

From Consumers to Pro-sumers: Understanding Cross-Cultural Content Creation and Value Production on TikTok and Douyin

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Abstract: This study explores how TikTok and Douyin users from diverse cultural backgrounds produce content and economic value through their interactions, content creation, and community engagement on these platforms. Using a qualitative approach rooted in ethnography and supported by theoretical frameworks on pro-consumer and participatory cultures, this research analyzes user behaviors, motivations, and the socio-economic impacts of user-generated content. The study finds that the parallel platformization of TikTok and Douyin, enabled by ByteDance's dual-market strategy, fosters distinct content creation and value production practices tailored to their respective cultural contexts. This research highlights how recommendation algorithms, user interactions within comment sections, and influencer-driven strategies such as live streaming collectively shape both cultural and commercial value on TikTok and Douyin. By examining these dynamics, the findings contribute to the understanding of digital prosumer culture, illustrating the fluid interplay between production and consumption within the digital economy and offering insights into the transformative impact of platform-driven ecosystems.

Keywords: TikTok, Douyin, prosumer culture, participatory culture, user-generated content

1. Introduction

The rise of social media platforms has fundamentally changed how individuals create, consume, and perceive value in the digital age. Among these platforms, TikTok stands out for its unique format and explosive popularity across cultures. Launched by the Chinese technology company ByteDance, TikTok allows users to sing along to their favorite songs and create videos with the help of an in-app synchronization feature. The primary function of TikTok is to shoot and share short videos, typically 15 to 60 seconds in length. TikTok enables users to create videos with various filters, music, and effects. Many of these videos respond to challenges initiated by users, TikTok, or well-known brands and celebrities [1]. In addition to video production features, TikTok is also a social networking platform. Users can send messages, follow others, and engage with videos through likes, comments, and shares. These features make the platform both a video-sharing tool and a social networking service.

TikTok's short-form videos have turned users into creators, generating significant social and economic value. In 2022, TikTok earned \$11 billion, primarily from advertising and in-app purchases [1]. This success is driven by AI algorithms that analyze user data to deliver personalized content. These algorithms create a feedback loop that increases engagement and strengthens shared preferences [1]. While TikTok does not exploit physical labor, it leverages user data to drive profit.

Therefore, this essay explores how users of Douyin and TikTok from different cultural backgrounds produce value, a research question that can be better understood through comparative case studies and by applying theoretical frameworks related to consumer-producer and participatory cultures. This research question not only sheds light on the global reach of TikTok but also contributes to a broader discussion of the role of social media in contemporary culture and the economy. More importantly, it connects with existing studies on TikTok producers and consumers from different cultural backgrounds, thereby enhancing the understanding of cultural production and consumption in the digital age. By examining how TikTok users from diverse cultural contexts produce and consume content, this essay extends existing theories of participatory culture and user-generated content. It also challenges traditional distinctions between producers and consumers, suggesting a more fluid and dynamic relationship. Specifically, it explores three key questions: First, how do TikTok users in cross-cultural contexts produce value through content creation? Second, what are the motivations of platform users in content creation, and what challenges do they face in this process? Third, how do different cultural contexts shape the value production process on TikTok and Douyin platforms? By investigating these questions, this article contributes to understanding the digital prosumer culture by offering insights into how users navigate the complex dynamics of agency, cultural expression, and economic benefit within the participatory framework of social media.

2. Literature Review

In today's digital culture, users are both content consumers and producers, embodying the dual role of the "prosumer." This phenomenon, especially prominent on social media and user-generated content (UGC) platforms, has blurred the traditional boundary between production and consumption. With the rise of digital technologies and platforms, user creativity and participation have become essential elements of the digital cultural industry. This literature review explores the role of online platform users in content production and examines their impact on the digital culture industry. Through relevant theoretical frameworks on prosumers and participatory culture, this study reveals users' distinctive role in digital culture. Additionally, by analyzing empirical data, it identifies participation patterns, motivations, and the social and economic impacts on the cultural industry. Ultimately, it aims to map existing academic research on prosumers and digital culture, highlight key issues, and identify research gaps. Finally, the review will offer guidance for future research.

Toffler introduced the term "prosumer" in *The Third Wave*. He predicted a shift towards consumers who actively participate in production. Toffler described a historical evolution of consumption: in pre-industrial societies, or the "first wave," people mostly engaged in self-sufficient consumption. The Industrial Revolution, or the "second wave," created a clear division between producers and consumers. In the "third wave," Toffler predicted a reintegration of the roles of producer and consumer [2]; he saw individuals acting as both. Supporting this perspective, Ritzer agrees with this view [3]. He argues that production and consumption have always been interconnected, even during industrialization. He suggests that we move beyond this traditional divide to better understand prosumer dynamics today. Building on this idea, Prahalad and Ramaswamy introduced the concept of "value co-creation" [4]. They argued that consumers play a key role in the production process. Tapscott and Williams expanded on this with the "wiki-economy" model, in which consumers directly contribute to business processes [5].

Participatory culture emphasizes community and collaboration over individual consumption. Brough and Shresthova describe it as a process in which users, acting as prosumers, work together to build communities [6]. Jenkins further explain that participatory culture has shifted from individual expression to collective engagement [7]. Jenkins identifies several forms of participatory culture, including affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem-solving, and circulations, all of which contribute to the creation of communities. One prominent manifestation is fandom culture, where fans transform individual responses into collective cultural production [8]. Through participatory culture, individuals actively engage in creating new cultural texts and social networks, illustrating the shift from passive to collaborative media consumption. Flew argues that this shift is significant, as it transitions users from mere consumers to collaborative producers who shape digital culture through their active participation [9]. Social media platforms have helped realize Toffler's vision of prosumerism, enabling the "social customer" [9], who actively shares information and participates in product discussions. As Tapscott and Williams note, platforms like Dell's IdeaStorm demonstrate how businesses can harness consumer input to drive innovation [10]. These cases underscore prosumerism's potential for creating economic value, as users contribute to brand development and product refinement.

However, as prosumer culture grows, it raises questions about its economic and social impact on the broader cultural industry. Connor observed that social networking has implications for capitalism, as it harnesses "commodity-centered self-fulfilment" [11]. Arvidsson and Colleoni term this "information capitalism," wherein social media facilitates value creation and strengthens relationships between consumers and brands [12]. Despite its benefits, prosumer culture has faced criticism. Beer and Burrows highlight the challenges in the production-consumption relationship within Web 2.0 [13]. Humphreys and Grayson draw on Marxist theory to argue that consumer participation can sometimes mask exploitation [14]. Zwick uses Foucauldian and neo-Marxist perspectives to suggest that companies exploit consumers' desire for recognition and autonomy [15]. These scholars argue that while prosumer culture promotes agency and creativity, it can also lead to exploitation, creating a blurred line between empowerment and commodification.

Overall, this literature review highlights the growing influence of prosumers in the digital culture industry. Users are reshaping production and consumption through active participation on social media and UGC platforms. This review explores the theoretical foundations of prosumer culture, participatory dynamics, and critical perspectives. These perspectives reveal both the opportunities and challenges of prosumer engagement in the digital age. Future research should explore these dynamics more thoroughly, focusing on how prosumers balance agency and exploitation in the digital economy.

3. Methodology

This study employs netnography, a qualitative method for researching online communities. Netnography adapts traditional ethnography to the digital realm, helping researchers understand user behavior, cultural practices, and interactions in online spaces like TikTok and Douyin. In this study, netnography is used to explore how users from different cultural backgrounds create value. The focus is on how users generate value through content creation, community engagement, and cultural expression.

3.1. Data Collection

Data was collected by selecting relevant topics and analyzing video content, captions, user comments, and interactions on TikTok and Douyin. The focus was on content created by food influencers with large followings and high engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, and comments. Videos from

influential accounts on both platforms were selected to ensure a representative and diverse dataset. This approach enables the analysis of how users generate and embed value through various types of content and audience interactions. It also takes into account the cultural and platform-specific differences between TikTok and Douyin.

On Douyin, a well-known creator (D1) has over 22 million followers. He focuses on preparing traditional Chinese dishes, and his content highlights accessibility and cultural heritage. The videos are clear and easy to follow, appealing to viewers of all cooking levels. The interactive nature of his videos makes Chinese cuisine more approachable for a modern audience. Another Douyin account (D2) is managed by a team of chefs with 14 million followers. They focus on traditional Chinese culinary techniques, and their videos highlight the artistry and craftsmanship behind classic recipes. They also incorporate storytelling, sharing personal or cultural anecdotes to deepen the content. This approach attracts viewers interested in the cultural richness and traditions of Chinese cuisine.

On TikTok, creators use various styles and strategies in their food content. A popular brand (T1) with 4.6 million followers focuses on quick, visually appealing recipe videos. These videos are designed for busy, modern viewers and center on comfort food with creative twists, aiming for viral appeal. The brand's established presence across multiple platforms supports this strategy. Another TikTok creator (T2), a chef with 7 million followers, combines culinary precision with humor. He creates high-quality food videos that often reimagine fast-food classics as gourmet dishes. His content appeals to both casual viewers and dedicated food enthusiasts. By blending entertainment with education, he maintains a strong connection with his audience. A smaller but dedicated TikTok creator (T3), with nearly 140,000 followers, specializes in baking tutorials. His content ranges from simple recipes to complex desserts, and he provides detailed, step-by-step guidance, showcasing visually attractive results that appeal to bakers of all skill levels.

This comparative analysis of Douyin and TikTok food creators (D1, D2, T1, T2, T3) reveals how cultural, personal, and commercial values are created and communicated across platforms. It offers a nuanced perspective on cross-cultural content production.

3.2. Data Coding and Analysis with ATLAS.ti

Data analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti, a software designed for qualitative data analysis. This tool helped organize the data and enabled systematic coding and thematic analysis. The collected data was coded to identify recurring themes and patterns, with a particular focus on value production. Thematic analysis was guided by frameworks on participatory culture and prosumer theory. These frameworks provided a structured approach to examining how users incorporate personal, cultural, and commercial value into their content. This approach facilitated an exploration of users' engagement in content creation, community interaction, and the blending of producer and consumer roles.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed alongside theoretical frameworks of participatory culture and producer-consumer (prosumer) theory. Participatory observation notes were coded and analyzed to identify core themes related to value production, focusing on user engagement in content creation and community interactions, as well as the mechanisms for cultural production and economic benefit. Key themes were identified and conceptualized, including the roles of the producer-consumer, cultural expression in content, and the forms of value (social, cultural, and economic) generated through content creation. Thematic analysis revealed how users act as both producers and consumers within the participatory culture of TikTok and Douyin, embedding cultural meanings in their content and exchanging and obtaining value through interactions with their audience. Producer-consumer theory was applied to explore how users seamlessly integrate the roles of creator and consumer, using participatory culture to strengthen their social networks and enhance their economic returns.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Role of Algorithms on Douyin and TikTok

The recommendation algorithms on Douyin and TikTok are designed to provide users with highly personalized content, allowing them to engage deeply with videos they are interested in without actively searching for them [16]. These algorithms achieve this by analyzing various user interaction data, such as likes, comments, viewing duration, and sharing behavior, to offer tailored content that enhances user satisfaction and reinforces platform engagement. TikTok and Douyin use algorithms to create detailed user profiles. These profiles are then used by algorithmic engineers to train the recommendation system and match content to viewers with high precision [17].

For example, popular TikTok food bloggers like T1 and T2 attract users who are interested in cooking. Creators achieve this by producing high-quality, visually engaging content and showcasing unique personalities. TikTok's algorithm analyzes viewers' habits and groups users with similar interests [18]. This enhances the reach of content and boosts viral engagement. Tailored visibility helps creators gain followers quickly and increases their influence on the platform.

Douyin's algorithm system, by contrast, emphasizes cultural relevance. It prioritizes content that aligns with users' regional and cultural interests [19]. For instance, food bloggers like D1 and D2, who specialize in traditional Chinese dishes, benefit from this approach. The algorithm analyzes user preferences and promotes content that matches cultural themes, such as Chinese cuisine and heritage. This strategy boosts visibility and increases audience engagement.

Both Douyin and TikTok refine their recommendation systems through real-time optimization. The algorithms adjust based on user interactions [20]. When a user likes, comments on, or shares a video, the algorithm registers this interest and recommends similar content to the user. This creates a "closed-loop" effect, where each interaction helps improve the user profile. As a result, the algorithm delivers even more relevant content [21]. Bloggers like T1, who offer detailed baking tutorials, benefit from this continuous feedback, helping them reach a larger audience.

Additionally, both platforms encourage user engagement by using simple, low-cost interaction mechanisms, including double-tap likes, quick comments, and easy sharing options. These features allow users to effortlessly engage with content, increasing each video's interaction and expanding its reach [21]. For example, T1's humorous and relatable video style attracts many likes and comments, enabling the algorithm to continue promoting these videos to an ever-broadening audience.

Finally, TikTok's algorithms prioritize content presentation by giving higher visibility to well-branded accounts, such as T2, which aligns with the platform's focus on rapid content distribution [21]. This branding advantage enables prominent creators to achieve broader content distribution and sustained follower growth, as their high-quality production values resonate with both the platform's visual standards and user preferences.

Overall, Douyin and TikTok's recommendation algorithms play a crucial role in helping food bloggers expand their audiences and increase content visibility. Through personalized push mechanisms, real-time adjustments, and low-cost interactive features, these algorithms establish a robust "two-way feedback" mechanism. This mechanism reinforces a closed-loop cycle, where user interactions continuously inform content recommendations. This cycle supports high engagement levels and facilitates the viral spread of content, helping bloggers accumulate substantial followings on both platforms.

4.2. User-Generated Content and Comments Section

Although recommendation algorithms play a crucial role in amplifying content visibility and engagement, users also contribute significantly to the platform's dynamics through comments and

interactions. The comments section has become an important space for user-generated content, reflecting diverse opinions, knowledge exchange, and social interactions. Analyzing these interactions helps us understand how users engage with influencers and reveals how they contribute to the cultural and social value of content on Douyin and TikTok.

To analyze the empirical data, the author coded the qualitative data collected from the comment section of each account. The analysis revealed that comments are one of the most common forms of social interaction. They express users' opinions and reflect knowledge-sharing behaviors. These comments help identify user activities and intentions on short video platforms. The study highlights the different ways users engage with comments and the intent behind them. To better understand these intentions, this article focused on the attitudes expressed in the comments toward the video content or context. YouTube comments can be categorised into three types based on their relevance to the video: Comments related to video content: These comments directly stem from the knowledge demonstrated in the video; comments related to video context: these comments relate to the knowledge presented but are not directly addressed in the video; general category: these comments are unrelated to the video content or context [22]. Building on these categories, this study further defines three distinct commenter attitudes, reflecting their stance on the video. It identifies three types of attitudes:

The first type includes constructive and positive comments. These comments are related to the knowledge shared in the video content and context, where commenters show interest in the knowledge, learning intent, and self-organizing abilities. Such activities typically generate questions, hypotheses, and models, test the feasibility of the knowledge, and defend or discuss it.

The second category involves critical and negative comments. These comments relate to the video content or context but do not contribute to knowledge-building nor show intent or action toward creative skill-sharing. These comments express a lack of interest in the shared information or fail to recognize its value.

The third type includes irrelevant comments. These comments are unrelated to the video content or context and disconnected from the video's theme or topic. They cannot clearly articulate a learning goal and often appear as incomplete sentences or phrases (Observational notes, 20241101).

From the statistical data, 53.85% of information-type comments were classified as "Constructive/Positive Comments." "Critical/Negative Comments" accounted for 23.08%, and "Irrelevant Comments" also made up 23.08%. These results suggest that commenters with a critical and negative attitude are more inclined to post general conversational comments, while those with an irrelevant attitude tend to post opinion-based comments. The classification data indicate that constructive and positive comments dominate, accounting for 53.85% of the comments in the video sections of Douyin and TikTok food influencers. This suggests that most viewers appreciate the influencer's content and tend to engage with it positively. Viewers often express appreciation for the video or discuss cooking techniques in their comments. This positive feedback strengthens the connection between the influencer and the audience, also helping to promote further content sharing and dissemination.

Around 23.08% of comments fall under "Critical or Negative Comments." These comments reflect that some viewers have a critical attitude toward the content or the influencer's style. Such comments may question cooking methods, criticize video quality, or express personal disappointment. Although this represents a smaller portion, negative comments provide opportunities for content improvement. Another 23.08% of comments were categorized as "Irrelevant Comments." These comments are unrelated to the video itself and may include advertisements, self-promotion, or content that doesn't align with the video's theme. This phenomenon is more common in popular influencers' comment sections, especially when the video attracts much traffic. Advertisements and other irrelevant content tend to mix into the discussion. Overall, the distribution of comment types shows that most viewers

hold a positive attitude toward food influencers' content, creating a good atmosphere for interaction, while also reflecting some critical opinions and the presence of irrelevant comments. For influencers, maintaining interaction with constructive comments, paying attention to improvement suggestions from critical comments, and minimizing irrelevant comment interference can further enhance audience engagement and content quality.

In addition to the general feedback, cultural recognition and sharing in the comments section are particularly prominent [23]. Viewers not only express their recognition of the culture behind the video through their comments but also share their related cultural backgrounds and experiences through interactions. For example, when a video showcases a traditional dish, viewers from relevant cultural backgrounds often express their identification with these cultural symbols in the comments, sharing family recipes or cooking experiences. This cultural recognition is evident not only in the audience's appreciation of the influencer's content but also through interactions with other viewers. These interactions promote cross-cultural dialogue and exchanges, strengthening the sense of connection among viewers. Positive interactions in the comments section foster emotional connections among users. These exchanges create opportunities for cultural dialogue and mutual understanding. Over time, the comments section becomes a space for cultural recognition and community building.

4.3. How Douyin and TikTok Bloggers Generate Value

The vibrant interactions in the comments section enhance social and cultural engagement with content. They also contribute to the value created by influencers and bloggers on Douyin and TikTok. Many bloggers build on this engagement by employing strategies such as influencer marketing and live streaming. These tactics help expand their reach, build brand loyalty, and generate economic value. In doing so, influencers demonstrate how they actively create value for both their brands and their audiences.

Influencer marketing involves brands partnering with online influencers to advertise their products or services [24]. Some types of influencer partnerships are simpler, such as those where brands engage with influencers merely to increase brand awareness [24]. Influencers are also viewed as a valuable investment by brands, as they allow businesses to reach potential customers more effectively and achieve a better return on their advertising investments.

Live video streaming is the instant distribution of video content through the internet, enabling audiences to view and engage with the host in real-time. In contrast to traditional business models, live streaming offers a more affordable and efficient alternative for both businesses and consumers [25]. It also provides consumers with a convenient method of shopping from home. Sellers and buyers can interact simultaneously, with sellers showcasing and presenting their products, while consumers can engage with one another to obtain information about the type or quality of the products.

It can be concluded that live streaming is an effective promotional medium that offers information, influences consumers, and attracts them to use, buy, and become loyal to a product. Brand perception, which is considered an intangible asset, includes factors such as brand identity, perceived quality, name or reputation, symbols, and slogans. It plays a key role in building a competitive advantage for the future [25]. To optimize marketing strategies and influence consumer purchasing behavior, brands must continually promote their identity to ensure that consumers remember them. Getting consumers to recall a brand is more challenging than launching a new product; therefore, organizations must sustain efforts to enhance brand recognition.

Platform practices related to marketplaces, business models, and monetization create friction between Douyin and TikTok. This study found that virtual currency and virtual gifts are the only means of direct monetization on both platforms. This virtual economy, however, is accessible only through live streaming, which is currently limited by the number of followers on both platforms [26]. This limitation is less problematic in the Douyin market, where live streaming is already well-

established and the use of virtual gifts has become habitual [26]. Douyin further facilitates user access to live-streaming content through a dedicated live-streaming section.

This does not mean that TikTok has encountered significant difficulties in developing its business model or monetization strategy. *The Trade* has outlined several ways to monetize TikTok's popularity, including Netflix marketing, linking to other monetization platforms, and merchandising. Sponsored content and brand partnerships are beginning to emerge on TikTok. However, one industry publication noted that "although sponsored videos occasionally appear, there is no clear way for creators to monetize their content directly" [27]. ByteDance may adjust its business model and monetization strategy, despite reports that the current strategy is working well in China. Furthermore, ByteDance's recent valuation of approximately \$100 billion (USD) suggests that the company is not financially distressed [28]. This market-level tension highlights the differences between China's digital content market and the international market. However, overcoming this tension may be easier than addressing the stigma of "being a Chinese platform" that ByteDance faces overseas.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, TikTok and Douyin exemplify the intricate ways in which social media platforms enable users to act as both content creators and consumers, generating value through engagement, creativity, and community interaction. ByteDance's dual approach with TikTok and Douyin represents a groundbreaking example of parallel platformization, where the two platforms share similar features but adapt to distinct cultural and regulatory contexts. The study demonstrates that user-generated content, facilitated by recommendation algorithms and the interactive comments section, drives cultural exchange, builds communities, and creates economic value, enabling influencers to foster brand loyalty and audience engagement.

While TikTok and Douyin empower users to contribute to digital culture, the blurred line between agency and commodification remains a critical area for further exploration. Overall, this study contributes to our understanding of prosumer culture and provides a foundation for examining the evolving relationship between digital platforms and user-driven value production across diverse cultural landscapes.

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