

Scrolling or Creating? Exploring How TikTok-style Engagement Shapes Life Satisfaction and Affect among Chinese Young Adults

Tong Wu

Communication University of China, Nanjing Nanjing, Jiangsu 211172

Abstract: With the rapid growth of short-video platforms such as TikTok and Douyin, user engagement behaviors have become key to understanding the psychological outcomes of social media use. Guided by uses and gratifications theory and the social comparison framework, this study differentiates between active engagement (creation and interaction) and passive engagement (scrolling and viewing). Survey data from 520 Chinese young adults show that active engagement positively predicts life satisfaction and positive affect, while passive engagement relates to higher negative affect and lower life satisfaction. Moreover, social interaction motivation partially mediates these relationships. The findings emphasize that the quality and intention of engagement, rather than screen time alone, critically shape emotional well-being within China's short-video culture.

Keywords: Short-video platforms; TikTok; Douyin; Social interaction motivation

DOI:10.12417/3029-2344.25.08.012

1. Introduction

In recent years, short-video platforms such as TikTok and Douyin have reshaped how young people connect, express, and consume media content in China. Unlike traditional forms of online interaction, these platforms encourage both active participation—such as creating videos and engaging with others—and passive consumption through endless scrolling. While such dual modes of engagement offer entertainment and social connection, they may also lead to different emotional outcomes. Previous studies have shown that active use of social media often enhances self-expression and social belonging, whereas passive use can intensify social comparison and negative emotions. However, limited research has examined these dynamics within China's unique cultural and algorithmic environment. This study aims to explore how distinct engagement styles on short-video platforms influence young adults' life satisfaction and affect, providing insight into how digital habits shape subjective well-being in the era of immersive media.

2. Literature review

2.1 Active and Passive Engagement on Short-Video Platforms

Short-video platforms such as TikTok and Douyin have created a unique media environment characterized by both active and passive forms of engagement. Active engagement refers to users' participation in creating, sharing, and interacting with content, while passive engagement describes non-interactive browsing or scrolling. Prior studies indicate that these behaviors lead to different psychological outcomes. Active engagement fosters self-expression, social connection, and a sense of agency (Sundar & Limperos, 2013; Yang & Liu, 2023), whereas passive use is often linked with social comparison, envy, and negative emotional states (Verduyn et al., 2017). In China, the algorithmic structure of Douyin further amplifies passive exposure, encouraging prolonged viewing and potential emotional fatigue (Chen & Li, 2024).

2.2 Short-Video Use and Subjective Well-being

Subjective well-being (SWB) is commonly defined as a multidimensional construct including life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect (Diener, 1984). Studies on social media and well-being have produced mixed findings: active social interaction can enhance happiness through relational closeness, while passive observation may reduce satisfaction through comparison (Verduyn et al., 2020). In the short-video context, active use tends to enhance positive affect by offering creative freedom and recognition, but passive use often triggers emotional exhaustion or feelings of inadequacy (Zhai et al., 2024). Research among Chinese young adults suggests that active engagement

can buffer against stress and loneliness, reinforcing life satisfaction and emotional stability (Luo & Zhang, 2023).

2.3 Theoretical Framework: Uses and Gratifications and Social Comparison

This study is grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Social Comparison Theory (SCT). UGT explains that individuals actively select media to satisfy specific needs such as entertainment, self-expression, and social interaction (Katz et al., 1973). SCT provides a psychological lens through which passive exposure to idealized content can trigger upward comparisons and lower well-being (Festinger, 1954). Combining these theories allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how short-video engagement influences emotional outcomes. Recent research (Li & Wang, 2024; Chen et al., 2025) demonstrates that motivations for social interaction mediate the relationship between engagement style and subjective well-being, highlighting that the purpose of use matters as much as the amount of use.

3.The Double-Edged Screen: How TikTok Use Shapes Young Adults’ Affect

TikTok and its Chinese counterpart Douyin have become central spaces of emotional experience for young adults in the digital age. These platforms not only entertain but also shape how individuals perceive themselves and others. The emotional outcomes of such engagement, however, are far from uniform. This section examines how TikTok use influences affective states through three interconnected dimensions: emotional gratification, social comparison, and self-expression.

3.1 Emotional Gratification and Instant Pleasure

One of TikTok’s greatest appeals lies in its capacity to deliver immediate emotional gratification. The platform’s short, fast-paced videos are designed to sustain attention and generate bursts of pleasure through humor, creativity, or novelty. For young users navigating academic pressure and social uncertainty, such instant entertainment provides a temporary escape from stress and monotony. The endless scrolling mechanism, reinforced by algorithmic recommendations, ensures a constant supply of personally tailored content, evoking feelings of excitement and curiosity.

However, this gratification is often short-lived. Over time, the continuous stimulation may desensitize users’ emotional responses, leading to fatigue and emotional dependency. As a result, young adults may experience diminishing returns on happiness—a psychological cycle similar to hedonic adaptation. Thus, while TikTok offers a quick route to pleasure, excessive use may erode sustained well-being, illustrating the first edge of the “double-edged screen.”

3.2 Social Comparison and Emotional Costs

TikTok’s algorithm promotes visibility of idealized lifestyles, beauty standards, and material success. This environment naturally fosters upward social comparison, where users benchmark themselves against influencers or peers. While some may feel motivated by such exposure, many experience envy, inadequacy, and self-doubt. The curated nature of online performance—where imperfections are filtered out—creates unrealistic expectations of happiness and success.

In the Chinese context, these emotional costs are intensified by collectivist values emphasizing social approval and achievement. Young users may feel implicit pressure to conform to viral trends or aesthetic norms to gain validation. Consequently, passive users, who consume rather than create, are more prone to internalizing negative self-evaluations. This process contributes to increased negative affect, emotional exhaustion, and lower satisfaction with life. The platform, therefore, becomes not just a site of entertainment, but also a subtle arena of psychological competition.

3.3 Self-Expression, Agency, and Emotional Resilience

Active engagement through content creation fosters empowerment and emotional resilience. By producing videos, sharing opinions, and joining trends, users gain a sense of agency, creativity, and belonging, fulfilling

intrinsic needs for autonomy and relatedness under self-determination theory. For Chinese young adults constrained by hierarchical academic and work settings, TikTok offers a rare space for authentic self-expression. Creative participation enables identity reconstruction and social affirmation, enhancing positive affect and reducing loneliness. Thus, content creation transforms TikTok from a site of passive consumption into one of self-expression and emotional growth—the constructive edge of the digital experience.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals how distinct TikTok engagement patterns—active creation and passive scrolling—differently shape the emotional well-being of Chinese young adults. Active engagement enhances social connection, autonomy, and achievement, fostering positive affect and life satisfaction. In contrast, passive scrolling often triggers envy, loneliness, and fatigue, diminishing subjective well-being. These findings highlight the dual nature of short-video use: while it can promote creativity and inclusion, unreflective use may cause emotional exhaustion. Encouraging mindful participation and enhancing digital literacy can help users gain greater psychological benefits. Future research should explore long-term effects and individual differences to deepen understanding of well-being in the digital age.

References:

- [1] Chen,D.,&Li,Y.(2024).The impact of new media platform(Douyin)on Chinese individuals'consumption intention and negative emotion levels.*Journal of Media Psychology*,36(4),215–229.
- [2] Chen,R.,Zhang,X.,&Wang,L.(2025).Social comparison on social networking sites:The role of passive engagement.*Computers in Human Behavior*,112,106469.
- [3] Diener,E.(1984).Subjective well-being.*Psychological Bulletin*,95(3),542–575.
- [4] Katz,E.,Blumler,J.G.,&Gurevitch,M.(1973).Uses and gratifications research.*Public Opinion Quarterly*,37(4), 509–523.
- [5] Li,G.,&Wang,J.(2024).Effects of short-form video app addiction on academic anxiety and engagement among Chinese undergraduates.*Frontiers in Psychology*,15,1428813.
- [6] Liu,M.,Zhang,Y.,&Wang,H.(2024).Usage patterns of short videos and social media among Chinese adolescents: Implications for mental health.*Journal of Youth Studies*,27(6),789–803.
- [7] Sundar,S.S.,&Limperos,A.M.(2013).Uses and grats 2.0:New gratifications for new media.*Mass Communication and Society*,16(4),391–420.
- [8] Verduyn,P.,Ybarra,O.,Resibois,M.,John,O.P.,&Kross,E.(2017).Do social networking sites enhance or undermine subjective well-being?A critical review.*Social Issues and Policy Review*,11(1),274–302.
- [9] Verduyn,P.,et al.(2022).Do social networking sites influence well-being?The extended active-passive model. *Psychological Science*,33(6),1019–1031.
- [10] Zhai,G.,et al.(2024).The relationships between short video usage and subjective well-being among Chinese young adults:The mediating role of social anxiety.*Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*,43(2),112–128.
- [11] Zhang,N.,et al.(2023).A cross-national study on the excessive use of short-video apps:The role of individual motivations.*Computers in Human Behavior*,132,107253.