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## The Impact of Cultural Factors on Chinese Teenagers' Self-presentation in Douyin's Videos

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### Abstract

Modern mobile technologies that allow the quick creation of short videos provide users with ample opportunities to present their information in public space. Teenagers have become the most active users of new forms of creativity, so their self-presentations on video platforms deserve attention. This study uses content analysis to examine the features of Chinese adolescents' self-presentation on Douyin, the Chinese TikTok counterpart, and the cultural factors that determine these features. We discovered that teenagers' self-presentation is characterized, firstly, by the creation of a virtual identity based on the real one, secondly, by freedom in the choice of role behavior, and thirdly, by the idealization of their image and various means of its formation. In addition to the impact of social, commercial, and network values, we also found the influence of traditional Chinese culture. Cultural stereotypes formed by upbringing are reflected in the forms of self-presentation (from external style to way of thinking) by the modern younger generation on social networks. We noted the role of celebrity culture in the daily lives of teenagers. In the future, studying the role of Chinese adolescents in the social information system, especially at the stage of changes in their self-perception and self-presentation, seems relevant.

**Keywords:** self-presentation, cultural factors, short video, TikTok, Douyin.

### 1. Introduction

Self-presentation, as Erwin Goffman rightly observed, is nothing but the management or regulation of impression and refers to the effort to present oneself to others to make them see one's personality the way one wants them to see it. This phenomenon is characteristic of interpersonal communication in which an individual "brings into play information about him" (Goffman, 1956: 10) to others using various symbols to give them a precise impression. For successful interaction, individuals try to idealize their image mainly through facial expressions, appearance, and actual behavior.

A permanent image is maintained through behavioral patterns (Goffman, 1956).

Today, online video clips can be presented and stored in cyberspace, allowing us to study people's self-presentation characteristics, strategies, and motives. In the Internet era, the daily management of human impressions inevitably extends to online interactions. Compared to face-to-face communication, people can eliminate as much as possible undesirable forms of their image and behaviors that do not fit their "role" in social media by embellishing their appearance and reactions as much as possible. Short video, as a new form of communication, has made the mode of self-presentation infinitely diverse.

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According to Sensor Tower, TikTok has become the world's most in-demand and fastest-growing app for watching and downloading short videos, and its audience is considerably young people (Sensor Tower, 2022). According to IiMedia Data Center, 49.42 % of Douyin's users – the Chinese version of Tik-Tok – are under 24 years old. And 65.6 % of minors are users of video platforms, and the length of time they watch short videos is increasing.

In general, the popularity of mobile devices and the Internet among minors has become a global phenomenon. Internet usage among Chinese adolescents aged 7 and above has reached 99.3 %, and watching short videos is the third most popular type of online entertainment among minors after listening to music and playing computer games (CNNIC, 2021). Therefore, analyzing Chinese adolescents' self-presentation in short videos is undeniably relevant.

According to Goffman's dramaturgical theory, in everyday life and relationships, each person is a performer, recognizing other people's expectations of his/her behavior and assuming their thoughts, feelings, and actions in specific situations, constantly adjusting his/her interaction with them depending on the depth of what is happening and the character of people. With the advent of cyberspace and social media, the "stage" for personal self-presentation has expanded. In computer-mediated communication, people can spend more time selecting or creating the information they present (Goffman, 1956). Online self-presentation and image management strategies are defined by factors such as personality characteristics, the purpose of the social media user, gender, age, country, and culture (Hart et al., 2017; Herring, Kapidzic, 2015; Schlosser, 2020; Vogel, Rose, 2016; Zhang et al., 2018).

While the Internet has turned the world into a global village by allowing information to circulate and change rapidly, related research shows that people from different countries and cultures provide different content and use different ways of presenting themselves online. Researchers examined 98 Korean and American personal Internet pages and found that American virtual "actors" were more likely to present themselves as static images, while Korean virtual actors presented themselves as images in motion (Kim, Papacharissi, 2003).

Also, due to socio-cultural factors, there are differences in how men and women from the same country present themselves on social media. For example, most Indian men use photos in casual clothing on Facebook and Orkut, whereas most Indian women use personal photos in "traditional" outfits on Orkut and in "formal" or "casual" clothing on Facebook (Nemer, Freeman, 2015).

A recent cross-cultural study has demonstrated that cultural factors influence the motivation to create precise images for self-presentation on social media in Asian and European users (Sariyska et al, 2019). Therefore, this study examined the characteristics of Chinese adolescents' self-presentation in short videos from a cultural perspective.

The Adolescent Age Range was chosen for several reasons. First of all, adolescence is defined as a transitional period of life that follows childhood and precedes adulthood. Second, it represents a pivotal phase for identity formation, embracing societal values and conventions of conduct, and acquiring social expertise and life competencies. Third, the expansive nature of the Internet results in adolescents inhabiting a milieu molded by numerous cultural determinants. Adolescence, as defined in developmental psychology, is the period between the ages of 10 and 19. During this time, individuals tend to focus on the opinions of others, which then shape their understanding of their own roles. It is based on the belief that others are concerned with both the appearance and behavior of the adolescent (Berk, 2007: 363-386). The traits exhibited by adolescents in their short video self-presentations offer insight into how new media transfers social culture, social values, and behavioral norms.

## 2. Materials and methods

This study analyzes the characteristic features of Chinese teenagers' self-presentation on Douyin, the original version of the TikTok app. The presence of the keywords "secondary school student" and "high school student" in users' profiles was chosen as the primary selection criterion for samples of age groups. The number of subscribers of more than 100,000 was used as a secondary selection requirement. Eventually, we selected 12 users with a ratio of male and female samples: 6 junior high school students (3 boys and 3 girls) and 6 high school students (3 boys and 3 girls). Table 1 presents the data from the research sample.

**Table 1.** Research sample

Nº	Nickname	Gender	Age group	Number of fans
1	苏璇儿	girl	secondary school student	5.800.000
2	豪豪oso	boy	secondary school student	273.000
3	Ameng	girl	secondary school student	182.000
4	杨阳洋	boy	secondary school student	163.000
5	果果子ღ·))	girl	secondary school student	155.000
6	-阿猪的日常	boy	secondary school student	141.000
7	拉笔小新	boy	high school student	2.300.000
8	谦之之_	girl	high school student	620.000
9	祝嘉泽	boy	high school student	260.000
10	我不叫媛媛.	girl	high school student	213.000
11	阮梦没睡醒	girl	high school student	135.000
12	花花花菜	boy	high school student	130.000

Filtering short videos posted over a six-month period in their accounts we selected all 12 profile photos representing 12 teenagers, and 478 videos as the samples for our study.

While keeping up the image of a "character" in everyday life requires a precise appearance and behavior, online short video apps offer several technical features to manage the impression. For example, editing features, video effects, controlling access to content, and more. Considering these factors, this study integrates previous approaches to examine the subject (see: [Algavi et al., 2021](#); [Banczyk et al., 2008](#); [Camarero et al., 2019](#); [Gálik, Gáliková Tolnaiová, 2015](#); [Okushova, 2020](#); [Volkova, 2018](#); [Wang, Wu, 2022](#)).

For analysis, we used user pictures, nicknames, and profiles. Video content and graphic effects, "behind-the-scenes" and virtual actors' looks, and musical, and vocal components were selected as samples for the study. MAXQDA software was used to code the samples to identify the characteristics of adolescents' self-presentation and to analyze the influence of cultural factors.

### 3. Discussion

Personal settings comprise nickname, user pictures, and profile, serving as a tool for self-presentation. Teens can employ avatars to express their individual self-perception. This research examined photo types and the emotional level of color treatments chosen for personal avatars ([Table 2](#)).

**Table 2.** Types of photos for adolescents' personal avatars

	Types of avatars	Quantity
Personal photos	Casual photo	2
	Selfies	1
	Artistic photo	1
Non-personal photos	Images of cartoon and anime characters	5
	Celebrity photos	3

As a result, we discovered that Chinese teenagers prefer impersonal photos such as cartoon characters and celebrity images for their user profiles. The color tint of the avatars is mainly neutral, indicating that teenagers employ images of other people or things to portray self-perception constructs.

A nickname is the first step in creating a virtual persona that emphasizes an individual's distinctiveness or uniqueness. It is a textual symbol that portrays one's reflections about themselves. Analyzing the meanings of personal nicknames (Table 1) in this study revealed intriguing characteristics.

- The structure of nicknames is complex and includes words, symbols, cartoon icons, and other elements. The choice of symbols and graphic images reflect an individual's traits rooted in reality.

- About 42 % of teens use nicknames in Chinese, and 33 % use a combination of words and symbols.

- Teenagers very rarely choose their real names as a nickname.

Previous studies confirm our observation that. According to one of them, 65 % of the Chinese believe that one should not use one's real name as an Internet alias (Wu, 2006), and this social attitude influences today's younger generation. Chinese people value anonymity and privacy (He, 1996) and are guided by the judgments and views of others. They fear a too-personal image may invite scrutiny and biased discussion (Lin et al, 2021). In addition, it is in the tradition of Chinese culture to choose subtle images and use graceful objects to express emotions and thoughts, expectations, and aspirations. Chinese teens choose avatars and nicknames in response to these cultural factors.

Profiles generally contain details including gender, age, hobbies, personal beliefs, and other personal characteristics. The studied profiles are filled with descriptive information about their activities, communication with fans, business collaborations, and links to other social platforms. Adolescents' self-descriptions may reflect their personal qualities and attitudes, attitudes and hobbies, which are often affected by sociocultural factors.

#### 4. Results

The study revealed that ticktockers only partially disclosed personal data. For example, #4 "杨阳洋" wrote that he is a 3rd grade student, and #5 "果果子ღ) ~~" reported that she is in 2nd grade and lives in Shanghai. Ticktockers who did not provide real information about themselves outlined their virtual identities. For example, #1 "苏璇儿>" stated that she is a blogger who likes to describe her life. In terms of hobbies, 6 users posted lists of songs in their profiles. 9 out of 12 expressed their mood in a positive way: their states reflected cordiality and good expectations. For example, "The coming day is promising" (#6), "The cure for life is to save" (#8), "Remember to be happy every day" (#12). As for the profiles, their content is presented in self-presentations, which primarily concern the daily life of the authors themselves.

The majority of posts relate to fan interaction. All bloggers thank for the support and attention to their pages and mention their accounts on other social media platforms that they suggest following too, including QQ (41.7 %), WeChat (41.7 %), Weibo (25 %), and Xiaohongshu (16.7 %). It suggests that teenagers want to strengthen communication with their admirers by taking advantage of additional opportunities. Meanwhile, the younger generation prefers graphic symbols rather than words in their profiles, which may be due to the influence of online culture.

Of the 12 bloggers, eight promoted business collaboration accounts on their pages or indicated information about the nature of collaboration in their profiles, and six recommended collaboration links regardless of age group and gender. According to our study, "internet celebrity" is the most desired career among 54 % of Chinese teenagers. High school students with a certain number of subscribers are naturally eager to earn money from this stream influenced by the behavior of internet celebrities, so their video content shows readily monetizable elements.

The evaluation system of successful self-presentation for short videos includes evaluation indices of visual and auditory features. Visual elements contain "behind-the-scenes", the ticktockers' look, and special effects, while the auditory components include not only the topic but also the timbre of the voice or musical styles.

In addition, short videos can be classified into five categories based on their content: everyday recordings, advertising, impression, reaction, and distribution of information. Notably, the majority (67.99 %) of these videos fall under everyday recordings (Table 3).

It is common for teenagers to document their daily routine by detailing their school activities, learning experiences, social interactions with friends and peers, weekend activities, personal attributes, and other characteristics. The two most common themes in the daily recordings are domestic life and school life. The subjects of the videos are often classmates, friends, and family

members. The episodes typically have a positive and emotive tone, portraying healthy interpersonal, friendship, and familial connections.

**Table 3.** Types of short video content

Types	Quantity	Share ( % )
Everyday recording	325	67.99
Advertisement	60	12.55
Impression	52	10.88
Emotional reaction	32	6.69
Information distribution	9	1.88
Total	478	100.00

Advertisements usually take the form of recommendations to subscribers of specific products. These can usually be stationary, clothing, skincare products, and other goods that are often used by teens. This preference may be due to two factors: teenagers imitate adult video bloggers, and merchants use the influence of young bloggers on their target audience to advertise their products.

Only 10.88 % of video content pertains to impressions which typically showcase the beautiful filming of oneself or others, resembling Tik-Tok's "explosive" videos, where the subject poses in front of the camera to show off their attractiveness. The common topics of emotional impression videos are relationships of all kinds, academic success or failure. A smaller percentage of content is about sharing information on teaching methods, recommending resources for any disciplines, courses, or online classes.

The young tiktokers shoot their videos mostly at school and at home. Typical locations for school scenes are classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, cafeterias, and school shops (Table 4). Domestic scenes include the protagonists' living rooms and dorms, bathrooms, and kitchens. Parks, cafes, cinemas, amusement and shopping centers are also popular locations for short videos. However, domestic scenes dominate with 50.21 %. The most common location in these scenes is a tiktoker's room and the most used film set is a desk, which may be associated with a sense of privacy or greater freedom.

**Table 4.** Locations of short video

Scenes	Quantity	Share ( % )
At home	240	50.21
At school	125	26.15
The others	113	23.64
Total	478	100.00

In 65.06 % of the short videos, teenagers prefer not to show their faces, filming themselves only from the side or back. This may be due to both character factors and privacy preference, as well as national culture. Adolescents in East Asian countries are very cautious about self-display due to the influence of Chinese traditional culture, particularly the "culture of shame" (Zhai, 2021). Adolescents maintain certain relationships with their fans to ensure personal interests but set invisible boundaries and try not to present too many scenes from their real-life under the influence of the traditional Chinese "differentiated mode of association" (Fei, 1992).

There are mainly three types of personal appearance: classy, casual, and school uniform (Table 5). "Classy" videos represented the largest proportion, comprising 48.87 % of the 311 short videos. For example, "苏璇儿", a 15-year-old high school student, carefully chooses her outfit, hair-dress, and makeup for each of her videos. Ticktockers, who only film themselves from the side or back also carefully consider their clothing choices. In 34.08 % of their videos, they wear casual clothes but for maintaining an attractive image they keep clean and neat their clothes. School uniforms are usually seen in school scenes, but sometimes in home scenes as well.

**Table 5.** The ticktocker's appearance in short videos

Appearance	Quantity	Share ( % )
Classy	152	48.87
Casual	106	34.08
School uniform	53	17.04
Total	311	100.00

Video effects include video editing, using video templates and filters, adding subtitles, adding emoticons, etc. Video effects were used in 95.61 % of the selected short videos. As a virtual platform, social media offers users more opportunities to modify their performances and adolescents are eager to use these tools to showcase themselves.

Musical symbols are used by teens in 90.38 % of short videos, while voice symbols are used in 47.28 %. Ticktockers use music to enhance the communicative effect of their video content. They select mostly background music according to the nature of the video, to advance the narrative, to create a certain atmosphere, to evoke the necessary emotions or the desired resonance of the audience. There are three types of music in this collection: narrative music, rhythmic music, and background music.

**Table 6.** The nature of audio information in short videos

Nature of audio information	Types	Quantity	Total
Musical symbols	Narrative music	38	432
	Rhythmic music	66	
	Background music	328	
Voice symbols	Introductory descriptive text	219	226
	Celebrity Quotes	7	

Background music in videos encompasses action songs, sound effects, or music that complements the overall theme and tone. Often, rhythmic music such as rock or electronic music is embedded in dance videos to emphasize the dynamism of gestures and movements. For instance, #4 selected "Move Your" as the soundtrack for her dance video with her friends.

Narrative music is accompanied by lyrics that convey emotions to evoke a response from viewers. For instance, in the graduation video, #12 picked the song "Cheers" to express gratitude for friendship.

We have identified two types of narrator voices: introductory descriptive language and celebrities' quotes. The former includes original sound, synchronized dubbing, and voice-overs created with the help of artificial intelligence. Teenagers are keen on employing the vast resources of artificial intelligence for voice-overs. This application generates quirky dubbing that can help eliminate a potential gap in the viewer's understanding of the video and foster a pleasant atmosphere.

Celebrity quotes are mostly motivational in nature. For example, No.10 chose a quote by Dong Qing, a well-known Chinese television host, to inspire himself: "Those days when we can't sleep at night, those moments when we want to avoid the abyss are precious moments that allow us to truly understand and accept ourselves, so that we can exceed ourselves".

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, according to the analysis results, the self-presentation of Chinese adolescents in short videos has the following features:

1. Virtual personalities. Teenagers create them based on their real personalities. These online identities are formed through the use of short videos using real scenes from school and home life, which serve as the foundation for their online identity.
2. Idealized self-presentation. As a general practice, idealized images are enhanced through the use of retouching and filters to achieve a more flawless appearance. Furthermore, the majority

of adolescents depicted in short videos demonstrate favorable interactions with their families, classmates, and social surroundings, signifying contented lives.

3. Hidden self-presentation. This is a common practice among adolescents who choose not to use their personal image as their user picture or their real name as their social media handle. In addition, many opt to conceal their face in videos by filming from a side or back view.

4. Adult Imitation. In behavior, language, and even the way they videotape, teens show clear traits of imitating adult Internet celebrities.

In addition to customized settings and short videos, teenagers' interactions with their audience in the comments section also have a significant impact on self-image management and the choice of self-presentation topics. Cultural factors that influence the characteristics of self-presentation include:

1. "Shame culture" and "social evaluation culture" continue to shape the way Chinese adolescents present themselves on social media today.

2. Young people in their daily lives mirror the behavior of Internet celebrities in various aspects, such as entertainment, experiences, cultural consumption, and creative activities. This trend displays a distinct inclination towards de-ideologization.

3. Impact of commercial values. Advertisements featured in the teenagers' short videos and information about their business collaboration with users suggest the impact of commercial principles and capitalization on the youth.

So, self-presentation on the internet manifests a person's self-identification and their social interactions. Considering the growing reliance on new communication channels for information, communication, and entertainment, it is pertinent to examine the position and role of adolescents in the social information system, especially during their self-perception and self-presentation change phase. Audiovisual and media literacy is an essential component of this study (Lin et al, 2021).

The availability of audio and video editing technologies has expanded the possibilities of self-presentation, allowing adolescents to create online avatars at will, bringing them closer to their idealized selves. However, social values, online culture, and the ethical attitudes of Internet celebrities still influence these representations of self before anything else. Although adolescents exist as virtual personalities in cyberspace, traditional culture has a more subtle influence on the meanings of their self-presentation.

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