

A Preliminary Analysis of the Impact of Short-Form Video on Adolescent Development: A Case Study of Douyin (Postprint)

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Abstract

In recent years, China's information technology has advanced considerably. In this context, the Internet has gradually become an indispensable platform for communication and interaction in people's daily lives, providing significant convenience. People have grown accustomed to navigating virtual spaces without leaving their homes, thus giving rise to various forms of new media. Currently, short-video applications are particularly prominent within new media, with Douyin being the undisputed leader. While Douyin allows users to engage in entertainment and learning during fragmented leisure time, overall, it does more harm than good to the healthy development of adolescents. Accordingly, this paper provides a brief analysis of Douyin's current influence on adolescent development for reference.

Full Text

Preamble

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A Brief Analysis of the Impact of Short Videos on Adolescent Development: A Case Study of Douyin

Abstract: In recent years, China's information technology has made considerable progress. Against this backdrop, the Internet has gradually become an indispensable platform for communication and interaction in daily life, bringing significant convenience and enabling people to navigate virtual spaces without leaving home. Consequently, various new media forms have emerged. Currently, short video apps are particularly popular among new media, with Douyin undoubtedly leading the pack. While Douyin allows people to entertain themselves

and acquire knowledge during fragmented time slots such as after meals, overall, its impact on the healthy development of adolescents does more harm than good. Based on this, this paper briefly analyzes the current influence of Douyin on adolescent development for reference.

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Douyin's primary audience consists of adolescents who mainly seek to derive ample pleasure from browsing various short videos to pass their fragmented time. However, this simultaneously brings numerous adverse effects, as negative and harmful video content significantly impacts adolescents' outlook on life and values, easily causing impressionable youth to deviate from their life course and commit immoral or illegal acts, which poses a grave threat to harmonious social development. Therefore, it is essential to fully understand both the positive and negative impacts of short videos on adolescents and adopt reasonable measures to safeguard their healthy development.

1. Purposes of Adolescents Using Douyin Short Videos

1.1 Entertainment and Leisure

Research on contemporary adolescents reveals that over 60% use Douyin for entertainment and leisure purposes. Given the fast pace of modern life, most adolescents face pressures from studies, work, and relationships, requiring a platform to release their heavy burdens. Douyin short videos have emerged to fulfill this need perfectly. Watching Douyin videos during leisure time not only helps kill boredom but also makes them happier through humorous content, eliminating negative emotions and reducing stress. For instance, student adolescents often lie in bed scrolling through Douyin after a tiring day of studying. Among all short video content, entertainment and leisure topics remain hotly discussed, constantly dominating Douyin's trending searches, with celebrity gossip becoming daily conversation fodder. Driven by such videos, adolescents primarily use Douyin for entertainment and leisure.

1.3 Displaying Individual Personality

The Douyin short video platform provides adolescents with a stage to fully display their individuality. In this virtual space of Douyin, numerous “absent audiences” provide ample motivation for adolescents to express themselves and showcase their personalities. Adolescents can also adjust their performance based on audience comments and bullet chats. If audiences are unsatisfied with the image they project, adolescents can delete such videos, freeze their accounts, and create new ones to reshape their self-image. This demonstrates that some adolescents use Douyin to fully express their individuality, hoping to resonate with like-minded individuals through the platform.

2. Negative Impacts of Douyin Short Videos on Adolescent Development

2.1 Loss of Subjectivity and Deviation of Values

Due to temporal factors, the Internet has essentially “grown up together” with China’s post-90s and post-00s generations, accompanying countless adolescents throughout their development—a trend that will likely expand in the future. The Internet profoundly influences all aspects of adolescents’ daily lives, strongly shaping their value formation and life direction. However, research reveals that some adolescents post videos on Douyin that run counter to mainstream values, reflecting fuzzy cognition, blind conformity, and loss of subjectivity. For example, a shocking incident in August 2018 triggered significant public controversy when an adolescent posted a video saying, “My mother passed away; can everyone give me a like?” This video was subsequently imitated by children aged 8-14, drawing widespread criticism from netizens who condemned it as a serious violation of human ethics and extremely detrimental to healthy adolescent development.

Some adolescents adopt radical performance styles to attract attention, unaware that the Internet connects the entire world, and those with unclear understanding will blindly imitate them, directly transmitting harmful values and undermining social harmony. In the same year, a middle school girl who posted her self-designed fonts on Douyin received numerous likes and shares, becoming an overnight internet celebrity and earning some income. She then questioned: “If I can make money by posting videos on Douyin, what’s the point of going to school?” Consequently, she lost interest in studying, became addicted to Douyin all day, and eventually had to take a leave of absence for psychological treatment. Some adolescents’ excessive obsession with Douyin short videos gradually alienates them from real life, causing them to lose correct understanding of social division of labor and professional careers.

2.2 Fraud, Vulgar, and Physical/Mental Harm

Douyin's content review process faces various challenges that increase difficulty, allowing fraudulent and vulgar video creators to exploit loopholes by posting content that skirts legal and moral boundaries to achieve ulterior motives. For instance, in May 2018, a 10-year-old girl watching Douyin came across an interesting video with a closing message: "To learn more, please comment." Driven by curiosity, she left a comment, and the video author soon added her as a friend. Expecting more interesting content, she was instead sent lewd and suggestive messages. Fortunately, her parents discovered this in time and immediately called the police, preventing a potential tragedy. This incident reveals that Douyin's imperfect supervision system creates opportunities for criminals.[1] Numerous dark corners lurk within short video platforms, and once adolescents accidentally fall into them, they suffer tremendous physical and mental harm.

2.3 Excessive Addiction and Public Security Risks

Most adolescents lack mature psychological development and easily become addicted to Douyin. Various lighthearted, interesting, or stimulating and novel content makes it difficult for them to extricate themselves, blurring the line between virtual and reality and creating a barrier between adolescents and real life. They revel continuously on the Douyin platform but experience endless loneliness in real life. Excessive addiction not only affects adolescents' personal lives but may also endanger public security. For example, some students imitate the popular "hand-waving fireworks" in classrooms[2] or replicate "boiling shrimp" recipes using scalding oil at home—both posing certain safety hazards to public security.

3. Positive Impacts of Douyin Short Videos on Adolescent Development

3.1 Meeting Adolescents' Value Needs

As China's material living standards have significantly improved, the demand for spiritual and cultural content has grown daily. Against this backdrop, short video platforms have emerged to fully cater to adolescents' needs for diverse values, enriching their relevant value appeals during growth. By browsing Douyin videos related to their majors or occupations, adolescents can effectively enhance their professional competence, broaden their horizons, and develop their thinking—all greatly beneficial for healthy adolescent development. For example, university students preparing for postgraduate entrance exams can, in their spare time, watch Douyin videos about how to effectively improve study efficiency and balance work and rest, which not only relaxes their tired brains but also helps them master excellent learning techniques to pave the way for successful exams.[3] Additionally, watching and creating short videos can effectively strengthen adolescents' subjective consciousness, promoting self-education. On Douyin, adolescents can fully express their individuality, which benefits those

with more withdrawn personalities. Through self-learning and video production, they gradually become the protagonists of their videos, liberating their nature and eventually making their originally withdrawn personalities more sociable—facilitating their integration into social groups.

3.2 Spreading Positive Energy and Cultivating Good Character

The Douyin platform hosts numerous short video creators, including ordinary people, internet giants such as CCTV.com and Tencent, as well as various entertainment and sports stars who showcase their daily lives through short videos. Although the content quality varies, the number of positive-energy videos is relatively substantial. Organizations like CCTV.com and the Communist Youth League regularly release positive-energy videos to effectively cultivate good character in adolescents. On October 1, 2019, during China’s National Day military parade, CCTV.com used short videos to showcase the stories behind the participating soldiers, enabling adolescents to fully appreciate the virtues of patriotism and hard struggle, thereby guiding them to establish correct values and learn from these “most beautiful” individuals.

3.3 Adding Fun to Adolescents’ Real Life

Most short videos posted on Douyin are based on users’ real-life stories, filmed and shared with others. For example, the recently popular “Wild Wolf Disco[4]” dance and “Guess the Star from Pictures” videos not only bring joy to adolescents but also give them something to share with friends in real life, strengthening friendships and adding fun to their lives.

4. Strategies to Guide Positive Influence of Online Short Videos on Healthy Adolescent Development

First, at the national level, the government should improve its online supervision system. Currently, relevant government departments have taken measures to supervise online short video dissemination, issuing corresponding regulations and establishing professional supervisory bodies. However, because short videos emerged relatively recently, the current supervision system remains imperfect, lacking mature governance methods and resulting in poor effectiveness. Therefore, government departments should refine the online supervision system, shift legislative thinking from post-incident response to pre-incident prevention, and formulate more comprehensive regulatory mechanisms focused on “prevention and control” by considering multiple factors including network purification goals, short video platform demands, and governmental legislative procedures. Simultaneously, they should clarify authority allocation within the supervision system, assign responsibilities to individuals, fully integrate various supervisory departments, and enable them to fulfill their proper roles in online short video supervision.

Second, at the school level, institutions should provide education on online values. The current trend in short video dissemination has gradually evolved to prioritize speed over quality, creating a strong impact on school-attending adolescents and significantly affecting their daily lives and spiritual worlds. Therefore, school leaders should emphasize online values education, enabling students to achieve good self-education and learn to independently distinguish between good and bad short videos online—absorbing the essence and discarding the dross, retaining what benefits their development while abandoning what harms it. Only then can healthy adolescent development be fully ensured. Additionally, based on regional characteristics, schools across China should integrate local traditional culture, allowing adolescents to learn ancient wisdom and absorb excellent traditional culture, thereby cultivating good character. With upright character, they will not be swayed by vulgar or negative content in online short videos and will always remain true to themselves as outstanding adolescents in the new era.

Third, at the short video platform level, software platforms should strengthen content supervision.[5] Currently, mobile data is experiencing explosive growth, and short video platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and Huoshan should assume responsibility for gatekeeping online information. When reviewing user-uploaded videos, they should not blindly rely entirely on computer algorithms but should adopt a dual approach of electronic computer review and manual review—videos must pass both reviews before being published on the platform. Notably, manual review should be conducted with fairness, impartiality, and transparency, regularly publishing non-compliant videos on the Internet so that all platform users can clearly understand review criteria and standards. This way, various vulgar and negative-energy videos cannot spread on the platform, effectively protecting adolescents' physical and mental health and promoting their healthy development. Simultaneously, when pushing videos on the platform, platforms should consistently uphold a positive and uplifting main tone, fully recognize their social responsibilities, classify users of short video platforms, and push videos with good moral and educational standards to adolescent groups while connecting with politics and culture, thereby ensuring adolescents' healthy development.

In summary, the current short video craze in society has brought certain positive impacts to adolescents, enabling them to absorb positive energy and grow healthily. However, short videos also have negative impacts on adolescent development, interfering with their value formation and cultivation of good moral character. To ensure adolescents' healthy development, reasonable measures must be adopted at the national, school, and platform levels to strengthen supervision and create a healthy online environment for adolescents.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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