Influencing Factors of Trust in Zibo Government in the Context of TikTok Use among Chinese Young Adults

Yang Yang [a], Hamedi Mohd Adnan [a, *], Nor Zaliza Sarmiti [a]

[a] University Malaya, Malaysia

Abstract

TikTok, as a newly emerging social media tool, has been widely used in China especially among Chinese young adults. After China has relaxed its controls of the COVID-19 pandemic policy, there are a great many comments from TikTok young adult users expressing their desire to travel to Zibo city (a city in Shandong), which shows their trust in Zibo government. Therefore, it is imperative to explore the influencing factors of trust in Zibo government in the context of TikTok use among Chinese young adults in this study. Snowball sampling technique was adapted in this study and eight interviewees who are TikTok users aged from 18 to 29 years old were selected. In-depth interview is used in this study to understand the influencing factors of trust in Zibo government from the perspective of eight young adult users. By employing social support theory, the finding indicates that emotional support, financial support and informational support all pays an important role in TikTok young adult users' trust in Zibo government. As a conclusion, in order to promote sustainable development and young adults' trust in government, policymakers are supposed to pay more attention to providing emotional support, financial support and informational support from the government.

Keywords: trust in government, TikTok use, young adults, social support theory.

1. Introduction

As a popular and newly emerging social media tool, TikTok has been widely used in most of the individuals' life (Kennedy, 2020). It is one of the fastest growing short video platforms in the world and is regarded as the international twin of Chinese mobile short video app Douyin (Zulli, 2020). Surprisingly, TikTok has had over 1 billion users globally by September 2021 while it has had over 600 million daily active users who watch and post short videos. This social media tool allows users to watch, share, create short-form videos, and comment on and live streams, satisfying their needs for recreation, socialization, and information seeking (Yao et al., 2023). Moreover, young adults are reported to use this social media platform most frequently (Smith, Short, 2022). Particularly, TikTok plays an important role in inspiring tourism, with 57 % of users using the platform as a channel for travel information and 52 % actively searching for information before traveling, according to the report released in August 2022 (Zhou et al., 2023). Therefore, TikTok, as a newcomer to social media, has an effect on tourism unmatched by previous social media.

Recently, there are a large number of comments from TikTok young adult users showing their desire to travel to Zibo city (a city in Shandong) because Zibo local government attaches great importance to the needs of tourists and makes every effort to provide them with a comfortable

---

environment which increases their trust in government (*China Daily,* 2023). Zibo city is more and more popular with TikTok users and becomes one of the most Chinese hot cities that they are willing to travel after China has relaxed its controls of the COVID-19 pandemic policy (*China Daily,* 2023). In order to promote high quality development, Zibo government ensures and improves people's livelihoods, firmly grasp the most direct and practical interests of the people, take more measures that benefit the people's livelihoods and warm their hearts, and not give up small and long-term achievements which has led to the popularity and trust in government among TikTok users.

It is believed that trust in government reflects individuals' confidence in government (Paxton, 1999). Some research has indicated that people's trust in government is decreasing especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Shanka, Menebo, 2022). Due to the successful policies from Zibo government, there in an increasing number of young adults from TikTok platform showing their trust in Zibo government which results in subjective well-being (Nguyen et al., 2023). Trust in institutions or government plays a fundamental role in young adults' life and their subjective well-being (Li et al., 2019). However, little research has explored the influencing factors of young adults' trust in government after China has relaxed its controls of the COVID-19 pandemic policy (Li et al, 2022). This study addresses this research gap by exploring the influencing factors of TikTok young adult users' trust in government. By understanding influencing factors of TikTok young adult users trust behavior, this study is useful for policymakers in promoting sustainable development and enhancing trust in government among local and international social media users.

2. Materials and methods

The participants were Chinese TikTok young adult users with the age of 18 to 29. The reason why the research chose young adults is that they are reported to use social media most frequently and 88 % of them are with the age from 18 to 29 using social media for a large portion of their daily time (Day, Heimberg, 2021) and there is no exception for TikTok young adult users (Smith, Short, 2022). Therefore, young adults make up the majority of TikTok users which is reasonable to be chosen as the target group.

Besides, snowball sampling was adapted in this study and eight interviewees who are TikTok users and meet the criteria were selected. In-depth interview (IDI) was conducted to collect data via WeChat. It is broadly used for Chinese people to communicate with others, which is similar to WhatsApp (Yang, Hamedi, 2022). The interview questions were designed to uncover influencing factors of trust in government among TikTik young adults.

Responses obtained from the interview were analyzed and grouped by using a thematic analysis approach which is a common form of analysis widely used in a qualitative research (Jowsey et al., 2021). Besides, the data was categorized by the researcher based on social support theory from the perspective of emotional, informational and financial assistance of Zibo government.

3. Discussion

During the Covid-19 pandemic, young adults have engaged themselves more in social media use because of maintaining social distance and long-term quarantine (Anashkina et al., 2022; Djumanova, 2022; Yang, Hamedi, 2022). Even after China has relaxed its controls of the COVID-19 pandemic policy, young adults tend to rely on social media tools to seek for more information related to health, daily information and entertainment (Demidov, Lomteva, 2022) and to study and interact with others (Muryukina, Gorbatkova, 2022). Due to the rapid spread of false information on various platforms in the context of new media (Ahmed et al., 2021), young people are not capable of thinking critically (Muzykant et al., 2023) which may lead to destructive consequences in the field of youth. However, social media has been regarded as a resource for the development of general competencies of young adults (Lomteva et al., 2022). Information released from official accounts on social media often helps people distinguish right from wrong, which provides people a sense of security and increases their trust in government (Li et al, 2023).

Other researchers have also reported that a high level of trust in government mirrors sufficient social support and available resources which prevent individuals from feeling powerless and helpless and meet their emotional demands (Li et al., 2022). In addition, trust in government may improve quality of life and mental wellness by encouraging social participation and decreasing people's depression, anxiety, and stress (Yamaguchi et al., 2019), which is positively associated with individuals' well-being. Although some influencing factors have been documented by researchers, it is imperative to

explore the influencing factors of TikTok young adult users' trust in government in the Chinese context after China has relaxed its controls of the COVID-19 pandemic policy.

On the other hand, it is believed that the level of economic development plays a fundamental role in people's trust in government (Li et al, 2019). Similarly, previous researchers have confirmed that the level of economic development also moderates the relationship between trust and life satisfaction (Jovanovic, 2016). A large body of literature has examined the effect of social trust on economic growth (Lyu et al., 2023), which shows that the economic development is an important influencing factor in terms of people's trust in government. Therefore, a good economy means the efficient work ability and achievements of the government. It will increase the authority and credibility of the government which results in TikTok users' trust in government.

Besides, it is mentioned by prior scholars that individuals' perceptions of the economic and political performance of government significantly predicted trust in government (Nunkoo, Smith, 2013). Meanwhile, other research also reinforces the need for researchers to consider trust as an important ingredient for cooperation among tourism actors and effective destination management (Beritelli, 2011). In other words, people's willingness to travel is because of the economic performance from the government and their trust in their government. Taking these factors into consideration, it is necessary to explore the influencing factors of TikTok young adult users' trust in government.

More and more official accounts release various information, including health knowledge, news, culture, and local tourism, through the Tiktok platform (Ostrovsky, Chen, 2020), which also attracts more and more young people to follow these accounts. There are even much fake news existing in social media platforms especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2021). However, the information released on official government accounts is more authoritative and people are more willing to trust official information which can prevent them from fear of pandemic and enable them to have a sense of security (Li et al., 2022). TikTok platform provides a large amount of information for its users and people can easily express their idea on the social media platform including their political opinion (Akay et al., 2020). When more and more users praise Zibo city and Zibo government on the Tiktok platform, young adults will be more willing to trust and rely on the government.

Social support theory was applied in this study. It is the perception and actuality that one is cared for, has assistance available from other people, and most popularly, that one is part of a supportive social network. These supportive resources can be emotional, companionship, informational, tangible (financial assistance) or intangible (personal advice), which can come from many sources, such as family, friends, coworkers, and organizations (Orrick et al., 2011). According to this theory, communities that that have less supportive structures such as social welfare programs, public education agencies and healthcare, tend to have higher rate of crime. By contrast, people tend to trust government when they have a sense of security and feel supported from the institutions. Besides, a range of frameworks has been employed to assess the primary mechanism through social support theory (Häuberer, 2011; Dubos, 2017; Leung et al., 2022). Some researchers have examined swift trust development and prosocial behavior (Leung et al., 2022). It is revealed by other researchers that community engagement and privacy concerns may affect some types of social support such as information or emotional support (Tseng et al., 2022).

4. Results

In this study, in-depth interview was employed to explore the influencing factors of trust in Zibo government in the Context of TikTok use. It presents the findings from the interviews with the interviewees from Chinese young adults. Referring to Table 1, among the respondents, there are three male users and five female users with the age from 21 to 29 and they are coded from code 1 to code 8.

It is confirmed by most of the participants (code 1, code 2, code 3, code 5, code 6, code 7 and code 8) that the emotional support from Zibo government plays a significant role in their trust in government. As is mentioned by code1 and code3, the Zibo government has taken effective measures to provide convenience for people and attract more tourists. This sincere approach has moved young adult users and makes them more willing to trust and rely on the government. After China has relaxed its controls of the COVID-19 pandemic policy, people may feel anxious about the uncertainties.

However, people are more likely to trust and rely on the government when they can protect people from the pandemic enabling them to have a sense of security (Li et al, 2022). This finding is in agreement with a battery of previous studies (Leung et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022). Based on social support theory, the emotional supportive resource from the society helps individuals to alleviate

their negative pressure and increase their sense of security and belonging (Orrick et al., 2011). By providing tourists with a comfortable environment and good services, Zibo government makes the tourists feel at home, which has made them win numerous praises on the TikTok platform, and also increased TikTok young adult users' trust in the government.

Table 1. Participants' Profiles

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Vocation
1	Male	21	A bachelor student
2	Female	22	A bachelor student
3	Male	25	A postgraduate student
4	Female	25	A bachelor student
5	Male	27	Financial assistant
6	Female	26	An English teacher
7	Female	29	A public servant
8	Female	23	A nurse

I think the propaganda of the Zibo government on Tiktok platform gives us a sincere feeling and I feel they are very reliable (code1)

The Zibo government is doing its best to provide convenience for the people, such as parking our cars in the government compound when we travel which enables us to trust government (code3)

Besides, most of the interviewees (code 1, code 3, code 4, code5 and code 7) expressed that economic support is one of the most important factors for Tiktok users to trust Zibo government. According to code 4 and code 7, he mentioned that the effective measure Zibo government has taken to reduce the local price is essential to their positive attitude towards and trust the government. Besides, it is also revealed that the interviewee code 7 that the government has provided people with shopping vouchers which attract more people to travel their and when they feel the sincere performance from Zibo government, they tend to have more trust in local government. It is consistent with previous research that institutional trust cannot be separated from economic development (Nunkoo, Smith, 2013). Based on social support theory, most research has also reinforced the notion that the primary operationalization of social support is based on the provision of economic assistance (Orrick et al., 2011). When the government attaches great importance to economic development, people's living conditions will become better and better, which enables TikTok young adults to understand the importance and reliability of the government. This suggests that in order to increase people's trust in government, policymakers are supposed to pay attention to economic support for people such as providing shopping vouchers and allowances.

I think the reason why TikTok young adults trust the government and want to travel to Zibo is that the local prices are very cheap. The government has taken measures to prevent high prices (code 4)

The Zibo government has issued many shopping vouchers, which not only promotes economic development but also saves money for the people, so we have great trust in the government's management methods (code 7)

In addition, half of the respondents (code 2, code 5, code 6 and code 8) also stated that informational support from Zibo government contributes to their trust in Zibo government. The local government provides people with all kinds of information they need through the official account on the TikTok platform such as local culture, scenery, and food which attract more TikTok users. This finding is in line with previous study which confirms the importance of official informational support (Ostrovsky, Chen, 2020). According to social capital theory, the information resources provided by the government can help people better cope with external challenges and improve their engagement of social activities (Tseng et al., 2022). With more helpful information released through TikTok platform, users can obtain the information such as travel guide through this platform which makes their life more convenient when people travel there. Therefore, when

TikTok users feel that the government tries their best to serve the people, they are more likely to trust the government.

The Zibo government always sends some videos of local culture through the Tiktok platform, which makes us feel that this place is fun, people are friendly, which increases our trust (code6)

On the Tiktok platform, we can see travel guide released from the official institutions. It makes us feel warm and feel trustworthy (code 8)

5. Conclusion

According to the finding of in-depth interview, this study revealed that there are three aspects including the emotional support, economic support and informational support all contributes to TikTok young adult users' trust in Zibo government in the context of TikTok use during the post COVID-19 pandemic. Based on social capital theory, this finding is consistent with theoretical perspectives highlighting the crucial role of the supportive resources supported from government can enable a person to have a sense of belonging and security, which contributes to their trust in government.

Therefore, first, it is necessary to promote young adults' trust in government through providing the emotional support, such as providing more friendly and beneficial services to people. Second, government should pay more attention to economic support such as introducing talents policy and more preferential policies for buying cars and houses. Third, informational support from the government should also be enhanced. For example, government can release more useful short videos through the TikTok platform including basic life skills in people's daily life, professional knowledge and cultural propaganda.

Such findings of this study are important because the results make it possible for policymakers to promote sustainable development and enhancing institutional trust in the context of new media use. This study also adds to the literature of social media consumption in China, which attaches great importance in filling in the gap in regard to information on the consumption of TikTok, particularly in terms of its use and government trust.

Besides, this study has several limitations. Firstly, this research mainly focused on TikTok young adult users. Future studies can involve in more people with different ages and from different countries. Secondly, this study employed qualitative approach to explore the influencing factors of government trust which may produce bias from subjective opinions. Future research may combine other methods such as questionnaire survey to test the influencing factors.

References

Ahmed et al., 2021 – *Ahmed, M., Riaz, M. Q., Qamar, M., Asghar, R.* (2021). Fake News Shared on WhatsApp During Covid-19: An Analysis of Groups and Statuses in Pakistan. *Media Education.* 17(1): 4-17. DOI: 10.13187/me.2021.1.4

Akay et al., 2020 – *Akay, O., Kulikova, E., Belyaeva, I.* (2020). The Embodiment of the Political Correctness Ideas in the Modern Media Space (Based on Feminitives). *Media Education* 60(4): 563-569. DOI: 10.13187/me.2020.4.563

Anashkina et al., 2022 – *Anashkina, N., Shmatko, M., Anashkina, S.* (2022). Media-Communicative Occupational Guidance Based on the Platform of Online Game. *Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie).* 18(1): 14-23. DOI: 10.13187/me.2022.1.14

Beritelli, 2011 – *Beritelli, P.* (2011). Cooperation among prominent actors in a tourist destination. *Annals of Tourism Research.* 38(2): 607-629. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2010.11.015

Day, Heimberg, 2021 – *Day, E.B., Heimberg, R.G.* (2021). Social media use, social anxiety, and loneliness: A systematic review. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports.* 3: 100070. DOI: 10.1016/j.chbr.2021.100070

Demidov, Lomteva, 2022 – *Demidov, A., Lomteva, E.* (2022). Behavior of Young People in the Media Environment. *Media Education.* 18(4): 552-561. DOI: 10.13187/me.2022.4.552

Djumanova, 2022 – *Djumanova, S.* (2022). Media consumption and media literacy level of Uzbek youth. *Media Education.* 18(2): 157-168. DOI: 10.13187/me.2022.2.157

Dubos, 2017 – *Dubos, R.* (2017). Social capital: Theory and research. Routledge.

Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2021 – *Fedorov, A., Levitskaya, A.* (2021). Media education model aimed at efficient development of audience's skills to reasonably confront the false (or partially

false) information, contained in anti-Russian Ukrainian Internet communication resources. *Media Education.* 17(4): 612-622. DOI: 10.13187/me.2021.4.612

Häuberer, 2011 – *Häuberer, J.* (2011). Social capital theory. Berlin: Springer Fachmedien: 330.

Jovanovic, 2016 – *Jovanovic, V.* (2016). Trust and subjective well-being: The case of Serbia. *Pers. Individ. Differ.* 98: 284-288.

Jowsey et al., 2021 – *Jowsey, T., Deng, C., Weller, J.* (2021). General-purpose thematic analysis: a useful qualitative method for anaesthesia research. *BJA Education.* 21(12): 472-478. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bjae.2021.07.006

Kennedy, 2020 – *Kennedy, M.* (2020). If the rise of the TikTok dance and e-girl aesthetic has taught us anything, it's that teenage girls rule the internet right now: TikTok celebrity, girls and the Coronavirus crisis. *European Journal of Cultural Studies.* 23(6): 1069-1076. DOI: 10.1177/1367549420945341

Leung et al., 2022 – *Leung, W.K.S., Chang, M.K., Cheung, M.L., Shi, S.* (2022). Swift trust development and prosocial behavior in time banking: A trust transfer and social support theory perspective. *Computers in Human Behavior.* 129: 107137. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.107137

Li et al., 2019 – *Li, B., Wu, Y., Hao, Z., Yan, X., Chen, B.* (2019). The effects of trust on life satisfaction in thecontext of WeChat use. *Telematics and Informatics.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2019.101241

Li et al., 2023 – *Li, S., Sun, Y., Jing, J., Wang, E.* (2022). Institutional Trust as a Protective Factor during the COVID-19 Pandemic in China. Behavioral sciences (Basel, Switzerland). 12(8): 252. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3390/bs12080252

Li et al., 2022 – *Li, S., Sun, Y.J., Jing, J.Q., Wang, E.* (2022). Institutional Trust as a protective factor during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. *Behavioral Sciences.* 12(8): 252.

Lomteva et al., 2022 – *Lomteva, E., Vorobyeva, N., Demidov, A.* (2022). Media center as a resource for the development of general competencies of college students. *Media Education.* 18(2): 266-276. DOI: 10.13187/me.2022.2.266

Lyu et al., 2023 – *Lyu, X., Ma, J., Zhang, X.* (2023). Social trust and corporate innovation: An informal institution perspective. *The North American Journal of Economics and Finance.* 64: 101829. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.najef.2022.101829

Muryukina, Gorbatkova, 2022 – *Muryukina, E., Gorbatkova, O.* (2022). Media educational technologies in teaching schoolchildren and students in the age of digital transformation. *Media Education.* 18(4): 617-623. DOI: 10.13187/me.2022.4.617

Muzykant et al., 2023 – *Muzykant, V., Burdovskaya, E., Muzykant, E., Muqsith, M.A.* (2023). Digital Threats and Challenges to Netizens Generation Media Education (Indonesian Case). *Media Education.* 19(1): 97-106.

Nguyen et al., 2023 – *Nguyen, H.M., Phuc, H.N., Tam, D.T.* (2023). Travel intention determinants during COVID-19: The role of trust in government performance. *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge.* 8(2): 100341. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jik.2023.100341

Nunkoo, Smith, 2013 – *Nunkoo, R., Smith, S.L.J.* (2013). Political economy of tourism: Trust in government actors, political support, and their determinants. *Tourism Management.* 36: 120-132. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2012.11.018

Orrick et al., 2011 – *Orrick, E.A., Worrall, J.L., Morris, R.G., Piquero, A.R., Bales, W.D., Wang, X.* (2011). Testing social support theory: a multilevel analysis of recidivism. *Journal of Criminal Justice.* 39(6): 499-508. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2011.09.005

Ostrovsky, Chen, 2020 – *Ostrovsky, A.M., Chen,G.R.* (2020). TikTok and Its Role in COVID-19 Information Propagation. *Journal of Adolescent Health.* 67(5): 730.

Shanka, Menebo, 2022 – *Shanka, M.S., Menebo, M.M.* (2022). When and How Trust in Government Leads to Compliance with COVID-19 Precautionary Measures. *Journal of Business Research.* 139: 1275-1283. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.10.036

Smith, Short, 2022 – *Smith, T., Short, A.* (2022). Needs affordance as a key factor in likelihood of problematic social media use: Validation, latent Profile analysis and comparison of TikTok and Facebook problematic use measures. *Addictive Behaviors.* 129: 107259. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2022.107259

Tseng et al., 2022 – *Tseng, H.-T., Ibrahim, F., Hajli, N., Nisar, T.M., Shabbir, H.* (2022). Effect of privacy concerns and engagement on social support behaviour in online health

community platforms. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*. 178: 121592. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2022.121592

Yamaguchi et al., 2019 – *Yamaguchi, M., Inoue, Y., Shinozaki, T., Saito, M., Takagi, D., Kondo, K., Kondo, N.* (2019). Community social capital and depressive symptoms among older people in Japan: A multilevel longitudinal study. *J. Epidemiol.* 29: 363-369. DOI: 10.2188/jea.JE20180078

Yang, Hamedi, 2022 – *Yang, Y., Hamedi, M.A.* (2022). The Addiction Use of Wechat Among Young Adults in China During the Covid-19 Pandemic. *Media Education*. 18(4): 645-655. DOI: 10.13187/me.2022.4.645

Yao et al., 2023 – *Yao, N., Chen, J., Huang, S., Montag, C., Elhai, J.D.* (2023). Depression and social anxiety in relation to problematic TikTok use severity: The mediating role of boredom proneness and distress intolerance. *Computers in Human Behavior*. 145: 107751. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2023.107751

Zhou et al., 2023 – *Zhou, Q., Sotiriadis, M., Shen, S.* (2023). Using TikTok in tourism destination choice: A young Chinese tourists' perspective. *Tourism Management Perspectives*. 46: 101101. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2023.101101

Zulli, 2020 – *Zulli, D., Zulli, D.J.* (2020). Extending the Internet meme: Conceptualizing technological mimesis and imitation publics on the TikTok platform. *New media & society*. 229.