

Understanding The Motivations and Perceptions of University Students Tipping Live-Streamers on Douyin: A Qualitative Investigation

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Abstract. This study investigates how to understand and view tipping live-streamers, and analyzes the different psychological and social motivations that students have for tipping live-streamers, on Douyin among Chinese university students. Despite the growing phenomenon of virtual gifting in the digital economy of China, exploration of this behavior within student populations is scant. Based on the Uses and Gratifications theory and grounded theory methodology, this study took 20 semi-structured interviews with Douyin users. Analysis revealed three overarching themes: culturally accepted and perceived view of tipping, Affectual Gratification and Affectional Gratification and Ego Boost self-actualization and self-enhancement based motivations. Evidence from interviews shows that tipping behaviour is about more than just what happens in a transaction; it is a part of identity work, a form of digital social belonging, and a practice of economic agency. Implications for digital consumer psychology and live-streaming platforms and content creators.

Keywords: Douyin, tipping behavior, university students, live streaming, Uses and Gratifications, grounded theory, digital consumer behavior.

1. Introduction

As a newly emerging phenomenon, live-streaming platforms have changed the digital entertainment and participatory culture landscape in China. China's real-time gifting tool on Douyin — its version of TikTok — is being used as a monetization tool to allow viewers to reward streamers in real time. This mechanism to monetize content is transforming not just how content creators earn a living, but user interaction and models of engagement. Thus, the tipping option has been firmly consolidated in the ecosystem of the platform, rapidly resulting into new economic and social behavior of the users.

Tipping has become a socially acceptable expression of appreciation, support, and visibility among younger users, and specifically university students. By the way, the idea of tipping doesn't only work in money generosity; it has several psychological and symbolic functions. From validating your own taste, getting validation, and even establishing a parasocial relationship with the streamer. This complicates motivations for the phenomena of changing your spending track record online since the behavior of peers, design of a platform (think public rankings and highlights of comments), and cultural attitudes that are more attune to those around them are all drivers.

However, little is known about the reasons why university students who actually tip do so. Why do these never-mind-poor-why-would-they-keep-going-at-it-all-you-get-is-the-sword-suckers, keep doing it? With these answers in mind, in the present research, we aimed to explore how and why Chinese university students tip live-streamers on Douyin, with a special emphasis on the interplay of identity construction, emotional needs, and social signalling in this digital context.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Although tipping on these streams works very differently from the tip jar in a cafe. Digital tips are different from onsite tips because they tend to be public, fluid, and highly embedded in the social

context of live-stream interaction, such that they are tightly woven into the private return of the public good. Fixed neither by the quality of service nor by the moral imperative to serve, it is governed by a mixture of the affective and the performative.

Ability to fit more user motives — It is becoming increasingly recognized that tipping in virtual spaces meets numerous other user motives. These are: to gain social recognition, create emotional bonds with streamers and perform symbolic self-presentation in front of peers. This exchange can be seen, in part, as a type of digital reciprocity whereby users pay content contributors in attention, visibility, or community membership by sharing with their own networks [1].

This behavior can be at least partially understood through the Uses and Gratifications theory [2] whereby people actively seek out media for their own personal benefits. The theory suggests that audiences are active and make selections of specific media and genres to gratify specific psychological and social needs such as diversion, aggression, imagination, addiction, personal identity, social identity, integration, escape, relaxation, information, and arousal [3]. Within this reading of live-streaming tipping serves as a mechanism in which the user extracts pleasure—not only from consuming content—but from a participatory act of symbolic investment.

These ideas are complemented by theories of self-esteem and self-enhancement in that people perform behaviors that prove their worth or increase their social standing [4-5]. On platforms like Douyin, where user interactions are legible and public, tipping functions as a kind of social signal. Providing a platform for economic means, positive social media image, or digital tribes — whatever it may represent to other people.

Collectively these frameworks provide a theoretical foundation for an examination of tipping behavior as a media practice and as an identity performance that is particularly salient in youth, visibility-oriented, online cultures.

2.2. Related Theories

Live-streaming is a new enabling feature built into social media, the functions of which span multiple dimensions of entertainment, marketing, and economy. It enables low-cost and distant social engagement functioning real-time interaction between content creators and audiences [6]. Several years ago, platforms including Douyin have embedded the function of live broadcasting as well as virtual tipping [7], in which taters buy virtual gifts and send them to live broadcast hosts during the program.

Now, while tipping is widespread in digital spaces, it is still different meat than what we know in offline tipping practices, at least in the West. Unlike traditional tipping, online tipping is fully voluntary and no average amount is set [8-9]. Unlike costly offline consumption — such as luxury goods or live-event tickets — online tipping can be more accessible, adaptable and economically sustainable for low-income individuals [10]. In addition, online having a tip is in the open, as opposed to the additional exclusive nature of offline tipping. Anyone watching the ‘live-streaming room’ can see it and thus public status signaling and social comparison is facilitated [11]. Online live-streaming is relaxed and open, and limitations from traditional social norms and etiquette are parred down [12].

This Consequently has led researchers to look into the psychological and social drivers for tipping online. Many streamers create a symbolic class system among their audiences, with tippers having higher social status [13]. Similarly, another factor affecting tipping motivations is attributed to the streamers themselves, namely the emotional expressiveness and personality traits exhibited by streamers [14]. Emotional displays positively affect tipping and loyalty from viewers since they both, well, make people feel good [15]. Using data from Douyu found that emotional reciprocity was an essential driver responsible for tipping among audiences with streamer and audience interaction being especially successful in generating higher tips [16].

Compared with this expanding research, few studies have focused on the tipping behavior of Chinese university students on Douyin. This paper attempts to address this by investigating the cognitive and motivational mechanisms underlying the online tipping behaviour of this group.

This research uses the Uses and Gratifications Theory, a common social media studies framework and is used to help frame the analysis. The theory suggests that users actively choose media to fulfill specific needs — including entertainment, informational needs, emotional needs and social connections. We showed that viewers have a strong desire to create connections with each other and with streamers and sometimes they do that through tipping [17]. Recognition and emotional satisfaction were also prominent motivational factors as tipping provides a way to receive desired recognition and to reaffirm and reinforce personal value within the digital audience [18].

Previous research has demonstrated that tipping may promote self-esteem in pointing to financial power, cultural sophistication, or social benevolence [19]. Self-esteem is an internal assessment of how well one is doing socially. Low self-esteem leads to lower tendency to seek public affirmation through tipping [20]. In contrast, those high in self-esteem may tip in a capacity of conspicuous consumption or as symbolic congruity to admired streamers [21-22].

A concept that is intimately entwined with self-enhancement is the desire to achieve or preserve a positive self-value [23]. People seek to enhance themselves when they want to be seen as distinctive or to have an impact. Tipping can help meet this psychological need on live-streaming platforms, providing both internal satisfaction and the external validation of tipping. Bareket-Bojmel et al. Such behaviors create a sense of superiority and belonging [24]. Tipping, therefore, is a ritual that fulfills needs of entertainment, emotion and esteem in addition.

To sum up, this study applies a Uses and Gratifications framework to examine the perceptions and motivations of Chinese college students toward online tipping on Douyin. The study tackles a niche audience and platform, allowing for a more in-depth exploration into the reasons and meanings behind digital micro-donations. Additionally, the results could provide actionable recommendations for streamers and platforms interested in improving engagement strategies and user experiences.

2.3. Related Experiments

This study is mainly qualitative in design, however there are a number of related experimental studies that provide useful context. Participants who were primed with materialism messages tipped significantly more via virtual tipping, in support of their hypothesis that self-enhancement motives drive digital generosity.

An experimental design, during simulated live streams, altered the emotional tone of streamers. The findings showed that streamers displaying higher valuation strength and positive emotions received more tips and better audience loyalty. This fits the notion that emotional satisfaction and social identification play the role of primary interveners in the tipping process.

The second called for higher interactivity – and received much higher tip activity, reinforcing that perceived intimacy and real-time engagement are strong predictors of tipping. These results offer empirical support for some theoretical considerations underlying the present study. While our research is qualitative, it is embedded in a wider empirical context providing evidence for the roles of emotion, interaction, and self-concept in virtual tipping behaviour.

3. Research Questions

- What are the perceptions of tipping on Douyin among Chinese university students?
- What are the psychological and social incentives that motivate restaurant tipping behavior?

4. Methodology

The qualitative methodology adopted in this research was semi-structured interviews. A purposive and snowball sampling technique was employed to recruit participants to ensure that participants were relevant (i.e., students who have tipped before) and diverse if possible [19]. Twenty undergraduates' students (10 male, 10 female) from Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University participated.

Participants were recruited through student forums and social media at first and then they used a snowballing technique for more engaged tippers to take part.

The data consisted of recorded one-on-one interviews, lasting from 25 to 45 minutes each, that were conducted either face to face or through a videoconference during October 2022. Interviews followed a semi-structured topical guide exploring the participants' personal experiences and motivations regarding tipping on Douyin. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for the interview, and confidentiality of data was ensured in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Table 1. Interviewees' information

ID	Gender	Age	Major
P1	Female	21	Media Studies
P2	Male	22	Electronic Engineering
P3	Female	20	English Language
P4	Male	23	Computer Science
P5	Male	21	Business Administration
P6	Female	22	Finance

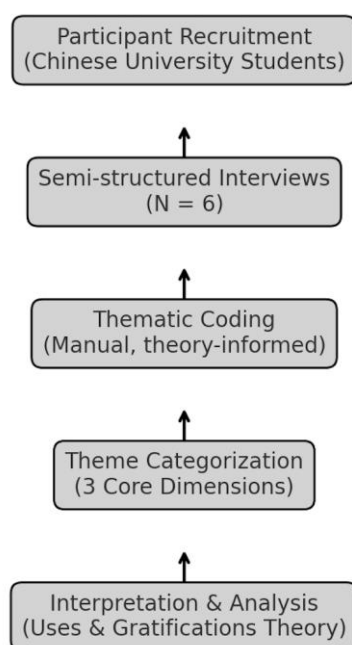


Figure 1. Interview process

We conducted a thematic analysis based on the philosophical underpinnings of Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory. The analysis was an open, axial, and selective coding process - open coding was used to discern key pieces of data, axial coding examined relationships between categories, and selective coding sounded out core themes. As a result, theoretical ideas emerged from the data through our iterative process, which made it possible for us to keep our analysis as closely aligned to participants narratives as possible.

5. Findings

5.1. Perception and Attitude based on Culture

Overall, landscape participants framed tipping as a "digital form of the consumer's handshake" and tipping align with wider trends of changing meanings of support and value within online

communities. In this digital-first world, tipping has emerged as a signifier of sentiment — sometimes even an emotional vote in lieu of a comment or other means of affirmation.

Shane Peters — "I think tipping is a way to support those streamers." Not the must, but if I really feel so nice about it, even few yuan can express my gratitude. To me, it is like clapping between the acts of a well-executed performance—it is modest, but illustrative of an appreciation of an accomplishment. I understand they depend on getting tipped to survive and this is just my way of saying their work matters.' — presented by Shutterstock

— Female, 21, Media Studies

It's like a ticket purchase / for me tipping is a way to consume content / some say tipping is a waste of money. If I see a stream that really entertains me for an hour or more, then I don't think a few yuan is an excessive price to pay—I think it is fair. And since this not a corporate form of entertainment, I can openly support the person who makes this.

— NO 22 Electronic Engineering MALE

These statements are examples of the increased processual internalization of tipping, reconstituting digital content away from just being free entertainment, toward a service to be paid for. Tipping here is a symbolic exchange and, in the attention economy, a valuation of human content creation (at least of some of it) being able to generate user interest and human emotion.

And micro-donations, though new, signals a larger cultural growing customization to digital ecosystems grounded in personalized, immediate, and reciprocal exchanges. While a Western narrative might often view tipping as optional or awkward, participants in this study described it as a natural, perhaps even obligatory, form of interaction — deeply rooted in the logic of Chinese digital platforms such as Bilibili, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu.

This tendency is consistent with Confucian concepts of reciprocity and filial piety: if one reaps benefit from another, it is only natural to give back, if only in small amounts. So tipping turns out to be this weird hybrid cultural tradition / digital quid pro quo—something that is both an expression of individual gratitude [for the contributing content] and collectively intelligible token of regard and investment in the embodied currency of the spare turnstile of content.

5.2. Emotional Gratification and Social Belonging

Participants didn't often characterize tipping as a simple transactional act, but rather as an emotionally charged act in which many expressed a desire for connection with another human. In particular, several participants described the warmth, validation, and satisfaction they felt when tipping, particularly in live-streaming scenarios — in which streamer-viewer feedback is direct, reciprocal, and performative.

When I usually watch live streams, it would be at night, "Just the interaction itself makes me feel like someone is there to guide me through. When (the streamer) uses my name to thank me, that actually makes me happy. I feel like I am recognized, however briefly. But when I am stressed or feeling lonely, it is this sort of real-time participation that helps. Not only is it entertaining — it is a companion I can lean on.'

--Age and subject: 20, English Language (MIM)

Tip I leave sometimes purely to appear in the comments section. So that really gives me a thrill as a streamer when after tipping, they come and talk to me directly. You get treated as if you're a celebrity in a room filled with people. I get it, part of it is performance, but that recognition is genuine. It compels me to come back, not just to spectate, but to exist, in the same way a recognizable face stands in a swath of hyperreality.

— Male, 23, Computer Science

They tell us that tipping is as much a political act as it is an emotional sense of wanting to be seen and appreciated in the face of overwhelming digital alienation. The parasocial dynamics that tipping supports offer an easy-to-access form of simulated intimacy for many users, especially ones that may feel alienated or isolated during offline moments.

Tipping, which increasingly comes with animations, sound cues, or on-screen shoutouts of its own, helps create a sense of social presence and belonging and amplifies the visibility even more. In revealing themselves as tippers, some of these people can literally step out of the audience, into the light if you like, and for a little while enjoy the visibility and identity that comes with this kind of symbolic participation in the community. Acknowledgment from streamers, particularly if tailored (for example, if the viewer is recognized by name) was a common form of emotional satisfaction reported, similar to the dopamine hit like and comment feedback loops of social media.

In addition, these behaviors reflect a larger set of social gratification motives through the lens of offline relations. With no real person before you, tipping is an understandable parallel to the ways in which we repay emotional debt through our cultural memory of gift giving, patronage, and ritual recognition. In the realm of Chinese digital culture, where *guanxi* and harmony are pillars of social interaction, this act may be used as a means to create or strengthen informal ties, however imbalanced, among users.

As such, tipping is more than a monetary or symbolic gesture; rather, it is a still more literal channel through which emotional sentiment, peer-to-peer visibility, and digital citizenship are mediated and felt in an ever-accelerating process of digitization.

5.3. Self-Esteem and Self-Enhancement

Tipping, however, was also often linked to emotional gratifications that extended past the momentary, specifically processes of identity construction, self-affirmation, and the conferring of ostensible social capital within the digital realm. For a number of participants, tipping ultimately meant more than recognition from the content creators whose work they enjoyed; it was a kind of symbolic performance of personal agency, status, and taste, within the semi-rigid, semi-flexible hierarchies we had all come to inhabit, at least in part, online.

It makes me feel like I have some kind of control over something. I am just an average student who sometimes misses classes to attend a hackathon or works part time to afford this new game system, but in the stream room, I am the top fan. The leaderboard shows my name on top and the streamer sees me. The knowledge that what happens, is seen by a large audience, and perhaps effects some change — a rare thing in the offline world. It allows control of when impact happens and how and that has been powerful for me.

— M21 — B. Business Administration.

“I hardly ever leave a tip, but each time I do it is like a shot in the arm It sort of puts forth the idea that you are established and able to appreciate good content. And it isn't so much as the money as it is what that gesture says about me, it feels, in some ways, like piecing together my identity. I want to be considered a person who knows what is good and uncompromisingly show that fact from the outside – in an elegant way.

— Female, 22, Finance

These reflections exemplify the practice of tipping as a digital self-enhancement strategy through which users project an ideal self that is highflying, financially powerful, culturally aligned, and socially visible. Tipping offers an alternative to those who may feel invisible or confined in their offline environments by allowing for a relatively low barrier to step out into the spotlight of their online identity, if only briefly when status is frequently measured by systems of leaderboards, badges, or top contributors.

This interplay matches closely with self-determination theory satisfaction of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Users tend to be in control of their participation in digital communities by deciding when, how frequently, and to whom to tip, which serves enhanced feelings of personal efficacy [17]. Finally, symbolic consumption theories indicate that consumers may also be attempting to display signal benefits of spending behavior, which may not only benefit creators, but also communicate identity impression traits to the creators and to the audience, such as wealth, big-heartedness, sophistication.

Such acts have an added cultural resonance in Chinese digital culture, where the line between consumer and participant seems to be blurring as people are hijacking and transforming popular memes for their own message. Many platforms will gamify tipping through things like rankings and titles, effectively turning it into a public competition for prestige. The status of a so-called ‘top fan’ or ‘super supporter’ grants the user not only social recognition, but also a sort of soft power in the community, contributing to a tipper’s sense of identity and belonging.

Tipping therefore becomes not just an economic transaction, but a multifaceted social practice that combines sentimental wishing, psychological gratification, and the continued creation of digital selves among contemporary youth.

6. Discussions

Taken together, this study adds to the understanding that tipping among Chinese university students on Douyin is less of an economic event than it is a culturally tinged emotional and psychological experience. Tipping is a deeply-lining action process rooted within processes of digital social norms and rules that relies on culturally specific interpretations of reciprocity, social contracting, and symbolic interaction. Participants recast the form of tipping in terms of gratitude, emotional connection, and construction of identity—often through processes of parasocial interaction, visibility, and symbolic capital in the gamified environment of the platform.

Crucially, tipping appears as a symbolic act of digital identity and belonging, particularly among young people situated in hybrid online-offline realities. For them, micro-donations are not just a means of supporting creators, but a way to fulfil deeper needs for acknowledgment, power, and self-affirmation. In this way, Douyin danzhu are reflective of broader digital consumer trends: increasingly, affective investment and social meaning become the connecting tissue through which platform engagement play out.

They advance a more contextualized view of user motivation in digital economies and may inform strategic implications of platform design, content, and audience retention. So, certain features that seem to increase visibility, facilitate more personalized interaction between creator and audience, or solidify status hierarchies, may also bolster tipping proclivities.

Future research might look at demographic differences—urban–rural divides, gendered motives, or the generational aspect—or perhaps examine the long-term social and psychological impacts of digital tipping as an everyday routine. Such longitudinal and cross-platform comparisons might produce new insights into tipping as a sociotechnical phenomenon in China’s fast-changing digital landscape.

7. Critical Reflections and Platform Ethics

Although the narrative around tipping is typically one that describes a voluntary act of appreciation, we need to reflect on the structure and individual psychological work it does to shape this behaviour on the Douyin platform. That gamified design of live-streaming—leaderboards, ranks, time-limited pop-ups, public calls to action—does not just make it easier for users to give, it creates environments where you give, and keep giving. It works in accordance with the larger logics of the attention economy, where user engagement equals a profit for the platform, but a loss of autonomy for the user.

From here, tipping may be less of an on-the-spot show of support and more of a ritualized platform labor—paying not just to consume content, but to gain prestige, ego, and emotional reciprocation. With platforms further collapsing any distinction between socializing and market exchange, tipping is a mode of symbolic performance, converting economic capital into social capital in spectacle.

Further, it prompts ethical questions about emotional manipulation and pressure in digital publics. Tipping is public — everyone can see the amount and the username of the person that tipped, and so, it can create some soft but strong norms of what qualifies as admired or expected behavior. Tip

incentives may not be entirely voluntary among users but are rather an implicit reward granted by the structure of the platform community. It resonates with common critiques of platform capitalism, in which emotional labor is forcibly extracted from both streamers and viewers masquerading as voluntarily engaged labor.

These dynamics become even more critical among younger consumers — for instance, university students who might be experiencing identity, social acceptance, and financial realities all at once. But platform designers and policymakers have to confront the blurry line between tapping into people and taking advantage of them. We should research these ethical dimensions further, considering how such digital architectures shape not just what users do—but how users feel, how users perceive, and how users value themselves in this process.

8. Conclusion

We show through this study that tipping behavior among the Chinese university students on Douyin is not just an economic transaction, but rather one that is driven and fueled by cultural, emotional, and psychological factors. Tipping occupies a space in changing digital manners, embedded in culturally specific conceptions of reciprocity, symbolic exchange, and social engagement. Participants described tipping as a demonstration of gratitude, the creation of an emotional bond, and the establishment of self-importance—typically via some combination of parasocial interaction, visibility, and social capital in the platform’s game space.

Tipping, subsequently, can be seen as a digital act of identity and belonging, which is especially relevant for youth that are challenged by hybrid online-offline realities. Micro-donations, for these users, not only affirm the creators they wish to support, but also meet higher-order needs for recognition, control and self-affirmation. In this sense, tipping on Douyin offers a window into shifts in digital consumer practices, in which places of consumption are less and less separated from social as well as affective investments.

Together, these insights position digital economies in a more complete framework surrounding user motivation and have possible implications specific to platform design, content strategy, and audience retention. Elements that increase visibility, personalize the interaction between creator and audience, or serve to bolster status hierarchies may act as additional positive reinforcements for tipping.

Future studies might delve into demographic differences—urban-rural, the role of gender in tipping motivations, or generational differences—or examine whether habitual digital tipping has effects of extending psychological or behavioral processes. Indeed, longitudinal and cross-platform comparisons may be particularly enlightening in revealing how tipping operates in various sociotechnical niches within China’s dynamic and ever-changing digital ecosystems.

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