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The emergence of “consumer sphere”: the logics behind short video activism tactics of Chinese consumers

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ABSTRACT

Short-video-based social media platforms (short-video-based [SVB] platforms) are becoming a common tool for an increasing number of consumers to safeguard their legitimate interests in China. This article examines how Chinese consumers practice video activism by using short videos on Weibo to construct a consumer sphere for themselves to protect their legal demands. By interviewing 56 interviewees including consumers, media practitioners, public relations department (PR) officials, and relevant government officials in China, we find that short videos are more than a visible vehicle on SVB platforms which makes the voices of consumers being heard, but significantly, these platforms create a “consumer sphere” for the consumers who experienced right infringement to defend their rights. The discussion and sharing of these videos unite the consumers to bring the individual issue to the spotlight of the public. We conclude that as more consumers join the queue to share their encounters, a sphere is constructed by the use of mediated tactics.

KEYWORDS

Video activism; media activism; SVB platform; short video; public sphere

Introduction

In recent years, with the rise of digital media, social movements brought by activism have prevailed globally. The movements such as #Blacklivesmatter and #Metoo overwhelmed social media and attracted the attention of all walks of life in western societies. By using videos innovatively, although it is not necessarily that activists can challenge the status of the powerful or change the social order, activists successfully draw the attention of authorities and voice their demand. Compared with the West, the development of video activism in China is not long, and it has not become a climate among a vast number of media users. The dissents in China also face technological and political constraints to argue their demands in an online environment.

This article looks at one of the emerging areas in the Chinese context that with the awakening of consumers’ self-protection awareness and their increasing power

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recently, various innovative video activism strategies/tactics are creating a new way for Chinese consumers to change their current situation where relevant rights and interests are still difficult to be protected by relevant laws and relevant departments. In this scenario, SVB platforms are becoming a handy tool for Chinese consumers to safeguard their rights and interests. Generally, according to Yu (2021), there are two types of SVB platforms prevailing in China: hybrid and pure. “The short video is the sole content [in pure platforms], interactions between different users on pure platforms are almost exclusively confined to the short video¹; [...] the “hybrid” SVB platform, such as Weibo, WeChat, and others 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.” (p. 299). In this study, we particularly focus on the hybrid form of SVB platforms. The pure platforms such as Douyin, Miaopai, and Kwai, are explored extensively regarding their function of social entertainment and information distribution (Chan, 2020; Chen et al., 2021), whereas hybrid platforms such as Weibo and WeChat not only provide a place for short videos to circulate, but also allow threads of comments and repost. For example, as a hybrid platform, Weibo combines the function of a search engine and social networking. Apart from filming and uploading videos on Weibo, consumers whose rights and interests are damaged can share their comments and receive responses from those who had similar experiences. Unlike the use of pure platforms, consumers can get together regarding the same issue and form a cohesive force to urge the merchants to reply.

To develop an in-depth analysis about how consumers turn to consumer activism with their use of short video, this study first map and contextualize media activism and video activism. Next, we define the short video activism as the fourth phase of video activism by combing the three previous video activism phases in China. We then rely on the theory of public sphere to argue that on those hybrid SVB platforms like Weibo, consumers do not plan to organize protests, originally, but as short video visualizes their individual demands and enlarges the impact, consumers gradually unit and support their “virtual peers” who have same encounters. In doing so, an online sphere of consumers is formed and short videos play their parts as nexus in this sphere to bring different actors together. This research emphasizes the process of how consumer activism comes into being a stream of collective force and the role that short video plays in this process.

From media activism to video activism

With the development of media and communication technology, social media has become a site where different social forces fight with each other. Bennett (2017) accounted that media activism focuses on how activists use media and communication strategies and tactics to press forward social movements or advance various causes (including media access and media rights policies). There is no unified definition for media activism so far, while media activism research has gained wide attention in recent years. Discussions about media activism are usually related to large

events or processes related to mobilisation, and social movement theories have significantly been adopted by media scholars in their media activism research (Pickard & Yang, 2017).

The research on media activism is generally based on two analytical frameworks (Carroll & Hackett, 2006)—“Resources Mobilization Theory” (RMT) and “New Social Movements” (NSM) in social movement studies. In the framework of RMT, social movements are assembled by social movement organisations (SMOs). Meanwhile, the media plays a vital role in initiating collective action in social movements for these organisations (Gitlin, 2003). SMOs have developed four primary forms of “media activism” actions to democratise media and communication and to achieve their goals, including “influencing content and practises of mainstream media,” “advocating reform of government policy/regulation of media,” “building independent, democratic and participatory media” and “changing the relationship between audiences and media” (Carroll & Hackett, 2006, p. 88). The NSM appeared around the mid-1960s in many European countries and the US. Unlike the social movement that regarded the working class as the core and focused on the economic redistribution during the industrial era, social movements with the themes of anti-war, civil rights, feminism, environmental protection, etc., are all essential components of the NSM. In the NSM framework, media activism is one of the primary forms of NSMs (Han, 2008a). As Pichardo (1997) points out, the NSMs tend to use disruptive tactics and mobilise public opinion to gain political influence from the perspective of tactic.

As one of the most influential subsets of media activism, video activism suggests that video production can be regarded as a primary tool for advancing social justice and social reform (Han, 2008a, 2008b). Or in other words, video activism can be regarded as “the use of video as an essential tool in social justice activism” (Harding, 2001, p. 1). The profound effects of video activism have become a focal point within social movement studies in recent years, and the active role of video, or called moving images, have been recognised by researchers in the field (Eder & Klonk, 2016). In the hands of a video activist, a camera and other video-recording tools can become “important resources for self-expression, collective identities, framing and diffusion of protest and social movements, and for attracting audiences and target groups” (Askanius, 2020, p. 137). According to Askanius (2020, p. 138), the term “video” in video activism can be “analogue, digital, moving image, or still images compiled into a stream of moving images,” it can “take on the shape of raw unedited footage, carefully crafted documentaries, or mash-up/remixes.”

Reviewing the development of video activism from the historical perspective in the global North context, it is evident that the previous video activism was positively related to the video technologies and the social contexts in the past. In the 1950s and early 1960s in America, activists started to build their media outlets to bypass mainstream media suppression. In October 1965, Korean American artist Nam June Paik taped the visiting scene of Paul VI in New York with a video camera and showed it in a coffee house on Greenwich Avenue on the same day. Boyle (1985) argues that this videotape could be considered the starting point of video activism in the global North. Juhasz (1995) also indicates that the American underground cinema during this period can be treated as a predecessor to the radical protest cinema (videos

including political activism of civil rights, anti-war protests, etc.) of the 1960s and 1970s. According to Askanius (2013), as one of the alternative public access television projects—the guerrilla television movement (Boyle, 1985), better and cheaper camera devices and editing tools offered more possibilities to the anti-systematic critical voices throughout the 1980s and 1990s. During this period in the global North, massive video activism organisations emerged, such as the Undercurrent in the UK; Paper tiger TV, Deep dish and Indymedia video in the US, etc. These organisations and groups offered independent and critical media analyses to society, launched filmmaking technologies workshops, screened independent films in communities, cultivated civil literacy, etc. They furthered the social change in the ways of media and video activism (Han, 2008a). As Juhasz (1995) states, rapid changes in politics, theory, and technology stimulate the significant productions of political filmmaking.

In one of Askanius's (2020) research on video activism, by reviewing the literature on video activism systematically, she identifies and unpacks tendencies in how activist video has been defined and examined as either technology, text or testimony. From the point of positioning video as technology, scholars have focused on specific video technology and specific platforms (e.g., Fish, 2016), “often with an interest in technopolitical aspects of video activism, or in video as a form of hacktivism” (Askanius, 2020, p. 140). From the point of positioning video as text, scholars have shed light on the types, taxonomies, genres, and subgenres of video activism (Askanius, 2013; 2020), and their aesthetics and artistic dimensions (Juhasz, 2006). The last point, as Askanius points out, videos are often regarded by scholars as testimony—a means of “bearing witness and providing visual evidence” in the literature. Based on these three dominant tendencies of conceptualizing video activism, Askanius (2020) advocates a more open-ended understanding of video activism stemmed from Couldry's (2004) practice theory, defining video activism as “the things activists do, think and say in relation to video for social and political change—all of which are organized by common understandings, teleology, and rules specific to this field” (p. 145). By doing so, it helps video activism scholars keep off a one-sided focus on the video content only, or a focus exclusively on the technology behind the video (Askanius, 2020). Inspired by Askanius, this article also explores the short video activism tactics from this video activism practice approach.

Short video activism: the fourth phase of video activism in China

Next, to further understand the short video activism tactics and the emergence of “consumer sphere” in China, it is necessary to explore it from the perspective of video activism in the context of China. According to Han (2008a), as an indispensable part of Chinese media activism, video activism in China first appeared in the late 1980s in the form of social documentary film. However, in China, researchers have rarely engaged in video activism research. The only research of video activism has always been connected with the Chinese social documentary film studies in their academic fields (e.g., Han, 2008a, 2008b, 2016; Song, 2016). More precisely, most of these researchers merely borrowed the western concept of video activism to analyse the development progress of Chinese documentaries rather than investigate the

Chinese evolution process of video activism itself. They only agree that the early Chinese social documentary film can be considered the earliest form (and the most representative form) of video activism in China. However, several questions remain to be answered, such as how these social documentary films work as a form of video activism and what is the latest expression of video activism in China after the age of social documentary film. Next, we will explain why these social documentary films are viewed as early video activism in China. When we discuss the social documentary film in China, it is necessary to mention the rise of NDM (New Documentary Movement) in the late 1980s.

In the early 1980s, Chinese state-run media such as China Central Television (CCTV) was keen on producing “Zhuan ti pian,” and most of the themes of these special films were about the Chinese natural scenery or political commentary (Xinyu, 2003), and the production team of these films usually needed to prepare the whole script before shooting. These films formed a new kind of state propaganda form collectively in front of the public. Under these circumstances, the NDM was born around the late 1980s as resistance to the “Zhuan ti pian,” which coincides with the historical stage of the reform and opening-up of China. Xinyu (2003) suggested that “truthfulness” and “individualization” are two main features of NDM, hence during this period, many documentary films that focus on the people at the bottom of society were beginning to be produced in abundance. “The recorders paid more attention to the subaltern emotional appeals and demand of interests, and they were closely concerned with the Chinese social realities from the top down. All of these were blind spots of the Chinese mainstream media [and their feature films] at that time.” (Xinyu, 2003, p. 336).

Chinese researchers such as Han and Xinyu L believe that the NDM represents the starting point of video activism in China. According to Xinyu (2003), the NDM was initiated by media professionals from two different parties in the television and film industry simultaneously: media workers working within the state-affiliated media and independent media professionals working outside the state-affiliated media. “These representative filmmakers come from the bottom, and they try their best to let subaltern act and speak in these social documentary films.” (Xinyu & Yuezhi, 2010, p. 9). However, it should be noted that these films were still produced by the documentary filmmakers instead of the people themselves. Therefore, these “new” social documentary filmmakers cannot replace the people from the bottom to speak because they cannot fully understand or experience the latter’s life, emotional feeling and appeal. Chinese people need to speak out their stories by themselves.

The underlying causes of the gradual rise of these Chinese social documentary films were as follows: first, on a micro-level, the popularization of the digital video camera, editing tools and the emergence of the Internet offered practical media activism tools for those radical filmmakers at large; second, from the perspective of macro-social environment level, during the Chinese social and economic transformation process, the conflict of interests between different groups or individuals continuously trigger new social conflicts, these public issues boosted the awakening of citizenship and the expansions of non-governmental organisations in China (Han, 2016). In light of the above, in China, the early history of video activism is equivalent

to the historical development process of the Chinese social documentary film to a certain extent. Moreover, according to Xinyu L and Yuezhi, Z (2010), it is incorrect to say that Chinese documentary and western documentary concepts are the same. This part aims to provide an essential historical context of video activism in the Chinese context and interpret interrelationships between social-political backgrounds, video-related technologies, and agents' video activism tactics. The historical contexts of video activism in China can help us better understand the cause of the present surge of short video activism in China.

If we treat the NDM as the *first phase of video activism* in China, back to the question we proposed above, it is necessary to find out the next phase of video activism in China, especially in this SVB age. Since the mid-1990s, the social documentary films progressively “came down” in the street, different categories of civil-documentary groups began to appear (Han, 2005). However, this situation did not last long. Xinyu (2003) emphasises that after the mid to late 1990s in China, the NDM began to wane in the wave of consumerism, especially the Chinese television industrialization and commercialization compelled the social documentary film industry to cater the popular taste and audience rating. The enthusiasm for video activism was laid aside by those social documentary filmmakers and audiences.

The passion for video activism returned until the late 20th century. Since 1998, TV programs like “Bai Xing Gu Shi” (The Story of People) produced by Beijing Television Station and “ShengHuo” (Life) produced by CCTV Channel 2 started to gradually use factual video footage provided by the public as their primary program. As Han (2005, p. 75) points out, such public video footages were adopted by the Chinese mainstream as their news materials, “it is commendable that the ordinary people can tell their own actual stories (emotional appeals and demand of interests) through their lens.” These television programs successfully exposed many social injustices and promoted social reform. By contributing news materials to the mainstream television stations in the form of videos, ordinary people successfully found a path for expressing their voices and safeguarding their rights. Therefore, these mainstream-made video television programs can be viewed as the *second phase of video activism in China*. Even today, media professionals still need to edit footage filmed by ordinary people before broadcasting it in China.

Since the beginning of 2000, the *third phase of video activism* in China began. At that time, the collective actions of ordinary citizens against the local government departments or commercial companies have occurred frequently in different cities (Han, 2016), such as the landmark event of the “Anti-Paraxylene Movement” in Xiamen. Meanwhile, some non-governmental organisations of video activism emerged, for instance, the Chengdu “IYoushe” public service advertisement group, etc. By looking into these video activism cases, Han (2016) indicates that the motivations of individual and NGOs groups to use video to advocate social justice and social reform was increasing. Moreover, the emergence of SINA, Youku, Liujianfang, Tudou.com and other video websites were offering the necessary space for the individual and NGOs to share their self-made documentary films during that time (Han, 2008b).

Meanwhile, the spirits of NDM came back to a certain extent, social elites and opinion leaders started to make their independent (or self-funded) social

documentary films once again for exposing the social ills, drawing the public attention to these issues, and urging the government to do more to cure these ills. For example, one of the most well-known documentary films—“ChaiJing Investigation: Under the Dome,” is a self-funded social documentary film exposing the smog problem in China produced by Chai Jing, a famous CCTV former journalist and an influential opinion leader in China. The film was released on February 28, 2015, and it was viewed over 300 million times in total on the website of Tencent Video (but only four days later, this film was blocked and taken offline by Tencent). Han (2016) states that the film “Under the Dome” successfully aroused the public, mainstream media, and government’s concerns about China’s smog problem. By using the impact of social media platforms and Chai’s influence, Chai created an ecological chain of video activism in China to a certain extent (Cui, 2017).

As mentioned above, the social documentary film has been regarded as one of the most representative forms of video activism in China. However, because of the high costs of production and distribution, social documentary film production has been dominated by social elites or professional media organisations rather than ordinary people. It should not be ignored that the third phase of video activism in China was inseparable from the emergence of online video websites such as SINA, Youku, Liujianfang, Tudou.com and other video websites. The evolution of the Internet has further decreased the production cost and popularised video editing tools for everyone (Askanius, 2013). By reviewing these three previous video activism phases in China, we have the chance to confirm the existence of several research gaps: fewer researchers pay attention to the field of public-dominated video activism; the operation process of video activism; the latest form of public-dominated video activism in the last five years in China, especially in the SVB platform age. To fill these gaps, we define that the latest short video activism tactics based on SVB platforms and short videos have provided a new way for Chinese consumers to speak out about their dissatisfactions with certain products/services, and it could be regarded as the fourth phase of video activism in China—short video activism. In this study, by further exploring this fourth phase of video activism based on SVB platforms, video activism studies in China will be pushed forward to a larger extent. Moreover, by looking into the historical contexts of video activism in China, we can better understand the cause of the present surge of short video activism from the historical development of Chinese video activism.

Short video activism in Chinese online public sphere

The public sphere (Habermas, 1989) has been questioned by many scholars over time (e.g., Gitlin, 1998; Garnham, 2000; Goode, 2009; Arora, 2015). For example, the rational public sphere model described by Habermas based on the bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth century has been criticized by scholars for its exclusions (e.g., Papacharissi, 2002). The emergence of the Internet in the 1990s stimulated debates on the accessibility of the public sphere further. Some scholars believed that Internet technology is fundamental to equality of access to information, which can strengthen deliberative democracy and the public sphere (Gimmler, 2001). Some disclaimed the

positive impact of Internet technology, proclaiming that the internet is not available to all social groups (e.g. Lunat, 2008), and situations like discursive dominance and the digital divide (Papacharissi, 2002) restrict the public space created by the Internet and prevent it from becoming a public sphere.

As it moves into the social media age, the studies applied to the theory of the public sphere to look at the role of media in democratic context centred on investigating the relationship between the use of media and the order inside the sphere (Lünenborg & Raetzsch, 2017). Especially on the condition that the communication among social actors regarding the controversial issue does not reach a rational decision, media plays an important part in this sphere for the dissents who stand on the opposite side of the others (DeLuca & Peebles, 2002). This stream of inquiry on the public sphere is extremely important in the discourse of democratic politics for how the status of powers inside the sphere is challenged or configured along with the advent of the internet (Dahlberg, 2007).

Although there are many critical voices, researchers have been striving to prove the plausibility of public sphere theory, and especially the connection between the digital media technologies such as social media and the public sphere today. For instance, the connectivity of social media not only ties the activists who share the same concern together, but also allows their collective action to be visible to the wider public (Waisbord, 2018). Dey's research (2020) investigates the activism use of Twitter in India that massive students in 2014 united on Twitter to boycott the injustice towards the victims of sexual violence. So far, the use of social media in activism issues received extensive attention for the deviance in authoritarian countries that online activism is in an arduous and dangerous environment to voice the demands. However, even if a portion of the public sphere optimists regard social media as an ideal starting place for the public sphere, the online public sphere has been challenged and restricted by the political and commercial impact and other practical factors. For example, as Garnham (2000, p. 41) stated, "the colonization of the public sphere by market forces" can be observed by the increasing commercialization of social media platforms. The traditional function of media, being a gatekeeper, does not vanish in these social media platforms (Goode, 2009).

Research on public sphere in China have increasingly emerged right after the first Chinese version of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* published in 1999 (translated by Cao et al.). The focus of scholarly discussion on the public sphere in the Chinese contexts is more about the contentious relationship maintained in the sphere, where many scholars have examined the possibility that this sphere does appear in China, especially after the introduction of the internet. Chinese scholars (e.g., Guo, 2013) attempted to demonstrate that the Chinese social media platforms have the possibilities to construct a public sphere. Since the early 2010s, more and more Chinese researchers, have started to criticize that previous studies often exaggerate the role of mass media (especially social media) and neglect the interactive relationships among the mass media, government departments and other social organisations in China (Huang, 2009). Moreover, a part of Chinese scholars unilaterally disclaims the full value of the public sphere theory. They believe that it does not apply to Chinese society (e.g., Zhang & Bai, 2017). In sum, Chinese researchers

who focus on media and communication studies related to the public sphere are talking past each other, or in other words, public sphere research in China is relatively scattered.

Even so, there are still a few Chinese researchers who attempt to draw lessons from the public sphere theory and define a subordinate “public sphere” concept that is more in line with the actual situation in China. For example, Huang (1993) examined the public sphere theory and came up a concept of “third realm” based on the Chinese situation. Huang (1993, p. 216) argued that Habermas’s public sphere is an “ideal abstracted from early modern and modern Western experience”, and “that is inappropriate for China”, Chinese public sphere should not be treated as a simple binary opposition between state and society. Huang (1993) put that the bourgeois public sphere is just one variant type of public sphere mentioned by Habermas; it is necessary to define a subordinate “public sphere” concept that is more in line with China’s national conditions. After Huang, scholars (e.g., Feng, 2015) focused on the “third realm” and take it as arguments to criticize the Habermas public sphere and discuss its applicability in China. Yang and Calhoun’s (2007) research on “green public sphere” is a significant example. According to them, the emergence of debates surrounding dam building on the Nu River signals the rise of a “green public sphere” in China. Within it, the environmental nongovernmental organizations played a leading role for making critical environmental discourse, and mass media, the Internet and alternative media produced and disseminated by those nongovernmental organizations were the main channels of communication.

In recent years, following Yang and Calhoun (2007) and Guo (2013), Sun et al. (2018; 2021) continued to shed light on the public sphere in China from the perspective of environmental politics. Since it is difficult for Chinese citizens to articulate their concerns about public issues through civic organizations or other formal means of participation, they have to participate in relevant discussions through informal ways (Sun et al., 2021), such as the online forum. Sun et al. (2018) investigated the ordinary Chinese citizens’ everyday talk about online environmental talk on three online forums and demonstrated that these talks serve as an informal mechanism for the general public to directly participate in environmental politics in China.

The “consumer sphere” we illustrate in this article has similar roots as the “green public sphere” and “environmental protection public sphere.” According to Lo and Leung (2000), the Chinese political system did not provide the public with an institutional channel to exert important influence in the environmental policy process. It can be regarded as another fundamental root cause of the emergence of the “green public sphere” and “environmental protection public sphere,” in addition to what Guo (2013) and Sun et al (2021) pointed out. Back to the “consumer sphere,” government relevant departments and businesses in China did not provide Chinese consumers with enough efficient channels to safeguard their rights and interests as well (Yu, 2021; Treré & Yu, 2021). It leads consumers to turn to the “consumer sphere” to seek solutions. Inspired by these above-mentioned studies, in this article, we regard the public sphere concept as a springboard for exploring how Chinese consumers adopt short video activism tactics based on hybrid SVB platforms to construct a proto “consumer sphere” for themselves to protect their legitimate rights and interests in China.

Methods and data

How do Chinese consumers evaluate the influence of their short video activism tactics on businesses, and the wider impact on social change? How do the respondents in the business, media and relevant government departments interconnect with each other under the influence of consumers' new media activism tactics? Put differently, how does the "consumer sphere" based on Weibo and other SVB platforms work? To answer these questions, this study relies on semi-structured interviews and conducts a thematic analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) of the interview data. In the duration of February 2019 and May 2019, the first author interviewed 56 interviewees in total from four different groups including: consumers (N = 15) who encountered/witnessed short video activism tactics, and well-known/veteran consumer activists; media practitioners (N = 15) who focus on the fields of consumers' disputes or consumer activism in any mainstream media such as television stations, newspapers, etc, as well as on SVB platforms (i.e., well-known television journalists and news chief editors, and Weibo influencers); PR officials (N = 14) of large corporations with specialized PR departments (i.e., brand-focused professionals, senior brand managers, and directors); and government officials (N = 12) who works in different consumer rights protection departments (i.e., secretary generals, spokesmen, and department directors). The respondents were recruited through the following methods: (1) personal network; (2) snowball sampling. All interviewees have a bachelor's degree or above, and all of them are proficient in using mobile phones and SVB platforms (e.g., Weibo, WeChat, Douyin, etc.).

The interviews focused on questions about interviewees' perceptions of the short video activism tactics, and the interrelationships between the four main actors - consumers, media practitioners, PR officials and government officials - involved in these tactics (i.e., how they examine their relationship with the other three actors involved in these tactics). The interviews are semi-structured and carried out in three cities in China —Beijing, Guangzhou and Foshan. The first author is a native of Foshan in Guangdong province (Foshan is adjacent to Guangzhou), whereas the second author is a native of Beijing. The average interview time for the interviewees in four groups was about 30 to 60 minutes.

With the permission of interviewees, all the interviews are recorded and transcribed by the first authors. Part of the transcripts were translated by the first author and the second author did the back translation to check the meaning. Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis method, we analyzed the interview data to identify initial themes, which led to a focus on short video activism tactics, interviewees' perception and experience of short videos, SVB platforms such as Weibo, and the overall interrelationships between the four main actors.

Findings

Personal struggles into the public

Chinese consumers' short video activism tactics are filled with personal interest considerations. The interview results suggest that show that Chinese consumers have the

following three concerns before deciding to implement the short video activism tactics: (1) *The Damage Extent*. Consumers' activism tactics are directly tied to the extent to which they are financially, psychically or mentally damaged. The more money they lose or, the more psychical or mental damage they suffer, the more they are willing to employ the short video activism tactics or other activism tactics to defend their rights and interests; (2) *The Ratio of Success*. Most consumers will estimate the probabilities of success of their activism tactics based on success rates of previous similar cases and their personal life experiences. The higher the success rates of similar cases in the past, the more they are willing to implement their short video activism plans. On the contrary, these consumers will be reluctant to adopt any activism tactics if they foresee that their success rate is rare; (3) *Privacy Matters*. Most consumers believe that choosing to use short video activism tactics means exposing themselves to public criticism. Consumers will not use these tactics if they believe that their privacy is far more important than their financial, psychical or mental losses.

Such as interviewee 7 (consumer) mentioned, "If a company infringes my rights very seriously, such as causing me huge financial loss, or physical and mental damage, I will definitely use these [short video activism] tactics to defend my rights and interests." Interviewee 42 (PR official) told a story about one of his mailing experiences in China. In his answers, he emphasises what he did during the whole process. "I sent a soymilk machine back to Shenyang through a famous Chinese delivery company, but when my family received the machine, they found that the machine was damaged." Consequently, interviewee 42 called the service hotline of that delivery company and demanded compensation from them, but nobody took his complaint seriously. Hence, he contacted the delivery company again, but this time he declared that he would have posted his bad experience with them on Weibo and other social media platforms. Working as a public relations official, this interviewee is familiar with these intimidating consumer activism tactics. "Based on my work experience, I predicted that they would solve my problem and compensate me with a high probability before using this strategy." His experience of fighting against a listed delivery company represents what most interviewees will act when they encounter similar problems: Chinese consumers have to make sure that their practices are "profitable" before they enact their short video activism tactics.

Chinese consumer activism is filled with personal interest considerations (as mentioned above, the damage extent, ratio of success and privacy matters are the top-three considerations). As interviewee 13 (consumer) pointed out, "Chinese consumers are selfish." The overall interview results elucidate that the consumer activism issue in China tends to be self-interest-oriented, and most Chinese consumers usually choose to "look on" instead of joining in one ongoing consumer activism issue and becoming a part of it.

Our findings show that the self-interest-oriented short video activism tactics in China can be sublimated into the public-interest-related activism event or movement. Although all interviewees in the group of consumers and media practitioners have admitted that personal-interest-related considerations exist in most short video lead consumer activism cases in China, these interviewees still believe that these cases can

draw the attention of the public, media practitioners, businesses and government departments to a certain extent and benefit all consumers in the society. We have defined two logics of change based on the interview results: “comrade logic” and “potential victim logic.”

Comrade logic happens when more consumers with similar experiences stand out and support the consumer who initiates short video activism tactics to fight against a company. And these consumers who join later become the comrades-in-arms of the foremost consumer, and all of them share the same goal: to safeguard their legitimate rights and interests. For example, as interviewee 34 (journalist) indicated, “consumer’s self-interest is not conflicted with the public interest. If one consumer stands out first and fights against a company for safeguarding her interests, then other consumers who find themselves with the same experiences will follow her/him and do the same thing.” Interviewee 38 (journalist) also stated that “I once encountered a consumer activism case while working for this company: in the beginning, only a few people who bought our apartments complained about quality problems such as water leaks online. Later, after other consumers with similar experiences saw these complaints online, they had a strong emotional resonance with those who complained, and they began to complain online together with previous apartment buyers.”

Potential victim logic happens when more consumers are involved in a consumer activism event against a company, as they are unwilling to be potentially harmed someday like the consumer (also the first acknowledged victim) who initiates the short video activism tactics fighting against this company. For example, interviewee 1 (consumer) mentioned that “personally speaking, no matter what others look at me, I do not care about other people’s business because [Chinese] consumers only fight for themselves. But if someone’s unfortunate experiences somehow become a public event, which means these bad things may happen to me, then I will pay close attention to this case. Helping others is helping yourself.” Interviewee 3 (consumer) also indicated that “all Chinese consumer activism cases I have known followed the same logic: a company violates a consumer’s rights and interests first, then after the media exposure, this dispute between the company and the consumer becomes a public event. The reason for this transformation is simple: because everyone knows that he bad things that happen to someone else’s head may also happen to them, they cannot ignore it.” In sum, as interviewee 14 (veteran consumer activist) indicated: “most consumer activism cases related to short videos in China are self-interest-oriented, Chinese consumers will not stand out and care about other people’s business unless they are the victims like everybody else.”

These representative answers reveal a common transformation path between self-interest-oriented short video activism tactics and the public-interest-related consumer activism event in China. This path can be indicated by a specific index—“Interest-related Index.” This index refers to the correlation between self-interest-oriented short video activism tactics and the interests of mass consumers. More specifically, the higher the interest-related index of short video activism tactics, the higher probability that they will be noticed by the public and sublimed into a public interest related consumer activism event; and the lower the index, the lower probability this case will be transformed to a public event.

To sum up, we should not ignore the self-interest-oriented nature of the short video activism tactics adopted by Chinese consumers. In China, most cases of consumer activism can be regarded as the personal confrontation between the individual and the company, which aims at safeguarding the initiator's rights and interests. Nevertheless, the convertible path between these self-interest-oriented consumer activism cases and the public-concerned consumer activism event should not be neglected, as the interviewee 6 (veteran consumer activist) summarized: "Protecting others is protecting ourselves, vice versa. Many people think that the misfortune of others has nothing to do with them, but this is completely wrong. Everyone is a part of the overall consumer group." He reminds us that a business does not serve only one consumer. On the contrary, it serves the entire society. In other words, if a consumer's rights protection practice can prompt the company to make corrections and changes, then other consumers and the whole society will benefit from it.

The feasibility of the "consumer sphere" in China

Unlike environmental destruction, human rights violation issues, which have been strictly controlled by the government, "marketplace choice" have gradually become a new way of political participation that citizen-consumers can employ their agency (Micheletti, 2003), especially in China. In terms of the Chinese government, as Gao (2016, p. 356) put it, "the huge commercial interests of the information industry may be tempting the central government to apply loose regulations to the social, entertainment and commercial aspects of Chinese cyberspace while, at the same time, maintaining strict censorship on the flow of information about political issues." Yang (2009, p. 34) also stated that "the central leadership will not tolerate activities that directly challenge its legitimacy, but it may tolerate and even encourage grassroots protests that target local leadership and local practices." Regarding Chinese consumer, they try to find ways to express and safeguard their rights and interests without opposing the party-state (Svensson, 2016). All these preconditions make a room for the "consumer sphere." In fact, in the previous studies on short video activism (Yu, 2021; Treré & Yu, 2021), the idea of the consumer sphere has been implicitly outlined. This study aims to combine their empirical evidence and our interview results to show the consumer sphere in detail.

In this study, most interviewees agree that when the consumer activism gradually spreads over different SVB platforms in China, these platforms offer an alternative discussion space for Chinese consumers to express and amplify their voices, and to safeguard their rights and interests by recording, uploading and reposting short videos about their unsatisfied consumption experiences or any practices related to these experiences. By doing so, Chinese consumers can capture the attention of mainstream media/we-media, public relations departments of businesses, government departments and the mass public, and solve their problems with the assistance of these actors, and without opposing the party-state. The complicated and bidirectional interactions between Chinese consumers, mainstream media and we-media, PR officials and government department officials through SVB platforms form a workable but abnormal "consumer sphere."

First, in this “consumer sphere,” Chinese consumers occupy the centre of the entire sphere. By using the short video activism tactics, consumers can get timely media coverage on their experiences; can promptly get relevant government departments to intervene in their conflicts with businesses and get their help; can force the business to take responsibility and compensate consumers in a timely manner (Yu, 2021; Tréré & Yu, 2021). For them, the short video activism tactics are more effective than using traditional rights methods (such as negotiating with the business directly, asking help from local relevant government departments).

Second, media (including mainstream media and we-media) play a significant role in the “consumer sphere.” So far, studies on the public sphere have explored the complicated relationships between the public sphere and various forms of media, such as newspapers (e.g., Raymond, 1998), community radio (e.g., Forde et al., 2002), television (e.g., Dahlgren, 1995), alternative media (e.g., O’Donnell, 2001) and new social media platforms (e.g., Iosifidis, 2011). There have been many similar discussions of how Internet-based media influences the construction process of the public sphere in the context of China (e.g., Li, 2016). Inspired by these studies, we need to consider the role of all forms of media (from We-media to mainstream media) played in the “consumer sphere” proposed in this article.

By obtaining short video evidence provided by consumers on SVB platforms and reporting on it, media can further influence the speed and attitude of relevant government departments and businesses to deal with the problems raised by consumers (Yu, 2021; Tréré & Yu, 2021). Besides, our interview findings further present that, in the eyes of relevant government departments, there is another cooperative relationship between government departments and the media. On the one hand, media working as an important information source for regulating the business for them. The interview results indicate that these officials expect the media to voluntarily inform them of any consumer complaints or consumer activism issues as soon as the media gets it. By doing so, these departments can know certain consumer activism issues in the first place and deal with them accordingly. On the other hand, these departments actively cooperate with the media to make the media expose the unfair, deceptive and fraudulent practices of the businesses they know to regulate the market and protect the rights and interests of consumers. As interviewee 50 points out, “media exposure/coverage is one of the significant ways for us to make businesses admit their faults and to protect consumers from being deceived by businesses. Normally, businesses choose to immediately admit their mistakes and make compensation to consumers after we ask the media to expose their offences in most of the cases.” In a word, in the eyes of the government departments, the media is an effective weapon for regulating the market and punishing the business that violates the legitimate rights and interests of consumers. Moreover, these departments also use the media as a “warning panel” for consumers by asking the media to promote the correct consumer knowledge to consumers, including consumer tips such as how to identify the true and false products, how to avoid being deceived by businesses, how to protect their rights adequately, etc.

Third, relevant government departments are another important part of the “consumer sphere” besides media. Most interviewees (10 out of 12) who works in

relevant consumer rights protection departments mention that once they notice the short video evidence posted by the consumer with the “help” of media exposure, they will intervene in the incident. As interviewee 46 states, “we have to admit that these short videos can speed up our work on dealing with related cases.” We concluded from the case studies Treré and Yu (2021) provided and our interview findings, the specific intervention methods of these departments include in-depth investigations, summoning the businesses involved and ordering them to rectify immediately, and issuing relevant laws and regulations to regulate the market and protect consumers’ rights and interests further.

Finally, as the hitting target in the consumer sphere, in the face of “smoking guns” (p. 309) presented by consumers with the assistance of the media and relevant government departments, businesses must solve problems for consumers, respond to the media coverage, and accept government punishments and make corrections, in order to maintain their brand image in front of the public (Yu, 2021).

Although the emergence of the “consumer sphere” has provided consumers with new opportunities to express their dissatisfactions and to protect their rights and interests, as well as a new place to influence government decisions, the real impact of “consumer sphere” is still doubted. The critical factors such as privacy concerns, businesses’ countermeasures, the profit-seeking nature of the media, and the government’s control of the media, are limiting the ability of short video activism (Yu, 2021; Treré & Yu, 2021)—the backbone of the “consumer sphere.” Moreover, the government’s other strategies and tactics such as “water army” (Morozov, 2012), “computer filtering” (Kalathil & Boas, 2003) limit the potential of the Internet to strengthen civil society in China (Sun et al., 2018), which affect the effectiveness of the “consumer sphere.”

Discussion and conclusion

Chinese political system did not provide the public with an institutional channel to exert important influence in the environmental policy process (Lo & Leung, 2000). Back to the “consumer sphere,” the findings suggest that government relevant departments and businesses in China did not provide Chinese consumers with enough efficient channels to safeguard their rights and interests. It leads consumers to turn to the “consumer sphere” to seek solutions.

The mechanism of this “consumer-centered” consumer sphere works in two ways. First, from the perspective of the relationship between consumer culture and politics, the relationship between consumption and citizenship in the world today is getting closer even though they tended to be situated in two opposing spheres of “private and public” a generation ago (Trentmann, 2007, p. 147). In recent years scholars from different disciplines (e.g., social movement studies, gender studies) have indicated the civil potential of consumption around various topics such as “fair trade, sweatshop products, and related issues of social and environmental justice” (Trentmann, 2007, p. 149) and use the term “citizen-consumer”² to symbolize it (e.g., Micheletti, 2003; Tian & Dong, 2011). Consumption has functioned for a long time as an “alternative sphere of political action and inclusion for groups excluded from

the formal body politic [...]” (Trentmann, 2007, p. 149). The growing relationship between consumption and citizenship has underpinned the emergence of the consumer sphere.

Second, from the perspective of the government control, unlike environmental destruction, human rights violation issues, which have been strictly controlled and governed by the government, “marketplace choices” (or consumptions) have gradually become a new way of civic engagement that consumers can employ their agency (Micheletti, 2003), especially in China. As Yang (2009) pointed out, the Chinese central government may tolerate and even encourage grassroots protests that do not directly challenge their legitimacy, hence, consumer activism issues will not be limited by the government as long as these collective actions are not anti-state and anti-party (Herold, 2008) in China. This creates another essential objective foundation for the “consumer sphere” model. Moreover, as Svensson (2016) proposed, the growing Chinese middle class (with strong purchasing power) nowadays are also trying to find ways to express and safeguard their interests without opposing the party-state apparently. In sum, from the perspective of Chinese, the consumption (consumer rights protection) area tolerated by the government is a low-risk sphere for them to participate in civic life.

Within the “consumer sphere,” based on short video technologies (SVB platforms and short videos), by recording, uploading, sharing and reposting short videos about their unsatisfied consumption experiences or any practice related to these experiences, Chinese consumers can express and discuss their grievances, capture the attention of mainstream media/we-media, public relations departments of businesses, government departments and the mass public to influence the decisions and behaviours of relevant government departments and businesses, and safeguard their rights and interests without opposing the party-state. Consumer activism, to certain cases, successfully brings the individual-merchant conflict into the public area, and the increasingly attention turns the individual issue into social and public affairs.

Unlike the Utopian bourgeois public sphere, the “consumer sphere” model is more pragmatic and currently working in Chinese society. This “consumer sphere” has the potential to become an alternative space for consumers to both take part in more public-concerned issues and safeguard their rights and interests at the same time. It can become a lively Internet-based channel for public opinion, which can mobilize the public opinion to monitor the government and business, address broader issues of justice, and most importantly, push for legislative and policy reforms. Consumers can actually get in touch with the media within the “consumer sphere” when they need, by adopting the short video activism tactics. With the assistance of the media, the “consumer sphere” can become a lively “Internet-based channel” (Cheung, 2016) for public opinion, which can mobilize the public opinion to monitor the government and business, address broader issues of justice, and most importantly, push for legislative and policy reforms. On the other hand, this “consumer sphere” has stimulated the growth of people’s consumer rights consciousness, and it “has contributed to people’s growing awareness of individual rights, albeit limited to economic and legal rights, and given them a range of ‘learning experiences’ in locating and using avenues to exercise those rights” (Hooper, 2005, p. 17).

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Notes

1. But now, users on these pure platforms can also post pictures and texts in their accounts. For example, Douyin launched their photo and text function in November 2021.
2. According to Trentmann (2007), Tian and Dong (2011), the term “citizen-consumer” refers to those individuals or groups whose consumption practices are guided by civil concerns.

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