



The influence of Douyin popular music dissemination on cultural identity among Chinese college and university students: The mediating role of education level

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ABSTRACT

Douyin has become a major channel for popular music to circulate among Chinese youth. Through algorithmic recommendation and short-video repetition, music is continuously disseminated, reused, and recontextualised on the platform, potentially shaping how college and university students interpret cultural symbols and develop a sense of cultural identity (Kaye et al., 2021; Morris & Powers, 2015). This study examines the relationship between the dissemination of Douyin popular music and cultural identity among Chinese college and university students and investigates whether education level mediates this process. We conducted a questionnaire survey of college and university students in Jiangxi Province. Measures include Douyin music dissemination practices, cultural identity, and education level. We performed correlation and regression-based mediation analyses using SPSS. The findings indicate that the dissemination of popular music on Douyin is positively associated with cultural identity, and that education level partially mediates this relationship. These results suggest that cultural identity formation in algorithm-driven environments is influenced not only by media exposure, but also by users' interpretive resources shaped through education. This study contributes to research on youth, music, and digital media by clarifying a mechanism by which the dissemination of short-form music videos relates to cultural identity formation in contemporary China.

1. INTRODUCTION

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Douyin is one of the most widely used short-form video platforms in China. It has become a significant channel for music dissemination, especially among college and university students. Through personalised recommendation algorithms, participatory functions, and audiovisual integration, Douyin has transformed how music is consumed, shared, and interpreted. Research on platformisation and music-service curation shows that digital platforms shape the conditions under which cultural content is circulated and encountered, while recommendation and curation influence users' musical experiences (Kaye et al., 2021; Morris & Powers, 2015).

The growing reliance on algorithmic recommendation systems has altered the conditions under which cultural identity is formed and expressed. College and university students may encounter local, national, and global musical styles within the same platform environment, often in rapid succession. Research on youth and digital culture suggests that such exposure encourages hybrid cultural expressions, while simultaneously raising concerns about cultural homogenisation and symbolic simplification (Kim, 2011; Kraidy, 2005). In this context, cultural identity is no longer shaped solely through family, community, or formal education, but increasingly through repeated mediated encounters.

Although existing studies have examined social media use, music practices, and youth identity, these strands are often treated separately. Few studies explicitly address how the dissemination of popular music on Douyin relates to cultural identity among Chinese college and university students, particularly when education is considered as an interpretive mechanism rather than merely a demographic background variable. Cultural identity in this study is understood as a perceived sense of cultural belonging that develops through lived experience, social interaction, and media engagement (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

To address this gap, the present study proposes and tests a framework linking Douyin popular music dissemination to cultural identity, with education level conceptualised as a mediating factor. Drawing on Media System Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) and research on youth identity formation (Arnett, 2002), this study aims to clarify how educational background shapes the interpretation and integration of music circulated on short-video platforms into identity-related understandings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social media and youth identity formation

For today's youth, platforms like Douyin are not merely communication tools—they are spaces where personal and cultural identities take form. Recent survey evidence shows that social media remains embedded in teenagers' everyday lives (Anderson et al., 2023). Young adults use music to align with subcultures, express moods, and signal social affiliations. Research on adolescent music use shows that music can be important to identity and social relationships, while TikTok's communicative forms intensify imitation and participation (North et al., 2000; Schellewald, 2021). Douyin enhances this dynamic by delivering curated music that resonates with youth lifestyles and local slang. Repeated exposure may increase familiarity and emotional association, allowing musical trends to become embedded in personal identity over time.

2.2 Douyin as a platform for identity expression

Douyin enables youth to perform identity through musical content. Its tools, such as lip-syncing duet videos, and filters, invite users to remake and reframe media. Research on TikTok describes how platform

affordances encourage imitation and participation, producing what Zulli and Zulli (2022) call “imitation publics.” These affordances allow users to reproduce and adapt recognisable audiovisual forms. Such participation can make identity expression collaborative and iterative rather than purely individual (Schellewald, 2021).

2.3 Cultural hybridity and music consumption

Cultural hybridisation occurs when elements from different cultures are combined to create new meanings. Douyin facilitates this process by blending Chinese traditions with global music trends. For example, videos may combine classical Chinese instruments with electronic beats, or pair traditional clothing with contemporary dance. From Kraidy’s framework, these practices can be interpreted as an ongoing negotiation between local and transnational cultural resources. Such hybridisation does not necessarily weaken cultural identity; instead, it can create new forms of cultural belonging that reflect both local heritage and global influence.

2.4 Media system dependency theory

According to Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), people depend on media to interpret the world, particularly during periods of social change or uncertainty. For Chinese students navigating rapid urbanisation and educational competition, Douyin becomes a source not just of entertainment, but of meaning-making. Algorithmic systems organise visibility and can shape what content users encounter. Cotter (2019) shows that platform visibility is negotiated through algorithmic systems, while Gran et al. (2021) identify algorithm awareness as a dimension of digital inequality. Applied to Douyin, these findings suggest that students may differ in how critically they recognise and respond to platform curation. The more they rely on Douyin for mood regulation or cultural orientation, the more susceptible they may become to its embedded logics.

2.5 Education level as a mediating factor

Not all users are equally influenced by digital content. Education level may affect how critically users evaluate what they encounter. Hobbs and Tuzel (2017) show that media literacy education can strengthen educators’ capacity to recognise and address media influence. In China, variation in educational access may mean that not all youth have equal interpretive resources for reflecting on the cultural meanings embedded in Douyin music. This supports examining education level as a mediating factor in how media exposure relates to cultural identity. Youth with stronger academic or cultural foundations may approach music content more reflexively, while others may be more likely to adopt platform norms without critical evaluation.

2.6 Identified research gap

Although previous research has examined social media use, popular music dissemination, and youth identity individually, few studies have proposed an integrated model linking these factors. The interaction between Douyin’s algorithmic structure, cultural hybridity, media dependency, and educational background remains underexplored. Current literature lacks a framework that explains how these components jointly shape cultural identity. This paper addresses this theoretical gap. By synthesising

existing perspectives into a single model, it aims to guide future empirical research and clarify how digital music platforms affect identity development among Chinese college and university students.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUAL RESEARCH MODEL

This chapter presents the study's theoretical foundation and conceptual structure. It explains the theoretical logic underlying the relationship between the dissemination of Douyin popular music and cultural identity and introduces the conceptual research model developed to guide the empirical analysis.

3.1 Theoretical framework

The rapid development of short-video platforms has transformed how young audiences circulate, encounter, and experience popular music. On platforms such as Douyin, popular music is not only consumed as entertainment content but also functions as a cultural medium through which values, symbols, and collective meanings are repeatedly conveyed. From a media and cultural communication perspective, continuous exposure to cultural content through digital platforms may gradually shape individuals' perceptions of identity and belonging.

Within this context, popular music dissemination refers to the processes through which music content becomes visible, repetitive, and socially embedded on digital platforms. Unlike individual participation or active involvement, dissemination emphasises the structural characteristics of media circulation, including algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, exposure frequency, and the social visibility of music content. These dissemination processes enable popular music to serve as a shared cultural resource that reaches audiences in a sustained and pervasive manner.

Cultural identity, as a socially constructed concept, reflects individuals' sense of belonging, recognition, and emotional attachment to cultural values and symbols. Previous studies have suggested that repeated exposure to cultural content through media platforms can influence identity formation by normalising certain cultural narratives and reinforcing shared meanings. In the context of short-video platforms, popular music may serve as a carrier of cultural expression that subtly contributes to the construction of cultural identity among young users.

This study introduces education level as a mediating factor to account for individual differences in interpreting and internalising media content. Education level is commonly associated with cognitive skills, cultural awareness, and critical media literacy. Individuals with different educational backgrounds may vary in how they process, evaluate, and respond to popular music disseminated through digital platforms. Rather than directly determining cultural identity, education level may shape how media content influences identity-related perceptions.

Based on these considerations, the theoretical framework of this study posits that the dissemination of popular music on Douyin influences cultural identity through sustained media exposure, while education level serves as a mediator by shaping the interpretation and internalisation of disseminated cultural content. Figure 1 illustrates the overall theoretical logic underlying this study.

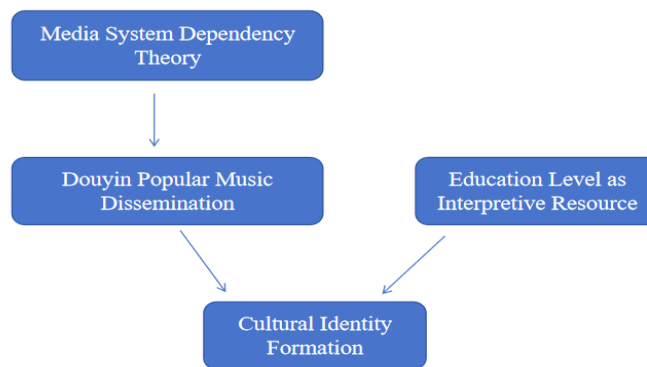


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework of the influence of Douyin popular music dissemination on cultural identity.

3.2 Conceptual research model

Drawing on the theoretical framework discussed above, this study proposes a conceptual research model to examine the relationships among the key variables. The model positions Douyin popular music dissemination as the independent variable, cultural identity as the dependent variable, and education level as a mediating variable.

The conceptual model assumes that the dissemination of popular music on Douyin directly influences cultural identity by shaping users' repeated exposure to culturally meaningful music content. At the same time, the model proposes an indirect pathway in which the dissemination of popular music affects education level–related differences in media interpretation, which in turn influence cultural identity. In this sense, education level is expected to partially explain how and why the dissemination of popular music on Douyin contributes to variations in students' cultural identity.

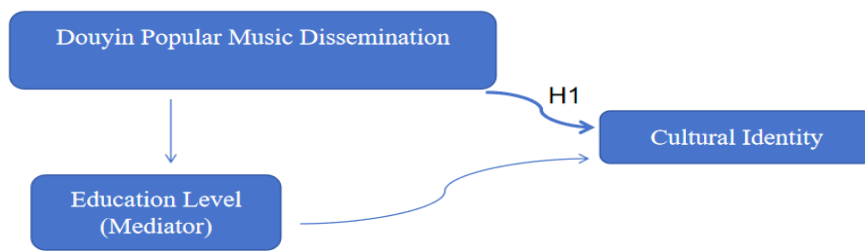
Figure 2 visually represents the proposed relationships among the variables, outlining both the direct effect of popular music dissemination on cultural identity and the indirect effect mediated by education level. The conceptual research model serves as the analytical foundation for the hypotheses tested in this study and guides the subsequent methodological and empirical analysis.

3.3 Hypotheses development

Based on the theoretical framework and conceptual research model, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Douyin popular music dissemination is positively associated with cultural identity among Chinese college and university students.

H2: Education level mediates the relationship between the dissemination of Douyin popular music and cultural identity among Chinese college and university students.



H2: Education level mediates the relationship between Douyin popular music dissemination and cultural identity.

Fig. 2. Conceptual research model illustrating the direct effect of Douyin popular music dissemination on cultural identity (H1) and the mediating role of education level (H2)

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research design

This study adopts a quantitative research design to empirically examine the relationships among Douyin popular music dissemination, education level, and cultural identity. A survey-based approach was employed to collect data from college and university students who actively use Douyin, allowing for systematic testing of the proposed hypotheses.

A quantitative design is appropriate for this study because it enables the examination of both direct and indirect relationships among variables within a structured analytical framework. In particular, this approach facilitates assessing the mediating role in the relationship between Douyin popular music dissemination and cultural identity, as specified in the conceptual research model.

4.2 Sampling and data collection

The target population of this study consists of Chinese college and university students, who represent a core user group of Douyin and are highly engaged in short-video and popular music consumption. This group was selected for its frequent exposure to popular music content disseminated through digital platforms and its relevance to contemporary cultural identity formation.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire using convenience sampling. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the study's academic purpose before completing the survey. To ensure data quality, responses that were incomplete or exhibited patterned answering behaviour were excluded from the final dataset.

4.3 Measurement of Variables

All constructs in this study were measured using multi-item scales adapted from established literature and adjusted to fit the context of Douyin popular music dissemination. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Douyin Popular Music Dissemination was measured by items assessing respondents' exposure to, repeated encounters with, and perceived prevalence of popular music content on Douyin.

Cultural Identity was operationalised using items that captured respondents' sense of cultural belonging, value alignment, and identification with cultural meanings conveyed by popular music.

Education Level was treated as a mediating variable and measured based on respondents' highest level of formal education attained. In line with the conceptual framework, education level reflects differences in respondents' educational background, which may influence their interpretive approaches to popular music content.

4.4 Data analysis procedure

Data analysis was conducted using statistical software to test the proposed hypotheses. Descriptive statistics were first employed to summarise the respondents' demographic characteristics.

To test H1, regression analysis was used to examine the direct effect of the dissemination of Douyin's popular music on cultural identity. To test H2, mediation analysis was conducted to assess the indirect effect of Douyin popular music dissemination on cultural identity through education level. The mediating effect was evaluated by examining changes in the relationship between the independent and dependent variables when the mediator was included in the model.

Reliability analysis was performed to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales, ensuring that all constructs met acceptable reliability thresholds before hypothesis testing.

4.5 Ethical consideration

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents' anonymity and confidentiality were ensured. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were used solely for academic research purposes.

5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the study's empirical findings and reports the statistical analyses conducted to test the proposed hypotheses. The results are organised according to the research objectives and the conceptual research model, focusing on the direct effect of Douyin popular music dissemination on cultural identity and the mediating role of education level.

5.1 Demographic characteristics of respondents

Table 1 summarises the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The sample consists of Chinese college and university students who actively use Douyin, reflecting the platform's core user group. Respondents represent various educational backgrounds, which provides a suitable basis for examining education level as a mediating variable in the proposed model.

Overall, the demographic distribution indicates that the sample is appropriate for investigating patterns of popular music dissemination on Douyin and their association with cultural identity among young adults.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18	176	46.9
	19	199	53.1
Gender	Male	201	53.6
	Female	174	46.4
Education level	Junior college	197	52.5
	Undergraduate	170	45.3
	Other	8	2.1

5.2 Reliability analysis

Before hypothesis testing, reliability analysis was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales. Cronbach's alpha was used as the primary indicator of reliability.

As shown in Table 2, the Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs exceed the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. These results suggest that the measurement instruments used in this study are reliable and suitable for subsequent statistical analyses.

Table 2. Reliability analysis of study constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Popular Music Dissemination	10	0.936
Cultural Identity	10	0.949
Overall Scale		0.932

5.3 Descriptive analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed to provide an overview of respondents' perceptions of the dissemination of Douyin's popular music and cultural identity. The results indicate that respondents generally report moderate to high levels of exposure to popular music content on Douyin, as well as a relatively strong sense of cultural identity.

These descriptive findings provide preliminary support for the assumption that Douyin is an influential media environment where young users frequently encounter and meaningfully engage with popular music.

5.4 Hypothesis Testing

To examine the proposed hypotheses, regression-based analyses were conducted in accordance with the research design outlined in the methodology section.

Direct effect of Douyin popular music dissemination on cultural identity

Hypothesis 1 proposes that the dissemination of Douyin's popular music significantly affects cultural identity. Regression analysis examines the direct relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

The results indicate that the dissemination of Douyin popular music has a significant positive effect on cultural identity. This finding supports H1, suggesting that increased exposure to and repeated encounters with popular music content on Douyin are associated with a stronger sense of cultural identity among college and university students.

Mediating role of education level

Hypothesis 2 proposes that education level mediates the relationship between the dissemination of Douyin popular music and cultural identity. To test this hypothesis, a mediation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between dissemination and cultural identity, both before and after including education level in the model.

The results show that when education level is included, the direct effect of Douyin popular music dissemination on cultural identity remains significant. Education level is also significantly associated with cultural identity. This pattern indicates that education level partially mediates the relationship between the dissemination of Douyin popular music and cultural identity.

Accordingly, H2 is supported, confirming that education level functions as an interpretive mechanism through which the dissemination of popular music on Douyin contributes to cultural identity formation.

Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

For clarity, Table 3 summarises the hypothesis testing results. The empirical findings supported both hypotheses proposed in this study.

Table 3. Summary of hypothesis testing results

Hypothesis	Relationship Tested	Result
H1	Douyin popular music dissemination → Cultural identity	Supported
H2	Dissemination → Education level → Cultural identity	Supported (Partial mediation)

The results demonstrate that the dissemination of Douyin's popular music significantly influences cultural identity among Chinese college and university students. Furthermore, education level partially mediates this relationship, highlighting the role of educational background in shaping how students interpret and internalise popular music delivered by the media.

6. DISCUSSIONS

This study examines the influence of the dissemination of Douyin's popular music on cultural identity among Chinese college and university students, with education level considered as a mediating factor. The empirical findings provide meaningful insights into how popular music circulated through short-video platforms functions not only as entertainment content but also as a cultural resource shaping young people's identity construction.

First, the results confirm a significant direct relationship between the dissemination of popular music on Douyin and cultural identity. This finding suggests that repeated exposure to popular music through Douyin contributes to students' emotional connection with cultural symbols, values, and shared meanings. Unlike traditional music consumption contexts, Douyin integrates music with visual narratives, trends, and participatory practices, allowing users to engage with cultural content in an immersive and socially embedded way. As a result, popular music disseminated on the platform becomes part of everyday cultural experience rather than a passive form of media consumption.

Second, the partial mediating role of education level highlights the importance of interpretive capacity in cultural identity formation. The findings indicate that while Douyin popular music dissemination directly influences cultural identity, education level shapes how users understand, evaluate, and internalise the cultural meanings conveyed through music content. Students with different educational backgrounds may therefore derive different interpretations from similar patterns of exposure. This result aligns with the theoretical assumption that education enhances individuals' ability to critically engage with media content, without diminishing the affective and symbolic impact of popular music.

Importantly, identifying partial rather than full mediation suggests that education level does not replace the role of media dissemination. Instead, it operates alongside media exposure as a contextual factor that conditions meaning-making processes. Even without high educational attainment, popular music disseminated through Douyin can still contribute to cultural identity by evoking shared emotions, collective memories, and a sense of belonging. Education level strengthens this process but does not constitute its sole driving force.

Taken together, these findings extend existing discussions on media system dependency by demonstrating that short-video platforms function as culturally significant environments. Douyin popular music dissemination provides not only information and entertainment but also symbolic resources that young users rely on to negotiate their cultural identity in contemporary digital settings. The results underscore the need to consider both media structures and individual interpretive factors when examining the cultural consequences of platform-based music dissemination.

7. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined how popular music disseminated through Douyin influences cultural identity among Chinese college and university students, with education level considered as a mediating factor. Using quantitative analysis, the study demonstrates that music content circulated on short video platforms plays a substantive role in young people's cultural experience and identity formation.

The findings show that exposure to popular music on Douyin is positively associated with cultural identity. This indicates that music encountered through short video platforms contributes to students' sense of cultural belonging and shared meaning. Because music on Douyin is closely integrated with visual presentation, trends, and social interaction, it becomes part of everyday media practice rather than a purely entertainment-oriented activity. In this context, popular music functions as a cultural resource that users repeatedly encounter and engage with in their daily lives.

The results also reveal that education level partially mediates the relationship between the dissemination of Douyin popular music and cultural identity. This suggests that educational background

shapes how individuals interpret and internalise the cultural meanings embedded in music content. Students with different levels of education may approach the same musical material differently, drawing varied interpretations from similar exposure. At the same time, the partial nature of the mediation indicates that education does not override the influence of media dissemination itself. Music circulated through Douyin continues to influence cultural identity directly, regardless of educational differences.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study extends Media System Dependency Theory by situating it within the context of short video platforms and digital music dissemination. The findings suggest that Douyin operates as a media environment in which users rely on popular music not only for leisure but also for symbolic and emotional orientation. By introducing education level as a mediating factor, the study highlights the interaction between media structures and individual interpretive capacity in forming cultural identity.

These findings drew several practical implications. In educational settings, greater attention may be given to media literacy training that helps students reflect on the cultural messages conveyed through popular music on digital platforms. Rather than discouraging exposure to short-video content, such efforts may support more reflective and informed media use. At the policy level, recognising the cultural influence of digital music dissemination may encourage the development of guidance and support mechanisms that promote culturally meaningful content. For content creators and platform operators, the findings point to the importance of considering the cultural impact of music dissemination practices, particularly for young audiences.

Taken together, the study underscores the cultural significance of popular music within short video environments and emphasises the need to consider both media influence and educational context when examining cultural identity formation. As digital platforms continue to shape everyday cultural experience, understanding how music contributes to identity construction remains a relevant area for further inquiry.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample is limited to Chinese college and university students, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings to other age groups or cultural contexts. Future studies may expand the sample to include additional populations to further examine the relationship between the dissemination of popular music and cultural identity.

Second, this study adopts a quantitative research approach based on self-reported data. While this method allows for systematic analysis, future research may benefit from incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews or content analysis, to gain deeper insights into how individuals interpret cultural meanings embedded in popular music disseminated on short video platforms.

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10. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that this research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

11. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Zhang Chan: Conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, data collection, formal analysis, visualisation, and writing-original draft; **Noor Mayudia Mohd Mothar:** Supervision, conceptualisation, validation, and writing-review and editing; **Mohamad Razeef Shah Bin Mohmad Rafik:** Supervision, methodology, validation, and writing-review and editing; **Manimegalai Ambikapathy:** Supervision, validation, and writing-review and editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

12. DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used DeepL for translation and language-editing assistance. After using this service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

13. DATA AVAILABILITY/ SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

14. ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the UiTM Research Ethics Committee (Reference No. REC/02/2026 (PG/MR/89)). Participation in this study was voluntary. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were maintained throughout the research process.

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