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Research on Tiktok Usage among Visually Impaired Groups: Media Empowerment and Social Integration

LingYan Li
Shanghai University of Technology, Shanghai 200000, China
Email: 15880103845@163.com

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of digitalization, short-video platforms like Tictok have become a vital channel for the visually impaired to participate in society, yet this group still faces multiple digital barriers. This study explores the Tictok usage of the visually impaired in China based on the media empowerment theory, focusing on the mechanisms of media empowerment and social integration, as well as the practical dilemmas they encounter. It synthesizes existing empirical and theoretical research findings to analyze the technical foundation, social value, structural obstacles and optimization paths of the visually impaired ' s short-video practice. The results show that Tictok empowers the visually impaired in self-expression, economic income and social connection, forming a positive cycle of online visibility and offline recognition, and effectively promoting their social integration. However, the group is also plagued by technical bias, algorithm discrimination, privacy risks and digital literacy gaps, with internal digital divides existing due to urban-rural and educational differences. The study concludes that the digital inclusion of the visually impaired requires collaborative efforts from multiple subjects: platforms should optimize barrier-free design and algorithm mechanisms, society should strengthen digital literacy education, and the state should improve relevant policy guarantees. This research enriches the application of media empowerment theory in disability studies and provides empirical evidence for building an inclusive short-video ecosystem.

Keywords

The Visually Impaired; Tictok; Media Empowerment; Social Integration; Digital Inclusion

1. Introduction: Research Background and Significance

In today's world, where digitalization is sweeping across the globe, social media platforms have become an indispensable part of people's daily lives. However, for the visually impaired, fully participating in the digital world still faces many

challenges. According to the World Health Organization, China has over 17 million visually impaired individuals, making it the country with the largest visually impaired population in the world (Li Ziwei, 2022). Traditionally, this group has long been in a state of "symbolic annihilation" in the public sphere - they are marginalized in real-world social spaces and absent from media representations or dominated by stereotypes (Li Ziwei, 2022). With the rise of short video platforms such as Tiktok, a new possibility is emerging: technology empowers the visually impaired to gain unprecedented opportunities for self-expression and social participation. This study holds significant theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, it contributes to expanding the application of theories such as digital divide, media empowerment, and identity politics in disability research. From a practical standpoint, it provides empirical evidence for improving the accessibility design of short video platforms and promoting social integration of visually impaired individuals. As Li Biao et al. (2023) pointed out, technology cannot function in isolation; media, individuals, and society are inseparable, and genuine digital inclusivity requires collaborative efforts from multiple stakeholders.

2. Media Empowerment and Digital Accessibility: The Technical Basis for Visually Impaired Groups to Access Short Videos

The theory of media empowerment provides a fundamental framework for understanding the use of short video platforms such as TikTok by visually impaired individuals. Multiple studies have shown that mobile devices, represented by smartphones, have become the primary entry point for visually impaired individuals to engage with the digital world. Zhao Na's (2022) research found that smartphones empower the daily lives of visually impaired individuals in various aspects such as information acquisition, social relationships, leisure and entertainment, learning and employment, "allowing them to enjoy a life almost identical to that of sighted individuals." This technological empowerment effect is particularly significant among the younger generation of visually impaired individuals. Wang Wenhua's (2024) survey revealed that young disabled bloggers generally participate in short video production for four motivations: self-expression, economic monetization, recording life, and increasing attention.

However, digital accessibility for the visually impaired still faces multiple structural barriers. Yang Xianshun and Xue Kaili (2024) explored the predicaments visually impaired users encounter when interacting with mobile applications from the perspective of moral objectification: visualdependence on smart advertising, inaccessibility of graphical verification codes, and non-linear design of interface interactions. These technical barriers reflect deep-seated mechanisms of "technological bias" and "internalization of exclusion". Li Biao et al.'s (2023) quantitative research further confirmed that although the overall digital media

accessibility for the visually impaired is relatively high, service accessibility and technical accessibility still need to be enhanced. This incomplete accessibility status directly affects their attitudes and behaviors towards media use.

Urban-rural differences and educational backgrounds are also significant factors influencing the digital participation of visually impaired individuals. Li Cunxia's (2021) study on visually impaired individuals in Inner Mongolia found that those with lower educational levels and relatively isolated living environments exhibited characteristics of "weak media participation and low media literacy". Similarly, Huang Jiandong and Cui Bo (2021) pointed out that the lack of built-in accessibility features in mobile phones and the scarcity of special education resources jointly contribute to the insufficient media usage abilities of visually impaired users. These studies indicate that the digital divide not only exists between able-bodied and disabled groups, but also within different strata of the visually impaired community.

It is noteworthy that the technological environment is undergoing positive changes. According to the survey conducted by Xiao Tingting (2024), the mobile media contact rate of visually impaired individuals has significantly surpassed that of traditional media such as braille books, and the mobile internet has greatly enhanced their ability to access and disseminate information. Zhang Yan (2016) was among the first to observe the enhanced inclusivity of social media for visually impaired individuals in the Web3.0 era, arguing that technological advancements are narrowing the information gap between the disabled and able-bodied groups. These studies collectively indicate that, despite remaining barriers, short video platforms have indeed opened up an unprecedented path for social participation for the visually impaired community

3. Social Integration and Relationship Reconstruction: Short Video Platforms as Social Capital for Visually Impaired Groups

The significance of short video platforms for the visually impaired extends beyond self-expression; they also provide a new avenue for social integration. Research by Li Ziwei (2022) indicates that traditional media often portrays the visually impaired within a "medical care" framework, shaping them as passive "weak" individuals. This symbolic erasure further exacerbates social exclusion. Platforms like Tiktok, however, allow visually impaired individuals to bypass the filters of traditional media and directly showcase their diverse life experiences and abilities to the public.

The in-depth interviews conducted by Wang Wenhua (2024) revealed the multiple positive impacts of short video practices on visually impaired youth: enhancing self-worth perception, expanding interpersonal networks, and gaining group endorsement status. It is noteworthy that these impacts often extend from online to offline, forming a virtuous cycle of "online visibility - offline recognition". The phenomenon observed by Zheng Runchao (2023) supports this finding: disabled

users who actively participate in TikTok creation also demonstrate stronger confidence and ability in social participation in real life.

Community connection is a key mechanism for short video platforms to promote social integration. Cheng Xin (2024) noted that disabled bloggers on Bilibili have established a close supportive community through fan groups. This weak connection based on common interests rather than disability status is more conducive to breaking social isolation. Jin Xiao (2024) emphasized the value of interaction between visually impaired bloggers and sighted users, arguing that forms of communication such as Q&A and comments help to eliminate cognitive biases and build a "visually impaired-friendly society".

Economic empowerment serves as the material foundation for social integration. Zheng Runchao's (2023) research revealed that some disabled Tiktok users have "entered the short video digital economy," earning income through live streaming sales and paid knowledge services. This economic autonomy not only improves individual livelihoods but also reshapes society's perception of the abilities of visually impaired individuals. However, the study also warns that excessive commercialization may lead to content homogenization or loss of authenticity, necessitating a balance between economic benefits and social values.

Public education is an important social function of short video platforms. Wang Jun and Li Jiakai (2025) pointed out that mainstream media's coverage of visually impaired groups often falls into stereotypes and polarized descriptions, limiting the public's understanding of their diverse life experiences. However, the daily content of visually impaired bloggers, such as showcasing independent travel, workplace coping, leisure, and entertainment, can effectively break these stereotypes (Wang Wenhua, 2024). This "politics of everyday life" is more persuasive than abstract advocacy for rights.

Xiao Tingting (2024) emphasized the importance of social integration from a policy perspective, pointing out that General Secretary Xi Jinping's directive of "building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, leaving no one behind, including people with disabilities" provides political support for barrier-free construction. As the infrastructure for social participation of the visually impaired, short video platforms have significance beyond mere media use, relating to the achievement of inclusive social development goals. Empirical research by Li Biao et al. (2023) further confirms that media accessibility indirectly improves the quality of social integration for the visually impaired by enhancing self-esteem and subjective social support.

It is worth noting that the process of social integration is not a one-way adaptation. The concept of "mutually beneficial network" proposed by Jin Xiao (2024) indicates that the short video practice of visually impaired bloggers not only changes their own situation but also enriches the cultural diversity of the platform, allowing sighted users to be exposed to different ways of perceiving the world. Zhu Simin and

Peng Lan's (2024) research on accessible films also suggests that the "viewing" logic of visually impaired individuals may provide an alternative perspective for visual culture research. This bidirectional change embodies the true meaning of social integration.

4. Challenges and Dilemmas: Structural Barriers in the Practice of Short Videos by Visually Impaired Groups

Despite the unprecedented opportunities brought by short video platforms to the visually impaired community, relevant research has also revealed multiple practical dilemmas. Yang Xianshun and Xue Kaili (2024) pointed out from the perspective of technological ethics that the current design of smartphone applications generally exhibits a tendency towards "visual centralism." This technological bias marginalizes the need for accessibility as a special situation rather than a fundamental right. Issues such as verification code recognition, missing image labels, and confusing interface navigation continue to restrict the full participation of visually impaired users.

Algorithmic discrimination is a new type of structural obstacle faced by visually impaired bloggers. Zheng Runchao's (2023) research found that Tiktok's content recommendation mechanism struggles to accurately understand the context of visually impaired-related content, leading to limited dissemination of high-quality content. More subtly, the algorithm may inadvertently reinforce the "disability spectacle" effect - only content that conforms to the imagination of sighted individuals (such as inspirational stories) is likely to gain traffic, while everyday presentations struggle to break through the information cocoon. This algorithmic bias creates visible stratification within the visually impaired community.

The dual dilemma of privacy and security has been mentioned in multiple studies. Cheng Xin (2024) warns that disabled bloggers may excessively expose their personal lives in the pursuit of visibility, facing risks to "personal privacy and security". Wang Wenhua (2024) interviewed individuals who mentioned the issue of "malicious comments triggered by being seen". Cyberbullying may hurt visually impaired users even more than sighted individuals, as they find it more difficult to identify and avoid malicious content. These risks have deterred some visually impaired users from using short video platforms.

The digital literacy gap is a significant factor affecting participation quality. Li Cunxia's (2021) research on visually impaired individuals in Inner Mongolia found that medium-aged and elderly visually impaired users with lower education levels generally suffer from insufficient media usage capabilities. Xiao Tingting's (2024) questionnaire survey also indicated that "not knowing how to use new media" is one of the main difficulties faced by the visually impaired group. This literacy gap not only limits individual development but also leads to an imbalance in the representation of voices within the visually impaired group, with younger, highly

educated, and urban-based users occupying a dominant position.

5. Research Outlook and Optimization Path: Building a Video-friendly Short Video Ecosystem for the Visually Impaired

Based on the issues and challenges identified in existing research, scholars have proposed optimization paths to promote the practice of short videos among visually impaired individuals from various perspectives.

Optimizing platform governance is a common suggestion across multiple studies. Zheng Runchao(2023) suggests that Tiktok should optimize its algorithm recommendation mechanism to avoid discriminatory or spectacle-like treatment of disability-related content. The core of these measures is to recognize the subjective status of disabled users, viewing them as co-builders of the platform ecosystem rather than special care recipients.

Media literacy education is widely regarded as a fundamental project to narrow the digital divide. Xiao Tingting (2024) called for "vigorously developing inclusive education to bridge the digital disability gap" and incorporating digital skills training into the education system for the visually impaired. Li Cunxia (2021) suggested implementing tiered training for visually impaired users of different ages and educational backgrounds, with special attention paid to remote areas and elderly groups. Such educational interventions require collaborative efforts from the government, social organizations, platform enterprises, and special education institutions to form a sustainable support network.

Policy and regulatory support serves as the institutional foundation for sustainable development. Xiao Tingting (2024) emphasized the importance of "accelerating legislative development to provide legal protection for the visually impaired." Li Ziwei (2022), from the perspective of media responsibility, suggested enhancing the presentation of diverse images of the visually impaired and reducing symbolic erasure. These policy interventions need to strike a balance between safeguarding rights and respecting autonomy, avoiding limiting the expression space of visually impaired users in the name of protection.

6. Conclusion: A Study on Short Videos for Visually Impaired Groups towards Digital Inclusion

Research has found that visually impaired bloggers are actively reconstructing society's cognitive framework towards disabilities through sophisticated identity management strategies and innovative content production methods. Their practices not only have personal development significance but also challenge deep-rooted ability biases on a broader level. As Jin Xiao (2024) stated, the short video practices of visually impaired bloggers embody a creative transformation from "vulnerability" to "strength", which provides important insights for building an inclusive society.

The theoretical contributions of the study are primarily manifested in two aspects:

Firstly, it enriches the application of media empowerment theory in disability studies, unveiling the intermediary mechanism between technological empowerment and social integration. Secondly, it advances the theoretical framework of digital inclusivity, emphasizing that genuine accessibility necessitates collaborative transformations in technology, content, and social cognition.

At the practical level, the study suggests adopting a comprehensive governance strategy: embedding accessibility design ethics in technology, optimizing algorithm distribution mechanisms on platforms, strengthening legal protection in policy, enhancing digital literacy in education, and promoting diverse presentation in culture. These measures require the joint participation of the government, enterprises, academia, social organizations, and visually impaired users themselves to form an ecosystem that promotes digital inclusivity.

The limitations of existing research also point out the direction for future exploration: the samples are mostly young visually impaired users in cities, with insufficient attention paid to rural and elderly groups; the methods tend to focus on case studies, lacking large-scale quantitative data support.

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