

# China: The rise of TikTok sister app Douyin as a powerful consumer tool

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Chinese people are increasingly using TikTok's sister app as a way to complain about products and are finding it a powerful asset.

Our [research](#) shows that Douyin, which is produced by ByteDance the same company that owns TikTok, has become influential in offering Chinese people a way of putting consumer pressure on companies.

This short-video platform has the [largest number of users in China](#) (over 730 million at the end of 2022). According to [Douyin](#), its users range from teachers based in rural China who record the impoverished living conditions that many local children face, to laid-off Chinese workers making a living live streaming.

Douyin and TikTok are essentially the same app. They allow users to create, share, and view short videos. However, they operate on different servers to comply with China's internet laws, such as the [cybersecurity law](#), which came into effect on June 1 2017.

For our research, we interviewed 56 people living in mainland China who were familiar with online consumer protests. We also followed an online protest and tracked relevant hashtags to gather more information, searching specific Chinese words on Douyin, such as "*xiaofeizhe*" (consumer; 消费者), "*weiquan*" (safeguard [legal rights](#); 维权), "*jianshang*" (profiteer; 奸商).

Over half of our interviewees believed that speaking out about unsatisfactory consumer experiences through media, especially social media, was the only way to protest against corporations. For instance, Liu (a consumer activist) observed that:

"Social media helps Chinese consumers resolve problems faster than other formal ways suggested by the government. It is very difficult to get a timely response when seeking help from government departments or directly negotiating with the businesses. Although [social media platforms](#) are not responsible for my financial loss, they allow and help me to spread my unfortunate stories. Our problems are resolved much faster when we post these complaints on Sina Weibo."

Interviewees told us that they see short videos as a powerful medium to communicate substandard consumer experiences. Douyin is easy to use and therefore appeals to users who are older or not tech-savvy. Many of our interviewees highlighted that for the [older generation](#), posting short videos on Douyin is a better way to express dissatisfaction than microblogging sites because the process is straightforward. For instance, Bing, an interviewee, said, "My parents know nothing about the internet, but they are able to record a short video with their phones and post it online."

Douyin offers a platform for consumer activism using *naoda* (to make a fuss over; 闹), which refers to Chinese consumers' strategic practices to achieve greater public visibility of their complaints. Bringing attention and visibility to a problem makes it more likely a company will respond.

In China, consumers are more likely to use social media platforms such as Sina Weibo (similar to Twitter) [to express dissatisfaction](#) with companies and boycott them, than to complain to a journalist. Because of censorship of the [mainstream media in China](#), social media arguably allows more freedom of expression.

## China's consumer power

In China, consumer activism has a long history. As early as 1905, middle-class people in urban China boycotted American goods and protested on

the streets against the [Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882](#), a US federal law prohibiting immigration of Chinese laborers. This is considered one of the earliest consumer activism movements in modern Chinese history, teaching Chinese consumers for the first time that their buying power mattered.

The concept of a "consumer" was [reborn in 1978](#), the year of China's economic reform, often called the "open door policy." More products started to appear on the shelves. Between 1994 and 2003, mainland China was the world's [fastest-growing consumer market](#), and the buying power of Chinese consumers progressively increased. Corresponding laws and regulations to protect consumers began to be introduced by the government.

The [Chinese Consumers Association](#) (CCA) was founded in 1984 by the Chinese government to protect consumers' rights and interests. It is important to note that it is not independent. The CCA is supported and regulated by the Chinese government, through which the government can exert control over consumer issues and policies. Therefore, unlike western consumer organizations, it cannot confront the government or initiate a collective boycott or protest.

With the emergence of video [social media](#) platforms, such as Douyin and Kuaishou, Chinese consumers have found new ways to speak up for themselves, attract media attention, and consequently, pressure businesses to give them their money back. These short videos have become a significant force.

Qiang, a professional photographer, told us that short videos on Douyin are more authentic than plain text and pictures on microblogging sites, and more importantly, they can be used as legal proof. [According to China's supreme people's court](#), original unedited electronic files such as videos can serve as evidence.

Tan, a graduate student, argued that protesting online is more effective than doing it offline as the consumers' stories can be seen by other consumers and the company in question: "Once your story is successfully spread on the platform, the company that violates your rights will notice you, and they will resolve your problem as soon as they can to protect their brand image."

Chinese companies hunt for consumer complaints on Douyin to address them as quickly as possible. In the PR company where Kai (a brand manager) works, a team searches consumer complaints on Douyin 24 hours a day, and "once they discover a complaint, they will make every effort to solve it and then earnestly request the consumer to delete the video," she told us.

As Douyin becomes an essential part of the everyday culture [of many Chinese people](#), it has become a far more powerful tool than might have been expected when it was first launched.

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