



How Chinese user perceives ‘Positive Energy’ through short-form video platform Douyin

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Abstract. With the rapid growth of the economy and technology, the increasing popularity of social media has had a significant influence on people's attitudes and behaviors. Among them, Douyin, a short-form video platform launched by ByteDance, a Chinese tech giant, has emerged as one of the most popular video platforms in China. Through the platform, people could produce, post, browse, and share thematic short-form videos as well as give a like and comment on them. Among the thematic content, ‘positive energy’ videos, which could raise people’s positive emotions and attitudes, thus influencing people's behavior and actions, have become a prominent part of Douyin. To explore how people perceive ‘positive energy’ on Douyin, this paper conducts qualitative research by interviewing 7 Douyin users ranging from 20s to 40s, which accounts for the largest proportion of Douyin users. In general, we argue that most of the users enjoy watching ‘positive energy’ videos on Douyin, presented in various thematic formats. Although the dominating motivational effect of a ‘positive energy’ video on users is short-lived and spiritual, such as triggering patriotism, optimism, and kind-hearted, it still has a lasting positive subtle impact on people’s actions and behavior. Besides, users argue that there is a significant need for the existence of ‘positive energy’ videos on Douyin, which could guide online public opinion, cultivate people’s cognition and behavior, promote the state ideology as well as propagate the national image of China.

Keywords: Douyin, short-form video, positive energy, playful patriotism, social media

1 Introduction

With the development of the economy and technology, the rapid growth of social media platforms has changed communication channels and information dissemination and has increasingly become influential in shaping people’s attitudes and behaviors. In the current era of numerous social media platforms, Douyin, a short-form video platform, launched in 2016 by the Chinese tech giant ByteDance, has become one of the most popular short-form video platforms in mainland China (Zhang, 2019)^[23]. Sharing and watching videos, accessing information, watching the live-streaming broadcast, doing online shopping, chatting with friends, and the entertainment features of Douyin have

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made it a dominant cultural phenomenon in China. Apart from its entertainment value, Douyin has political properties, reflected in the promotion of ‘positive energy’ videos to its users.

‘Positive energy’ is a buzzword coined by the Chinese government, referring to content that is capable of evoking positive emotions and attitudes as well as generating constructive discussions and actions among individuals and groups (Yang & Tang, 2018)^[20]. The term becomes so prominent in Douyin since 2018 that the platform even creates a separate section for the ‘positive energy’ video (Chen, Kaye, & Zeng, 2021)^[4]. By June 2018, over 500 Chinese government departments had posted ‘positive energy’ videos. (Zhulan, 2018)^[25]. The Chinese government’s promotion of ‘positive energy’ on Douyin involves various strategies, including propaganda and ideological messaging, the use of celebrity influencers, and the promotion of traditional Chinese culture and values.

Previous studies pay more attention to the area of health communication, especially exploring how ‘positive energy’ videos affect people’s attitudes towards COVID-19. By examining how Chinese users perceive ‘positive energy’ through Douyin as well as what role ‘positive energy’ videos play on Douyin, this paper seeks to shed light on the evolving dynamics of media and content regulation in China, and the implications for online communication and information dissemination in Chinese society.

2 Literature review

2.1 Short-form video and Douyin

China leads the world in active social media users (Statista, 2018)^[15]. With the development of society and technology, people are increasingly inclined to consume information through videos, favoring them over text and images. Therefore, with the advent of the 5G era, the short-form video industry has rapidly developed (Zhou, Lee, & Liu, 2021)^[24]. Since 2017, short-form video applications are starting to dominate the social media landscape in China (Zhang, 2019)^[23]. In 2019, 78% of Chinese users used application software, while 65% of users possess at least two video apps (Shi & Chung, 2019)^[18]. This phenomenon shows that short-form videos have become an important factor in people’s social interaction and completely change the way people live (Zhou, Lee, & Liu, 2021)^[24].

Short-form video usually refers to those a length of content ranging from several seconds to five minutes, often between 15 and 60 seconds (Chen, Kaye, & Zeng, 2021)^[4], which is convenient for users to share and browse video clips on a smartphone during segment time (Li, 2018)^[9]. The popularity of short-form videos can be attributed to their low production costs, widespread content, and blurred distinction between producers and consumers (Kong, 2018)^[8].

Among the short-form video platforms, Douyin, launched in September 2016 by ByteDance, becomes the most popular one in China. Until April 2018, Douyin topped the list of app store free ranking (Ma & Wang, 2018)^[19]. In May 2019, the daily active user of Douyin reached 300 million in China, with 2.6 billion in advertising revenue (Huang & Lin, 2019)^[13]. Different from other social media applications such as Insta-

gram, Weibo, and Snapchat, where users need to subscribe to the accounts of interest, Douyin runs a special way that could automatically recommend personalized content to their users that they are interested in based on their browsing behavior (Omar & Wang, 2020)^[11]. This mechanism provides endless videos to the users which makes them highly addicted to the app (Romero, 2020)^[14].

The operation of Douyin is simple. Users could easily create their video clips by adding background music, stickers, and special effects that are already made in the app. Besides, Douyin also has social functions such as writing comments, giving a 'like' to the video, inviting friends, and private chatting with other users. These social functions facilitate intimate communication between video producers and viewers, aiding the rapid and wide dissemination of content (Qian, 2018)^[17].

Although previous research has already studied video apps or platforms such as YouTube and Snapchat, the study on Douyin is just beginning. This research is focusing specifically on the newborn short-form video app, examining how Douyin uses its mechanism of transmission to promote 'positive energy' content and how users perceive 'positive energy' videos.

2.2 Positive energy

The word 'Positive Energy' first appeared in China in the early 2000s and then entered the public consciousness in 2012 (Yang & Tang, 2018)^[20], which stands for the core political ideology of Xi Jinping's administration (Chen & Wang, 2019)^[3]. After popularized during the 2012 London Olympics (Triggs, 2019)^[16], this word has been frequently used in Chinese political speech on social media (Lu et al., 2021)^[26].

'Positive Energy' refers to the ability and possibility to attract positive feelings and attitudes as well as the reconciliatory words and deeds within individuals or groups (Yang & Tang, 2018)^[20]. Except for the political meanings, 'Positive Energy' also refers to positive behaviors and optimistic attitudes (Lu et al., 2021)^[26]. More recently, 'Positive Energy' has always been used to describe Chinese well-being, prosperity, and national strength (Hird, 2018)^[6].

The videos promoting 'Positive Energy' are so popular in Douyin that there is even a specific trending page for it. These videos often promote state ideology and patriotism, encompassing themes such as solidarity, charity, amicability, self-improvement, and professional dedication. Data shows that, by June 2018, 'positive energy' videos were promoted by more than 500 Chinese governmental accounts on Douyin and these videos were viewed over 1.6 billion times (Chen, Kaye, & Zeng, 2021)^[4]. The influence of 'positive energy' videos on Douyin cannot be underestimated.

Although research on 'positive energy' and short-form videos on Douyin is developing, most of the research focuses on health communication, particularly about COVID-19. Further investigation is needed to explore the impact of 'positive energy' in other areas and understand the role of 'positive energy' videos on Douyin.

2.3 Censorship and playful patriotism

To form the techno-nationalist internet, China has steadily tightened its grip on the Chinese internet through a system of internet censorship (Plantin & Seta, 2019)^[12]. In China, technologies should not override politics but should complement political rule (Zhao, 2008)^[22]. This integration of social media platforms with the government is reflected in the active national intervention in content regulation. To avoid significant changes and maintain the current situation, content posted on social media will be censored by the Chinese government (Lu et al., 2021)^[26], including sensitive posts, comments, and misinformation (King, Pan, & Robert, 2013)^[5].

On 15 December 2019, the Cyberspace Administration of China published the announcement of the Provision on the Governance of the Online Information Content Ecosystem, an official guideline issued by the government, indicating that except for illegal content, negative content should also be deleted. Therefore, to better ensure that content posted on platforms complies with national regulations, stricter censorship policies will be applied by social media platforms (Lu et al., 2021)^[26]. Content will be deleted and the account will be blocked once the platform finds something violates the guidelines (Kou, Semaan, & Nardi, 2017)^[21].

In addition to the entertainment value, Chinese internet industries always possess political properties, which have been linked to the political agenda such as the ‘Chinese Dream’ and ‘national rejuvenation’ ((Keane & Chen, 2017)^[7]). Based on that, playful patriotism, defined as the state-approved but not necessarily orchestrated media content that promotes national ideology in a light-hearted and amusing way (Chen, Kaye, & Zeng, 2021)^[4], occurred on China’s internet.

Researchers suggest that most videos posted by both individual and governmental accounts in the ‘positive energy’ section on Douyin are patriotic and these contents always deal with serious topics in a non-serious way, in other words, a ‘playful’ way (Chen, Kaye, & Zeng, 2021)^[4]. This phenomenon is not uncommon online in China, because the definition of ‘positive energy’ is inseparable from patriotism. (Triggs, 2019; Yang & Tang, 2018)^{[16][20]}. While not all the content posted on Douyin could be exemplified as playful patriotism, ‘positive energy’ videos do serve as a tool promoting playful patriotism.

‘Positive energy’ videos show in various forms and the way they promote patriotism is sometimes implicit; however, overall, the content is consistent (Chen, Kaye, & Zeng, 2021)^[4]. In a playful social media platform such as Douyin, it is more appropriate to create and post non-serious, amusing, or light-hearted patriotic content that is more in line with the overall playful culture that Douyin has built.

In sum, previous research has already studied Douyin and ‘positive energy’, but few studies have paid attention to the audience’s perception of ‘positive energy’ videos and the role ‘positive energy’ videos play in Douyin. To better illustrate these research topics, we propose 4 research questions:

- RQ 1: What are the main types of ‘positive energy’ videos on Douyin?
- RQ 2: Who produces/promotes ‘positive energy’ videos on Douyin?
- RQ 3: What impact do ‘positive energy’ videos bring to Douyin users?
- RQ 4: What role do ‘positive energy’ videos play on Douyin?

3 Method

A qualitative research design was employed to explore the research questions. Interviews were used as a method to generate discussion and to collect data, providing an in-depth investigation into how Chinese users perceive 'positive energy' through Douyin. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with seven active Douyin users in China, aged 20-44, and all the participants were located in Shenzhen. Interviews were conducted online and offline from May 2023 to June 2023 and each interview lasted for more than 30 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, audio recorded, and transcribed by the author of this research.

3.1 Participants

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, primarily consisting of friends and acquaintances of the researcher. Participants included seven adults (three females and four males) who live or work in Shenzhen, aged from early twenties to early forties (Table 1). All interviewees were volunteers and were of different occupations or identities, working in different fields such as media, finance, arts, government, and education, including one 'positive energy' video producer and one governmental Douyin account operator. One of the participants was unemployed. Besides, all interviewees have a college degree or above.

Table 1. Information about all the interviewees

	Sex	Age	Occupation	Education
P1	Male	26	Journalist ('positive energy' video producer)	Graduate
P2	Female	39	Investment Manager	Graduate
P3	Female	20	Student	Undergraduate
P4	Male	29	Civil Servant (governmental Douyin account operator)	Graduate
P5	Male	35	Dancer	Undergraduate
P6	Male	44	Unemployed	Undergraduate
P7	Female	44	Teacher	Undergraduate

3.2 Data Collection

A semi-structured interview protocol with ten questions was developed before conducting the interview. Open-ended and follow-up questions were also included to better elicit the viewpoints of respondents (Baiocchi-Wagner, 2011; Matveev, 2004)^{[1][10]}.

The interview was designed to accommodate the participants and conducted face-to-face in a conference room in their working place (four participants) or conducted online through VooV Meeting (three participants), a widely used online meeting app in China launched by Tencent. All interviews were audiotape recorded and each

interview lasts approximately 30 minutes to 40 minutes. Interviews proceeded as follows:

Each interview was conducted by one researcher and one participant. First, an introduction to the study was provided to the participants at the beginning of the interview by the researcher. Then, basic information about the participants, such as age, occupation, and educational background, was collected by the interviewer. After that, the interview began with the pre-developed questions. Interviews included questions about how long they have been using Douyin, how long they spend on Douyin every day, what they like to watch on Douyin, how often 'positive energy' video comes out on Douyin and what are these videos about, their feelings about these 'positive energy' videos and how these videos affect them. Follow-up questions were asked based on the participants' answers. At the same time, the interviewer may ask participants to give examples to demonstrate their personal opinions. The researcher concluded the conversation with an open-ended question about the effects of 'positive energy' videos on Douyin.

The interviews were conducted by a single researcher, acting as a discussion facilitator and leading the conversation to promote a positive dynamic. Although interviews were recorded, the researcher was also responsible for taking field notes. All interviews were audiotape recorded, re-evaluated, and then transcribed for further data analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using open coding methods and thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clark (2006)^[2], thematic analysis can help to reveal "experiences, meaning, and the reality of participants" (p. 81). The researcher and participants are all native Mandarin speakers; therefore, interviews were first transcribed and individually coded by the researcher in Chinese. Then, the researcher began the analysis by analyzing the transcript. We began the analysis by first analyzing the transcript independently and then meeting to discuss the themes. Two themes emerged and are discussed later, including past research studies as well as the evidence from our data to support and establish the credibility of each theme.

4 Findings

This research revealed different types of 'positive energy' videos on Douyin, the main producer and propagator of 'positive energy' videos, the effect of 'positive energy' videos on users and the role 'positive energy' videos play on Douyin.

All participants were active users of Douyin, and 3 of them argued that they have been using Douyin for 6-7 years. Among them, the shortest duration of using Douyin is 2-3 years. The videos they watched on Douyin included various categories such as news, travel, movies, music, daily life sharing, beauty, make-up, pets, humor, dance, food, military, sports, games, education, etc. (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of participants' usage of Douyin

	Sex	Age	Occupation	Years using Douyin	Time spent on Douyin everyday	Interested topics
P1	Male	26	Journalist	5-6 years	2 hours	Travel, movie, hot current event
P2	Female	39	Investment Manager	3 years	1 hour	Music, daily life sharing
P3	Female	20	Student	4-5 years	1-2 hours	Beauty, humor, pets
P4	Male	29	Civil Servant	2 years	1 hour	Singing, dancing, food, government affairs
P5	Male	35	Dancer	6-7 years	2 hours	Dance, military, food, TV series
P6	Male	44	Unemployed	6-7 years	5-6 hours	Novelty, military, news, sports, game
P7	Female	44	Teacher	6 years	1 hour	Daily life sharing, education, beauty knowledge sharing.

4.1 The main types of 'positive energy' videos on Douyin

All participants proclaim that they have watched 'positive energy' videos on Douyin and they got 'positive energy' videos every time while they were on Douyin (Table 3). 'Positive energy' videos that participants watched included various topics such as rescuing stray animals, caring for vulnerable groups (elder, poor), touching events, family harmony and warmth, social positive news, scientific and technological progress, sports events, military power, patriotism, etc.

Table 3. 'Positive energy' videos that participants saw on Douyin

	Have watched 'positive energy' videos or not	Frequency	Topics of 'positive energy' videos that watched
P1	have watched	Everyday	Rescue stray animals, vlog from vulnerable groups, help elder people
P2	have watched	Every time on Douyin	Helping poor people (dustmen and building workers), the provincial Tourism Bureau director promotes local culture
P3	have watched	2 'positive energy' videos out of 10 videos watched	Touching events, scientists make contributions to the motherland, famous war, helping poor people (countrymen)
P4	have watched	Everyday	The handicapped who is firm in spirit, family harmony, and warmth
P5	have watched	Every time on Douyin	Elder caring, 'positive energy' news, military, Olympic Games, sports events, donations to earthquake-stricken areas
P6	have watched	Every time on Douyin	Militarily power, advances in science and technology, economic advance
P7	have watched	Everyday	Rescue stray animals, caring for vulnerable groups, intangible cultural heritage, education knowledge sharing, farmer support, psychological counseling, patriotism

Thus, it can be observed that 'positive energy' videos can be categorized into three types: positive news, daily record, and planning plot. Positive news refers to news reports that promote good and active thoughts as well as actions that include topics such as touching events, military power, and advances in science, technology, and economy,

sports event. These are the facts that happened in society, therefore, the official government accounts are the biggest producers of such videos. The second type of 'positive energy' video is the daily record that includes V-log from vulnerable groups, rescue stray animals, knowledge sharing, and psychological counseling. The planning plot, as the word goes, is a kind of video that is planned. This kind of 'positive energy' video always has a specific topic and a shooting script. A common theme for such videos is caring for vulnerable groups, which includes helping the elder and the poor. One of the participants mentioned in the interview about such a 'positive energy' video she had seen, all the content in that account is about one man offering free haircuts to construction workers. Another participant claimed that he saw this type of 'positive energy' video about one man taking free photos of a poor elder who lives in the countryside.

4.2 The primary producers and promoters of 'positive energy' videos on Douyin

There are two main 'positive energy' videos producer and propagator on Douyin, the national official account and the private account. The national official accounts include Chinese national media such as the Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily, China Central Television, China Daily, China National Radio, etc., and official government accounts such as the State Council of China, provincial and municipal education bureaus, public security bureau, etc. Participants claim that these national official accounts always post positive news, which includes touching events, military power, and advances in science, technology, and the economy. Private accounts include non-government registered accounts and personal accounts such as the accounts of private companies or online influencers. The main content of such accounts covers daily records and planning plots.

4.3 The impacts that 'positive energy' videos bring to the Douyin users

The impact of 'positive energy' videos on individuals is primarily manifested in their psychological state and actions. All participants claim that watching short videos of 'positive energy' on Douyin had an impact on them and the biggest impact was on spirit and emotion. After watching the 'positive energy' videos, they reported feeling motivated and uplifted in their lives; generating a sense of national pride and honor, thus facing work and life with a positive and active attitude. One of the participants said: "After watching a video that touches you, you will feel that living is very powerful, that is, no matter what kind of environment you are in, or what kind of state of mind you are in, it will always make you feel that from now on, every little thing you do is meaningful."

While 'positive energy' videos can have a stimulating effect on the audience's psychology and spirituality, most of the participants indicated that this effect is typically short-term and temporary. "After watching a short video before I go to bed at night, I feel like my blood is boiling, I want to fight hard, and then the next day when I wake up, I forget all about it," said one of the participants. However, this temporary psycho-

logical impact of 'positive energy' videos does not negate its influence on individuals' behavior. All participants claim that 'positive energy' videos do affect their actions, subtly. For example, most of the participants reported that after watching a 'positive energy' video about helping people or rescuing stray animals, they would also do the same thing when they were in a similar situation. "From the time you were born to the time you grew up, all the experiences you had, all the things you saw were in your mind and they had an imperceptible and unobtrusive influence on you. So if you watch positive energy videos every day, little by little, you will be affected, slowly" said one of the participants.

Additionally, the research found that participants not only imitated positive behaviors depicted in the videos but also shared positive ideas with people in their social circles. One participant said that after watching a short video of positive energy, he would discuss the content of the video with his family and friends, and at the same time, give patriotic education to his children. Another participant, working as a teacher, reported that she would apply the content of 'positive energy' videos to her teaching.

4.4 The role 'positive energy' videos play on Douyin

All participants agreed that the presence of 'positive energy' videos on Douyin is necessary. According to this study, the first role that 'positive energy' videos play on Douyin is a propagator. Participants claim that the primary function of these videos is to capture and convey positive energy, thereby fostering a healthy online environment. One participant suggests: "So I think recording these 'positive energy' contents and posting it on Douyin is already valuable and meaningful. Positive energy is to make you believe that the world is good, and only when you believe that the world is a good place, you will create a better future." These 'good' things form and represent the national image of China in various aspects such as the spirit of Chinese and the social morality, and are shown online to the world.

Another role that 'positive energy' videos play on Douyin is a regulator. Currently, online content is diverse, and to ensure the safety and health of the Internet environment, the Chinese government participates in the regulation of the online ecosystem, reviewing and supervising the published content, and guiding public opinion as well. The 'positive energy' promotes the political agenda of the core values of (Chinese) socialism, the 'Chinese Dream', and 'national rejuvenation'. "There are so many things online. If there is no such video ('positive energy' video), the online environment is tending to be vulgar, so it is appropriate to have them ('positive energy' videos)" said one participant.

Furthermore, the 'positive energy' video also plays an educator on Douyin. As we mentioned above, topics of 'positive energy' videos contain touching events, famous wars, military power, 'positive energy' news, advances in science, technology, economic, intangible cultural heritage, education knowledge sharing, psychological counseling, patriotism, etc. The facts and values that these videos convey have educational attributes and functions and thus have a positive impact on cultivating the audience's cognition and behavior. "The amount of information that 'positive energy' videos give me is a shortcut for me to understand this society," said one participant.

Another participant claimed: “These videos (positive energy videos) can cultivate your self-confidence, including national self-confidence and confidence in science and technology. Besides, it can also cultivate the spirit of patriotism and promote the spirit of positive energy.”

5 Conclusion

The main purpose of this study is to explore how people perceive ‘positive energy’ on Douyin. By interviewing seven active Douyin users, this research reveals three different types of ‘positive energy’ videos on Douyin, which are positive news, daily record, and planning plot. It also reveals that both national official accounts and private accounts serve as the primary producers and promoters of ‘positive energy’ videos. Furthermore, the research found that ‘positive energy’ videos significantly influence individuals’ thoughts and behaviors. They also fulfill the roles of propagating, regulating, and educating on Douyin, which contribute to the propagation of positive energy and the national image of China, promotion of state ideology, guidance of online public opinion, and cultivation of individuals’ cognition and behavior.

To date, limited research has explored users’ perceptions of ‘positive energy’ on Douyin, especially the impact of ‘positive energy’ videos on users as well as the role it plays on Douyin. Hence, the findings of this study address a significant research gap, provide new insights into explaining the effects of ‘positive energy’ videos, shed light on the evolving dynamics of media and content censorship in China, and search the implications for online communication and information dissemination in Chinese society.

Furthermore, these findings could be used to further investigate and expand the literature on this topic. For instance, our research found that most Douyin users prefer to ‘give a like’ to the ‘positive energy’ videos but are not open to sharing and distributing the videos directly. Besides, compared to the general users, ‘positive energy’ videos have little impact on the ‘positive energy’ video producers or the account operator. Moreover, Chinese Douyin users hold a positive attitude toward the regulating role of the ‘positive energy’ videos. Therefore, an extensive qualitative study on these phenomena could be designed to provide more reliable and generalizable results.

Three limitations exist in this research study. First, the sample size is too small, only seven participants involved in this study, to accurately generalize the results. Besides, all of the participants have a bachelor’s degree or above and were based in Shenzhen. Therefore, educational and regional bias may be presented in this study. Moreover, only interviews were used in the study, the form of study is relatively limited. Based on that, future research should expand the sample size, ensuring that the sample size is geographically diverse and covers all groups of people. Meanwhile, adding focus groups to broaden the research methods thus ensure the diversity as well as the accuracy of the research data, which could have resulted in different observations and conclusions.

In sum, it is important to further understand the underlying effect of ‘positive energy’ and the communication mechanisms of playful patriotism and how they affect the

audience. Future research on this topic could generate viable and predictive models, which can be implemented and applied to sociological, political, and communication contexts.

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