

# “Recording a Beautiful Life”: A Qualitative Study of Users’ Perceptions and Productive Practices regarding “Positive Energy” Videos on Douyin

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## Abstract

Drawing on nine semi-structured interviews and grounded theory analysis, this study explores how Douyin users perceive and engage with “positive energy” short videos, while “positive energy” is often seen as a top-down ideological construct, the findings reveal that users interpret and reproduce such content through diverse, emotionally situated, and context-specific practices. Users do not passively absorb state-aligned messages; rather, they negotiate meanings, regulate emotions, and selectively express identification through both compliance and subtle resistance. The study introduces the concept of Negotiated Positive-Affective Governance to describe how affective expression, ideological dissemination, and algorithmic mediation intersect in users’ everyday media practices. It contributes to the literature by shifting focus from institutional power to user agency, providing a grassroots perspective on how emotional politics and soft governance operate on Chinese short video platforms. Methodologically, it offers a replicable model for analyzing digital media experiences from an affect-centered perspective.

## Keywords

Positive Energy, Affective Governance, Douyin, Platform Governance, Soft Power

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## 1. Introduction

Since the term *Zheng Nengliang* (positive energy) emerged as a high-frequency expression within China’s mainstream ideology in 2012, it has rapidly penetrated various media texts, gaining widespread dissemination and institutionalized sup-

port on the short video platform represented by Douyin (Chen et al., 2021; Kaye et al., 2021; Lu & Pan, 2022). Establishing a dedicated “positive energy” section within its interface, Douyin attracted more than 500 government and mainstream media accounts: entities that utilize the platform to disseminate a national image and mainstream values, characterized as “positive, healthy, and sunny” (Chen et al., 2021). This mode of dissemination has been termed “playful patriotism” by scholars; it illustrates how the government embeds and guides social ideology through platform governance and content orientation (Chen et al., 2021). Douyin’s capacity to institutionalize and amplify ideological content is closely tied to its expansive media infrastructure (which supports a wide range of functions—from livestreaming and e-commerce to digital entrepreneurship), making it the most fully developed short-video ecosystem among Chinese platforms (Yu et al., 2023). It is its technical and commercial versatility and vast user base that enable Douyin to function as both an ideological apparatus and a participatory cultural space.

However, the dissemination of positive energy is not a one-way imposition. As Leo-Liu et al. (2024) suggest, platforms like Douyin function as spaces for the construction of ideological dominance, as well as arenas where the state negotiates with the public over the contours of acceptable discourse. Various media practices—such as Internet subcultures, feminism, and satirical expression by users—result in ironic appropriation, re-creation, and negotiated interpretations of positive energy content (Yang, 2022). For instance, revealing the limitations of state discourse on gender issues, the dissemination of the virtual idol *Jiangshan Jiao* illustrates how users utilize platform mechanisms to express dissatisfaction with dominant ideologies and to engage in emotional self-regulation (Yang, 2022). What this form of activity reflects is broader tensions within platform governance: as Helberger et al. (2018) point out, there are platforms continuing to grapple with moderating contentious content without suppressing public discourse—thereby creating a space where users can navigate and respond to both ideological pressures and algorithmic constraints.

On the other hand, scholars have argued that the notion of “positive energy” is not merely an extension of state propaganda, but rather a form of depoliticized, yet highly disciplinary, ideological discourse. This discourse constructs a “chain of equivalence”: one that facilitates the translation of national interests into individual identification between mainstream and grassroots (Chen & Wang, 2019; Liu & Miao, 2024; Yang & Tang, 2018). Within this context, Douyin serves as a space for the articulation of official narratives, and a site for user agency, creative reinterpretation, and self-expression (Fung & Hu, 2022).

While much existing scholarship has provided macro-level analyses of “positive energy” discourse, micro-level investigations into how ordinary users interpret, accept, or resist such content remain relatively limited. Few studies have examined whether—and how—users actively adopt “positive energy” as a normative framework in their own creative practices. This study seeks to address this gap: employing qualitative interviews to explore Douyin users’ perceptions and attitudes to-

ward “positive energy” videos. It focuses on how meanings are constructed, and cultural practices emerge through processes of viewing, evaluating, sharing, and producing content.

Therefore, the goal of the present study is to explore how everyday content creators and viewers on Douyin perceive and engage with the discourse of “positive energy.” Through in-depth qualitative interviews, the research seeks to: 1) examine how users interpret the concept of “positive energy” and whether they experience pressures—either from platform governance or broader public discourse—to interact with such content; 2) investigate whether users adopt “positive energy” as a normative or guiding principle in their own creative practices, including the criteria they employ in doing so; and 3) analyze how Douyin’s “positive energy” mechanisms shape users’ identity formation and social relationships within the platform’s participatory culture.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Politicization and Cultural Translation of “Positive Energy” Discourse

Initially emerging as a popular Internet term within grassroots communities in mainland China, “positive energy” draws upon multiple cultural sources, including entertainment media and positive psychology. It was later appropriated by the Party-state propaganda apparatus and institutionalized as a key ideological instrument in the governance strategy of the Chinese Communist Party (Liu & Hu, 2023; Nakahara & Cai, 2025; Yang & Tang, 2018). Beyond its function as political messaging, “positive energy” is deployed to construct notions of a “harmonious society” and the “happy subject,” functioning as a form of depoliticized soft governance that enacts ideological discipline without direct coercion (Chen & Wang, 2019). As Gillespie (2017) notes, platform structures are purposefully designed to guide participation toward particular normative outcomes. This recognition reinforces how Douyin’s interface and algorithmic architecture function not merely as technical tools, but as part of a broader governance mechanism that aligns emotional expression with ideological objectives. While such mechanisms enact a clear disciplinary logic, they also leave room for limited forms of operational autonomy. As Havens (2014) argues, even within highly regulated institutional contexts, actors may perceive and exercise constrained forms of agency, which paradoxically enable greater flexibility and collaboration within an otherwise rigid system. Yet, governance strategies that rely heavily on emotional appeal and moral discourse are not without risks. As Suzor, Van Geelen, and Myers West (2018) argue in the context of platform governance, the absence of reliable and transparent information often compels users to develop their own interpretations, which can foster distrust and give rise to conspiratorial narratives that further strain platform-user relations. Within the Chinese context, this insight points to a broader tension: while “positive energy” aims to stabilize affective and ideological consensus, the mediated space in which it circulates remains open to contestation, re-interpretation,

tion, and resistance.

## 2.2. The “Positive Energy” Mechanism and Techno-Governance on the Douyin Platform

As Douyin has emerged as one of the most influential short video applications in China, the discourse of “positive energy” has been increasingly embedded within its content recommendation algorithms and interface design. For instance, the platform has established dedicated “positive energy” sections to guide user traffic, while videos from government accounts and state media frequently occupy top positions on trending lists. Although the Chinese government does not exercise direct operational control over platforms like Douyin, it retains the authority to set ideological priorities and guide the platform’s normative direction—a phenomenon consistent with what [Van Dijck et al. \(2018\)](#) describe as the indirect yet powerful role of states in shaping platform governance within “platform societies.” These official narratives often adopt visually engaging and entertainment-oriented forms of expression to align with user-generated content in both form and tone ([Chen et al., 2021](#); [Lu & Pan, 2022](#)).

Moreover, as part of what has been termed “platform state capitalism” ([Fung & Hu, 2022](#)), Douyin’s technological infrastructure significantly shapes the visibility of content and modes of user participation. [Liu and Miao \(2024\)](#) argue that, in response to censorship and political sensitivities, content creators often frame their expressions within the discourse of “positive energy.” This strategy constitutes a form of “pragmatic depoliticized resistance,” allowing users to navigate platform constraints while maintaining a degree of expressive autonomy.

## 2.3. User Perception, Attitudes, and Practices of Reproduction

While scholarly attention to how users receive and interpret “positive energy” content remains limited, existing studies suggest that audiences are far from passive recipients. In the Chinese context, Douyin users frequently engage in the reproduction and reinterpretation of “positive energy” discourse through humor, irony, “cuteness” (*menghua*), and even practices of recoding ([Yang, 2022](#)). Expanding on this, [Valkenburg et al. \(2021\)](#) show that user responses to media content often elude simple categorization: individuals who are generally positively affected by social media may still encounter moments of negative impact, just as those more prone to negative experiences occasionally report benefits. Such findings underscore the fluid and context-dependent nature of media reception, shaped by shifting personal, temporal, and affective dynamics.

## 2.4. The Dynamics of “Positive Energy” in Affective Communication and Community Interaction

“Positive energy” functions not only as an ideological construct but also as an affective mechanism. [Liu and Miao \(2024\)](#) further observe that even within marginal communities, such as those producing LGBTQ+ content, creators strategi-

cally invoke mainstream discursive tropes like “positive energy” and “national unity” to navigate platform risks. This reflects an emergent negotiated co-existence between state ideology and grassroots expression.

Building upon the literature, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Douyin users perceive the content and emotional expressions embedded in “positive energy” videos?

RQ2: What are users’ attitudes toward platform-recommended “positive energy” content? To what extent is such content accepted, questioned, or reinterpreted?

RQ3: What motivates users to produce and disseminate “positive energy” videos on Douyin? Are their actions driven by platform incentives, ideological alignment, or strategic efforts to avoid risk?

RQ4: How do users understand the relationship between “positive energy” content and state ideology when engaging with such materials as viewers or creators? Do their practices reflect negotiated or ironic forms of expression?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Overview of Research Design

This study employs semi-structured in-depth interviews, which has open-ended questions, not closed questions (Allmark et al., 2009), as its primary method of data collection. Each interview, conducted either face-to-face or online, lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. The interview questions were organized around five key themes: 1) users’ cognitive and emotional responses to “positive energy” content; 2) the criteria by which such content is evaluated, including dimensions such as authenticity, positive values, aesthetic fatigue, and political signaling; 3) the motivations and attitudes underpinning viewing behaviors—whether users actively seek out or passively consume such videos, and whether their engagement reflects genuine identification or ironic detachment; 4) participants’ past experiences of creating or sharing “positive energy” content, with attention to the role of social norms and platform mechanisms; and 5) how users understand the relationship between state discourse, platform algorithms, and personal expression. All questions were open-ended, designed to encourage narrative elaboration and to elicit deeper experiential and emotional insights through follow-up prompts.

#### 3.2. Participants

To ensure diversity and representativeness, this study includes nine interviewees drawn from a range of professional backgrounds, including state-owned enterprise managers, corporate employees, finance professionals, and IT workers. All participants are regular users of Douyin, with ages ranging from 30 to 50 years old. They were recruited through purposive sampling based on their self-reported familiarity and engagement with “positive energy” content, ensuring alignment with the study’s thematic focus. Theoretical saturation was considered reached

when no new analytical categories emerged during the final rounds of interviews. Most report using the app for 30 minutes to three hours per day, engaging with content that spans news, short drama series, history, public welfare, and comedy. This indicates a wide array of usage purposes and interest patterns. The sample also ensured regional diversity by including participants from eastern, central, and southwestern China. Additional inclusion criteria required participants to have used Douyin for at least one year and to have engaged with “positive energy” videos on a weekly basis. Detailed demographic information of the participants is presented in the **Table 1** below. In addition to the interviews, participants completed asynchronous online questionnaires that collected supplementary narrative responses. These were integrated into the same dataset based on consistent themes, allowing for cross-verification and enrichment of individual accounts.

**Table 1.** Basic information table of the interviewees.

Code	Gender	Age	Occupation (Present)	Interview Date	Time of duration
Interviewee 01	Female	40	Administrative manager of state-owned enterprises	June 6th	Online survey questionnaire
Interviewee 02	Female	Near 40	Employee	June 6th	Online survey questionnaire
Interviewee 03	Male	46	Office staff in financial enterprises	June 6th	Online survey questionnaire
Interviewee 04	Female	45	Practitioner in the financial and insurance industry	June 1st	17 min
Interviewee 05	Female	30	Operation of insurance company call centers	June 6th	Online survey questionnaire
Interviewee 06	Female	39	Insurance practitioner	June 1st	11 min
Interviewee 07	Male	38	Practitioner in the insurance and financial services industry	June 1st	15 min
Interviewee 08	Female	48	Financial employee	June 1st	8 min
Interviewee 09	Female	36	IT practitioner	June 1st	12 min

### 3.3. Data Analysis

This study employs the Grounded Theory approach within qualitative research to systematically analyze interview data, to generate theoretical insights grounded in the concrete experiences and narratives of the participants (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). Grounded Theory follows a bottom-up analysis logic, asserting that theoretical constructions must emerge from empirical data. The analytical process consists of three key stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. These are supplemented by memo writing and constant comparative anal-

ysis to ensure coherence, analytical depth, and the methodological rigor of theory development.

In the initial stage of open coding, the researcher conducted a close, line-by-line reading of the full interview transcripts from nine participants. Through meticulous textual analysis, key terms and recurring concepts were identified, with particular attention paid to frequently appearing core statements, behavioral patterns, and emotional responses. This process led to the generation of preliminary conceptual labels such as “emotional regulation,” “sense of authenticity,” “hesitation to repost,” and “algorithmic pressure.” In the subsequent axial coding phase, these initial concepts were grouped and synthesized into broader thematic categories. Utilizing a “context-action-outcome” framework, the researcher mapped out the causal relationships and interactional dynamics among subcategories, thereby constructing a behavioral logic chain that explains how users engage with “positive energy” short videos. Finally, during the selective coding phase, all coding outcomes were integrated around a central analytical category—“negotiated governance of positive affect”. This served as the organizing axis for developing a theoretical model that captures how Douyin users watch, interpret, evaluate, and disseminate “positive energy” content.

Throughout the coding process, this study employed the constant comparison method, systematically juxtaposing participants’ language, cognitive patterns, and behavioral trajectories to identify both shared and divergent themes. This comparative strategy aimed to elevate the level of theoretical abstraction. To ensure the reliability of the findings and maintain analytical transparency, the researcher kept ongoing analytic memos to document the evolution of interpretive insights, the development of conceptual relationships, and efforts to mitigate potential biases. Additionally, two qualitative researchers in the field of communication were invited to conduct a peer debriefing of the preliminary coding outcomes, thereby reinforcing the methodological rigor and theoretical credibility of the study.

### 3.4. Ethical Considerations

This study strictly adheres to academic ethical standards and the principles of human subjects’ protection. All interview participants provided written informed consent before participation and were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without incurring any consequences. Throughout the research process, all data were anonymized to safeguard individual privacy.

## 4. Findings

This section presents the core findings derived from the qualitative interviews with nine Douyin users. Drawing upon the three stages of grounded theory analysis, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, it illustrates how participants perceive, engage with, and reinterpret “positive energy” discourse in their everyday media practices.

### 4.1. Open Coding

Through open coding of interview data collected from nine participants, several recurring conceptual units and meaning clusters were identified. Notably, participants' definitions of "positive energy" short videos exhibit a marked tendency toward diversification. While most respondents acknowledged the term's origin within the context of official discourse, their personal interpretations emphasized the emotional core conveyed positivity, moral goodness, and motivational affect. For instance, the female interviewees in Interview 1 and Interview 6 associated "positive energy" with feelings of "spiritual comfort" derived from narratives of perseverance, altruism, and mutual assistance. In contrast, an IT professional in Interview 9 described such content as "videos that resonate with me and make me feel hopeful and warm." These responses suggest that viewers do not evaluate "positive energy" videos based solely on ideological labels, but rather on their emotional resonance and perceived authenticity. "Genuine emotion" and "emotional impact" emerged as key criteria in such assessments. This phenomenon indicates that "positive energy" should not be viewed as a fixed ideological symbol imposed by the platform; rather, it constitutes a dynamic and contested category continually negotiated and reconstructed through users' affective engagement with the content.

Secondly, the motivation to engage with "positive energy" videos is deeply shaped by users' real-life circumstances, particularly in their frequent invocation as tools for emotional regulation and psychological buffering. For example, both female participants in Interview 2 and Interview 5 noted that during periods of work-related stress, emotional suppression, or negative experiences, they would actively seek out such content to "soothe emotions" and "find a spiritual outlet." Similarly, a male participant in Interview 7 explained that he tends to watch these videos during "holidays or after work," as a means of gaining "emotional encouragement" and "positive guidance for life." These narratives collectively illuminate how, in a fast-paced and pressure-laden social environment, users turn to "positive energy" content as a mechanism of personal affective regulation, thereby forming a distinct media use motivation. This motivation not only reflects users' selective adaptation to platform content but also provides an affective foundation for algorithmic recommendation systems.

At the same time, several interviewees conveyed a nuanced stance toward Douyin's algorithmic recommendation system. At the same time, several interviewees conveyed a nuanced stance toward Douyin's algorithmic recommendation system. On the one hand, many acknowledged the platform's capacity to promote "positive energy" content, with some even suggesting that such algorithmic steering contributes to fostering a constructive and uplifting online environment (Interviews 3, 4, 6). On the other hand, concerns were raised regarding the repetitive nature of recommended content and the resulting affective and aesthetic fatigue (e.g., Interviews 2, 5). Some respondents also noted the risk of becoming confined within an "information cocoon," which limits exposure to diverse per-

spectives and topics. This ambivalence reflects a media psychological structure marked by simultaneous acceptance and resistance, users recognize the platform's emotional and normative influence, while also expressing implicit criticism of its potential to constrain discursive plurality.

In terms of content reproduction, most interviewees reported that they had actively re-shared videos promoting "positive energy," although very few engaged in original content creation. Such acts of reposting were largely driven by value alignment and emotional resonance (as seen in Interviews 1, 5, and 9). Several participants also mentioned that one of their primary motivations was the hope that those around them would see the videos and feel encouraged (Interviews 3 and 4). Notably, some interviewees indicated that they would "carefully evaluate" the potential political risks or deviations from mainstream ideological orientations before reposting (Interviews 6 and 9). This reflects a form of "self-disciplinary awareness" in the act of creation or dissemination within the platform environment. These findings suggest that positive energy videos not only serve a discursive function at the content level but also reinforce the internalization of ideology through users' voluntary mechanisms of self-censorship embedded in platform dynamics.

Finally, regarding the social significance of positive-energy short videos, nearly all interviewees expressed affirmative views. They commonly perceived such content as a source of emotional solace, psychological reassurance, and value affirmation within an increasingly anxious and restless societal climate. As such, these videos were seen to contribute positively to both social stability and the overall ecology of digital platforms (Interviews 4, 6, 7). Some respondents went further to emphasize the latent function of these "uplifting and morally oriented" online narratives in shaping national image and fostering collective identity. Their responses reflect a heightened awareness of the inherent alignment between dominant state values and the logic of platform-based dissemination.

In sum, users' engagement with "positive energy" short videos, both in terms of viewership and re-production is neither a matter of passive acceptance nor outright rejection. Rather, it is a negotiated process shaped by platform algorithms, state ideology, and personal affective experiences. It is through this dynamic process that users continually ascribe individualized emotional meanings to the notion of "positive energy," which in turn constitutes the theoretical point of departure and analytical foundation of this study.

## 4.2. Axial Coding

Building upon the initial open coding of the nine interview transcripts, this study proceeded with axial coding to uncover the underlying structural logic of users' behaviors in watching and disseminating "positive energy" short videos. Through a systematic examination of recurring themes and behavioral cues, five relatively distinct yet interconnected categories emerged: emotional regulation, meaning negotiation, platform mechanisms, value expression, and ideological identifica-

tion. These categories illuminate how users engage in a continuous chain of media practices—watching, evaluating, creating, and expressing—and further reveal the negotiation processes among platform governance, dominant values, and individual perception.

Primarily, emotional regulation emerges as a central motivation for users engaging with “positive energy” videos. A majority of interviewees explicitly indicated that, when facing occupational stress, domestic trivialities, or broader life difficulties, they intentionally sought out such content to find emotional solace and replenish their psychological resilience.

Secondly, users do not passively accept a singular, top-down definition of “positive energy” during their viewing experiences. Instead, they engage in processes of meaning negotiation to form individualized standards of judgment. Many interviewees emphasized that whether a video conveys “positive energy” does not depend on its label or the platform’s categorization, but rather on whether the content feels sincere, emotionally resonant, and capable of moving the viewer.

However, such negotiation is also constrained by the structural mechanisms of platform algorithms. Many interviewees expressed a general awareness that the logic underpinning content recommendation tends to amplify particular forms of “positive energy” discourse, resulting in an “information cocoon” effect along their viewing trajectories.

At the level of content reproduction and circulation, participants’ acts of reposting are often motivated by value alignment and considerations of social context. While most users do not actively produce “positive energy” content themselves, they tend to share or privately forward such material when emotionally moved during viewing or when seeking to convey a stance to specific relational others.

Finally, although some interviewees maintained a strategic distance from the discourse of “positive energy” and demonstrated selective acceptance, the majority nonetheless articulated a latent alignment between such discourse and the state’s dominant values. Many respondents categorized videos centered on themes such as patriotism, perseverance, and altruism as expressions of “positive energy,” interpreting them as reflections of “core socialist values,” “national cohesion,” and “social stability.”

In summary, users’ engagement with “positive energy” short videos, through processes of viewing, interpreting, and reproducing content, reveals a complex media behavior shaped by emotional motivations, meaning-making, platform mechanisms, dissemination strategies, and value alignment. This behavioral pattern not only outlines the practical trajectory of “positive energy” discourse at the user level but also illustrates how ideology is negotiated and normalized on a micro level within the dynamic interplay between the state, digital platforms, and individuals.

### 4.3. Selective Coding

Building upon the processes of open and axial coding, this study further engages

in selective coding to distill a central conceptual axis from multiple core categories. The goal is to construct a coherent logic of user behavior surrounding the viewing and engagement with “positive energy” short videos. Through a systematic comparison of the narratives and experiential trajectories of nine interviewees, the analysis reveals a dominant logic chain characterized by four interrelated mechanisms: emotion, meaning, platform, and identity. These interconnected dynamics constitute users’ decisions to view and share “positive energy” content. At the heart of this process lies a core category that may be conceptualized as “negotiated governance of affective positivity.”

To begin with, emotional regulation emerges not only as the primary motivation behind users’ engagement with “positive energy” videos but also as the foundational mechanism driving the communicative efficacy of such content. Within a social context marked by rapid pace and mounting pressures, users turn to short videos as mediating tools for emotional buffering and psychological self-soothing. They actively seek out content imbued with warmth, encouragement, and optimism to counteract the anxieties of everyday life.

Secondly, within the concrete practices of viewing, users do not passively absorb the state- or platform-defined meanings of “positive energy.” Instead, they remain in a continual process of “negotiating meaning.” Drawing upon emotional resonance, lived experience, and ethical judgment, users actively reconstruct the semantic boundaries of positive energy.

This process is deeply shaped by the embeddedness of platform algorithmic mechanisms. Within the dynamic feedback loop between algorithmic recommendations and user preferences, individuals benefit from the convenience of personalized content delivery while simultaneously expressing a degree of vigilance and subtle resistance toward content homogeneity. Users develop a set of what can be termed “platform negotiation strategies”: these include actively bypassing algorithmic suggestions, selectively engaging with trustworthy content, and filtering out irrelevant or ineffective information.

More significantly, in the phase of content reproduction, users engage in forwarding, commenting, and targeted sharing not only as a means of value expression but also as a process of constructing their digital identities. The act of forwarding is often driven by emotional resonance and moral alignment, functioning simultaneously as a form of “micro-public expression” and a method of signaling identity within social interactions. Notably, some users engage in a form of “self-censorship” prior to sharing, carefully avoiding political risks or content that deviates from dominant ideological orientations.

Ultimately, “positive energy” short videos emerge as a vital mediating arena for users’ identity expression, emotional self-regulation, value orientation, and moral imagination. Within this arena, individual behaviors are indeed shaped by both the ideological imperatives of the state and the algorithmic logic of platform technologies; yet, they also retain a degree of agency, negotiation, and creative latitude.

Accordingly, drawing upon the above multi-dimensional analysis, this study

conceptualizes the interaction between users and “positive energy” short videos as a form of Negotiated Positive-Affective Governance. This refers to a process in which users, situated within platform architectures and ideological frameworks, engage with positive energy content as a means of emotional regulation, meaning-making, and identity formation. Simultaneously, through this engagement, they partake in the everyday absorption, translation, and reproduction of state-endorsed values. This finding not only deepens our understanding of platform-mediated dissemination and user participation but also offers theoretical insight into the mechanisms of soft governance and affective mobilization that shape the dynamics of digital public discourse in contemporary China.

## 5. Discussions and Conclusion

### 5.1. Summarization of Findings

Based on in-depth interviews with nine Douyin users, this study investigates how “positive energy” short videos are interpreted and practiced in users’ everyday processes of viewing, evaluating, creating, and sharing. It systematically addresses four core research questions.

In response to RQ1, the findings reveal that users do not passively absorb the content or emotional appeals of “positive energy” videos. Instead, their interpretations are shaped by diverse and context-specific pathways. While most participants acknowledge that the concept of “positive energy” originates from mainstream ideological discourse, they tend to redefine it through personal emotional lenses—framing it as content that conveys goodwill, evokes hope, and offers emotional comfort.

Second, regarding RQ2, users exhibit an ambivalent stance toward platform-recommended “positive energy” content. On the one hand, they recognize the algorithm’s role in amplifying such content, thereby fostering an optimistic public opinion climate. On the other hand, they express concerns about aesthetic fatigue caused by repetitive narratives and the risk of being trapped in an “information cocoon.” In response, some users have developed strategies such as “actively bypassing recommendations” or “manually searching for content” to preserve emotional autonomy and ensure a diversity of information sources. This dual posture strategic acceptance coupled with implicit resistance, highlights the user’s ambiguous and negotiated position within the platform’s governance infrastructure.

Third, addressing RQ3 concerning users’ motivations for producing and disseminating “positive energy” content, the study finds that such practices are not driven solely by platform incentives or overt political identification. Rather, they are often grounded in emotional resonance, the desire to maintain interpersonal relationships, and an awareness of potential political sensitivities. Some users even engage in self-censorship before reposting to ensure the content does not cross ideological red lines.

Finally, in response to RQ4, users demonstrate a clear awareness of the ideological implications embedded in “positive energy” content. While most acknowledge

the role such content plays in promoting national image, sustaining social stability, and disseminating mainstream values, their engagement does not necessarily signify full identification with official discourse. Instead, their participation often reflects negotiated, and at times even ironic modes of expression. This selective emotional alignment, coupled with strategically ambiguous articulation, contributes to a broader mechanism of negotiated affective governance.

In sum, Douyin users' practices of viewing and reproducing "positive energy" videos represent a complex process that interweaves emotional regulation, meaning negotiation, platform-driven affordances, and political consciousness. Users function simultaneously as receivers and amplifiers within the platform's affective dissemination structure, and as agentive actors capable of reconstructing meaning and deploying tactical modes of expression. By conceptualizing this process as "Negotiated Positive-Affective Governance," the study illuminates how state ideology is absorbed, reconfigured, and reproduced at the intersection of platform logic and everyday user practices, offering empirical grounding and theoretical insight into the mechanisms of soft governance and affective mobilization in China's digital public sphere.

## 5.2. Comparing with Previous Research

This study centers on the mechanisms through which "positive energy" short videos function in users' viewing, sharing, and creative practices, extending the existing research trajectory on the ideological operations of digital platforms. At the same time, it introduces several theoretical and analytical expansions.

Previous scholarship has primarily focused on how state ideology is embedded into Douyin's algorithmic structures to facilitate "soft governance" or "gentle propaganda" through technological mediation (Chen et al., 2021; Lu & Pan, 2022). Building on this foundation, the present study further reveals the set of everyday negotiation strategies developed by ordinary users in response to positive energy content, ranging from emotional regulation and meaning reconstruction to risk avoidance, thereby highlighting the tension between governance logic and individual practice.

In terms of cultural translation and discursive reception, Chen and Wang (2019) argue that positive energy functions as a depoliticized mode of ideological regulation in official discourse, constructing the imaginary of the "happy subject" and a "harmonious society." However, this study, through users' concrete acts of viewing and re-production, finds that behind the appearance of depoliticization lies a process of re-encoding and internalizing moral judgment, identity positioning, and affective expression. This perspective enriches our understanding of the dynamic construction of positive energy as a cultural signifier.

Moreover, while Yang (2022) has emphasized the ironic reappropriation and creative subversion of positive energy discourse, this study finds that users' practices often occupy a gray zone: neither fully affirming nor overtly resisting the dominant narrative. Instead, they engage in strategic adjustments between per-

sonal psychological needs and platform-imposed constraints. This form of everyday negotiation calls into question the oversimplified model of ideological indoctrination.

Regarding platform governance, the study also resonates with van Dijck et al.'s (2018) discussion of the "platform state." Although Douyin is not directly controlled by the government, its content curation and algorithmic recommendation systems enable a subtle alignment between state interests and commercial logics. Echoing findings by Yu et al. (2023) and Liu et al. (2024), this research shows that users frequently engage in "strategic evasion" and "discursive calibration" via platform affordances, most evidently through self-censorship behaviors before re-posting content.

In sum, this study constructs a model of "Negotiated Positive-Affective Governance" grounded in users' lived experiences. It contributes to our understanding of how state discourse penetrates the digital sphere through platform infrastructures, while also illuminating how users reconstruct meaning and manage emotional agency within a space that is simultaneously constrained and open.

### 5.3. Contribution of This Research

Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective that bridges affective politics and platform governance, this study makes three key contributions:

First, at the theoretical level, it proposes the concept of *Negotiated Positive-Affective Governance*, emphasizing that users are not passive recipients of "positive energy" narratives, but rather active negotiators situated within the intersection of algorithmic curation, dominant ideology, and individual emotional needs. This model addresses a gap in current scholarship, which tends to overemphasize structural dynamics between the state and platforms while overlooking user agency.

Second, on the empirical level, the study draws on in-depth interviews with nine Douyin users to map their psychological motivations and strategic behaviors in the processes of viewing, evaluating, and disseminating "positive energy" content, particularly their reconstruction and individualized interpretation of its affective core. In contrast to macro-level studies that focus on platform or state perspectives, this research foregrounds a more grounded, grassroots viewpoint.

Third, on the methodological level, the study employs a three-stage grounded theory coding process to systematically extract core dimensions such as emotional regulation, meaning negotiation, platform mechanisms, and identity expression from the original narratives. Through logic-driven axial construction, a central category is distilled. This approach not only offers a framework that remains closely attuned to users' lived experiences, but also provides a replicable analytical model for future research.

In sum, this study deepens our understanding of the dissemination logic behind positive energy content and offers a new lens for analyzing how state ideology is negotiated and transmitted within digital platforms. It underscores the importance

of examining the interplay between technological infrastructures and emotional dynamics in understanding affective politics and soft governance in the digital age.

#### 5.4. Limitations and Future Research

While this study draws upon robust qualitative interviews and grounded theory analysis to explore Douyin users' perceptions and practices surrounding "positive energy" videos, several limitations remain that demand further examination and refinement in future research.

First, the sample size is limited, and the demographic composition is relatively narrow. This study interviewed nine participants, who, while diverse in terms of gender and professional background, were primarily concentrated in the 30 - 50 age range, held higher levels of education, and identified as medium- to high-frequency Douyin users. As such, the perspectives and engagement patterns of other user groups—such as adolescents, elderly users, or individuals with lower educational attainment—remain underrepresented. These groups may differ significantly in how they interpret and interact with "positive energy" content. Future studies would benefit from a broader and more diverse sample, incorporating variation in social class, geographical background, and age, to enhance the representativeness and external validity of the findings.

Second, the study employs a single research method. Relying primarily on in-depth interviews, the research focuses on users' subjective perceptions and narrative experiences. While this approach offers valuable insight into the emotional, value-oriented, and behavioral mechanisms underlying user engagement, it provides limited analytical depth regarding the content characteristics of "positive energy" videos. Future research could benefit from a mixed-methods approach, incorporating content analysis, semantic network analysis, or survey-based inquiry to explore the typologies of platform-pushed content, modes of affective expression, and patterns of audience reception. Such triangulation would allow for a more integrated understanding of the interplay between user cognition, platform governance, and content ecology.

Third, the evolving nature of the platform context was not dynamically captured. As a rapidly updating digital platform, Douyin's content algorithms, moderation protocols, and ideological orientations are highly fluid. However, the present study's data collection was confined to a specific time period and did not account for shifts in user perception and behavior triggered by major policy changes, emergent social events, or technological updates. Future research might adopt a longitudinal design to track the same users' perceptions and expressive practices across varying sociopolitical contexts and platform environments, thereby revealing the evolving dynamics of "positive energy" dissemination over time.

Finally, the theoretical framework leaves room for further development. This study proposes "Negotiated Positive-Affective Governance" as a central concept, effectively integrating user practices with platform governance logics. However, it

has yet to fully engage with broader international theoretical discussions, such as affective politics, platform capitalism, or cultural negotiation. Future research could build upon this foundation by incorporating more cross-culturally resonant perspectives, such as Foucault's notion of governmentality, Ahmed's theory of affective politics, or Couldry's media normativity to deepen the theoretical articulation of soft governance within the Chinese digital platform context.

In conclusion, future studies can advance the understanding of "positive energy" dissemination within China's platform society by expanding sample diversity, integrating mixed methods, adopting longitudinal perspectives, and engaging more deeply with global theoretical frameworks. Such efforts will contribute to a more systematic account of the multi-layered and multi-actor dynamics shaping ideological communication in the digital age.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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