC on TikTok is more popular with the overseas audience, representing a new form of China's overseas influence. China has had different forms of overseas communication in the past decades. For instance, in the realm of film, *Hero* directed by Zhang Yimou entered European and American markets in 2002. However, for TV programs, overseas Chinese have been the major audience groups, and for social media, the majority of WeChat users are also overseas Chinese. Chinese popular music is mainly consumed by domestic markets, but the Chinese Internet giant Tencent holds part of Spotify. Tencent has also bought the parent company of League of Legends (LOL), the contents of which were not produced by China. TikTok is the first Internet platform owned by a Chinese company to have become the most popular platform around the world in a broader sense.

Social media and the formation of national discourse

Social media and its extensions have gone through an increasing number of changes and are now widely spread around the world. The development and iteration of smartphone and Internet technology have made it possible for social media to permeate into various aspects of users' daily lives in different forms. Social media has become the main force of information dissemination and is accelerating the process of globalization. Its unique features, such as high levels of timeliness and interactivity, have allowed information to circulate rapidly around the world as people share information and exchange views, thus creating a new channel that plays an increasingly important role in the process of national image communication. As a crucial part of national soft power, national image influences the speaking rights and competitiveness of countries.

It is fair to say that social media based on Internet technologies has become the main platform people use to acquire information, share opinions, and participate in interactions, as well as a having become a vital channel for establishing national image and spreading national culture in the era of media convergence (Jenkins 2004). UGC on social media also profoundly affects the design of national image (Yang and Wan 2016). Unlike traditional media, digital media tell stories in a bottom-to-top way. Based on users' personal experiences and easily accessible traditional or ordinary media elements, digital technology is used to communicate and share personal stories to a broader community, which helps to further promote national values (Woletz 2008). The promotion of national brands is generally considered to be the non-historical and exclusive presentation of a country. At present, there is still limited theoretical research on using the media as an institutional,

systematic, and social storyteller to promote national brands (Bolin and Miazhevich 2018).

The rapid development of information technology has profoundly affected the form, production, and reception of storytelling, which is the most common method of communicating information in human society. The "participatory" feature of social media makes storytelling through social media an effective means to make the audience's storytelling mode dynamic (De Fina 2016). This means that storytelling through social media can enhance the intimacy between audiences, gather them together, and recreate a collective consciousness (Gupta-Carlson 2016). Short videos transmit information and tell stories through audio-visual language symbols. With the development of showing short video with vertical screen, and the specialization and refinement of video content manufacturing, short video has become an important communication channel for government agencies and other media, as well as an important tool for political propaganda (Xing 2021).

Faced with various speculations and predictions about China's possible future courses of action, China has made use of social media to fashion and project its soft power. UGC on social media platforms provides insight into public opinions and perceptions of China's national image (He et al. 2020). In recent years, as China's state propaganda apparatus more frequently uses scientific and technological achievements to portray China as a rising power and boost patriotism and national pride, a tendency has arisen in the official Chinese discourse on nationalism that can be termed "techno-turn" (Wang 2020). Techno-turn is the term for a mercantile-like behavior that connects tech innovation and enterprise directly to national security, economic prosperity, and the social stability of the nation (Capri et al. 2020). This techno-nationalism has greatly affected the orientation of China's national discourse on social media. The Chinese state makes Douyin users feel its presence through a new form of techno-nationalism: the promotion of trending #PositiveEnergy videos. Positive energy (*zheng nengliang*) has been employed in the political discourse of China frequently since 2012 (Yang and Tang 2018). While being "grassroots" in nature, positive energy generates a kind of "transcendental Chinese patriotism" (Du 2014) that distinguishes itself from mainstream Chinese patriotism as constructed by the state. By June 2018, over 500 Chinese governmental accounts on Douyin were promoting positive energy (the dominant state ideology) in videos; in these videos, Douyin promotes the Chinese state's political agenda by promoting a new form of playful patriotism online (Chen et al. 2021).

Compared to words, the audio-visual language is more persuasive and powerful, and can cause an audience to have emotional resonance in a more intuitive way. In recent years, the carrier of Chinese culture overseas has been updated day by day. The purpose of external communication is to export the values and cultural connotations of a country and shape its national image. Short videos, relying on their inherent affordances and communication advantages, are able to transport Chinese culture overseas with the functional characteristics of education and entertainment, so that overseas Chinese users can still use and easily accept Chinese culture. Thus, these videos play an important role in the communication of Chinese culture and become a new medium through which foreign users contact Chinese culture (Zhou 2019).

The globalizing internet of China

Heated debates have been set off surrounding China's foreign policy in the digital age; in these debates, "China's globalizing Internet" as a symbol of the country's interface with the global system is crucial to comprehending the dynamic and dialectical global communication order (Hong and Harwit 2020). As an integral part of the global political economy, Chinese social media continues not only to tap the domestic market but to actively expand into overseas markets. For example, WeChat was first released by the Chinese multinational company Tencent Holding Limited in January 2011. In the past decade or so, global users of WeChat have exceeded 1.2 billion; this ranks it third in the world's top social media platforms right after Facebook and WhatsApp (Chuzhoucaiji 2022). WeChat presents a multipurpose smartphone application, going beyond the features offered by its counterpart WhatsApp, which is popular in Western countries (Montag 2018). Baidu has been actively expanding its market in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America since 2010. Visual Capitalist reported that Baidu ranks fourth in most-used websites, with the most traffic in the world in 2022. Recently, Gartner, a global authoritative technology research and consulting institution, released the "Report on Competition Pattern: Conversational AI Platform." In this report, Baidu is the only shortlisted supplier in China and is in the market-leading position in the field of conversational AI (Netease 2022a). In addition, in recent years, TikTok has successfully become a global phenomenon app using the short video form. In order to cope with the impact of TikTok, other major social media platforms have begun to focus on the output of short video content. The popularity of TikTok, especially among teenagers and young people, has inspired Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to create their own IP short video channels: Lasso, Reels, and Shorts. By 2022, TikTok had achieved more than three billion downloads worldwide, and half of Americans are now users of TikTok (Netease 2022b). Social media has become a crucial platform for the construction of China's national image in the eyes of a global audience, and the success of TikTok in becoming the most popular short video platform on a global scale brings important implications for adjusting China's overseas promotional strategies.

Language and culture barriers have long been major difficulties facing international communication, and TikTok as a digital platform has succeeded in overcoming some of the difficulties of cultural self-production and self-dissemination. In other words, TikTok enables different countries/regions to participate in cultural production on a platform developed by China. The success of TikTok has redefined the soft power of a nation: a new strategy for overseas communication has arisen that, instead of exporting culture, outputs a digital platform as a carrier of culture. That is to say, besides cultural content, digital platforms as well as software and hardware can be influential tools of overseas communication through scientific and technological innovation. The wide reception of TikTok has also proved that as long as digital innovation meets the needs of global culture markets, digital products from China can set trends for the world.

Conclusion

With the rapid development of information and communication technologies, it is has become an urgent requirement of the new era for China to strengthen the construction of its international communication capacity and to form an international voice that matches its comprehensive national strength and international status. The ultimate goals of national brand construction and propaganda are to proclaim the position of a country, affect the psychology of a wider audience, and to improve the image of the country.

Bottom-up storytelling through UGC on TikTok enables its users to showcase creativity, share opinions, and build social networks, all of which can further promote national brands and ideologies within the affordances of the short video platform. TikTok's creativity/innovation has led to a new generation of global culture, not through content innovation but through a further step: showing that the key to the success of international communication lies in the creativity/innovation of digital technology itself. The use of digital technology should meet the needs of the new global generation, and strengthening the digital power of a country has become the most effective and powerful way to establish a national brand and improve a country's soft power in the era of media convergence.

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Ethical statements

I hereby declare that this manuscript is the result of my independent creation under the reviewers' comments. Except for the quoted contents, this manuscript does not contain any research achievements that have been published or written by other individuals or groups. We are the only authors of this manuscript. The legal responsibility of this statement shall be borne by me.

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