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Article

Researching Motherhood in the Age of Short Videos: Stay-at-Home Mothers in China Performing Labor on Douyin

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Abstract

Addressing the particular context of China, this article has two aims. First, it offers reflections on the possibilities and limitations of using user-generated short videos (vlogs) as research data both methodologically and ethically. We specifically explore the potential of centering vlogs as a new format for examining motherhood behavior across online and offline spaces. Secondly, it adds to the thematic literature on the (re)production and representations of motherhood. We critically examine the rising phenomenon in China of the stay-at-home mother, by exploring how these mothers use short video platforms. Inductively learning from the thematic analysis of short videos of stay-at-home mothers published on Douyin, the patterns in the data indicate three distinct forms of labor are performed through digital motherhood practices: domestic labor, affective labor, and entrepreneurial labor. Drawing on these patterns, we update the original framework of "motherhood 2.0," which was coined in the 2010s to address mothering practices in industrialized western societies. We extend this framework and conceptualize "motherhood 3.0" by analyzing a type of Chinese community-based intersectional performance of motherhood, gender, and labor that we see emerging in digital cultural production centered on short videos. Mediated labor within online and offline motherhood practices is informed by social, cultural, and technological factors. Digital technologies and mobile media communication provide new means for stay-at-home mothers to navigate between their roles as devoted mothers and their pursuit of self-actualization.

1. Introduction

The social media representation of women and their daily lives has become an important arena where cultural constructions of femininity can be evaluated, negotiated, replicated, and contested (Tambunan, 2020). User-generated content and gendered digital practices are intrinsically connected in our era as social media platforms promise to empower female users to have greater autonomy over their digital self-representations, voice, and visibility (Lupton & Pedersen, 2016; Wotanis & McMillan, 2014). Female content creators perform diverse types of labor as they engage with digital cultural production while drawing on technological affordances to make themselves visible in public discourse. Simultaneously, social media platforms are profit-oriented. They generate profit by linking audiences to targeted advertisements while enabling content creators to monetize their labor in the broader context of the digital attention economy (Abidin & Brown, 2018; Nixon, 2017).

In this article, we address, in particular, the digital representations of motherhood on the platform Douyin in China. Previous studies have examined how

motherhood practices are performed, negotiated, and evaluated on different mobile media platforms. Various media spaces have been reviewed, such as discussion forums (Mackenzie, 2018), films (Schweller, 2014), Facebook (Anderson & Grace, 2015), Instagram (Germic et al., 2021), WhatsApp (Lyons, 2020), and Youtube (Kennedy, 2019). Scholars have paid ample attention to the impact of digital technologies on the construction and representation of motherhood, addressing topics including identity construction, belonging, knowledge sharing, and community-building (Archer, 2019; Mackenzie & Zhao, 2021; Orton-Johnson, 2017).

Focused on the Anglo-America context of middle-class couples, the term "motherhood 2.0" has been coined to refer to the interweaving of digital media and maternal identity on Web 2.0 social media platforms, blogs, and reality TV. It elucidates how the strategic appropriation of digital affordances may facilitate the emergence of diverse motherhood subjectivities. Mommy bloggers and stay-at-home social media content creators circulate their identities, emotions, and experiences into the public sphere, which helps women to diversify conventional, homogeneous understandings of mothering and motherhood. Women develop a stay-at-home career by strategically embracing the possibilities of these mediums to generate income while working from their homes (Schweller, 2014). The growing popularity of interactive, mobile short video social media platforms such as Douyin (the Chinese equivalent of TikTok) complicates the mediated experiences of stay-at-home mothers. We contend that further conceptual elaboration is needed to address the degree to which these tools have created new opportunities for domestically repressed voices. These developments require us to become attentive to new patterns and narratives empirically and methodologically, to understand the changing and novel characteristics of mediated motherhood practices beyond motherhood 2.0. Moreover, the changing media landscape also creates new methodological possibilities and challenges for media and communication researchers interested in how people navigate offline and online spaces. For this purpose, in this article, we reflect upon our methodological decision-making steps in relation to ethical considerations. We discuss how we navigated (a) the challenges of conducting fieldwork during the COVID-19 health pandemic, (b) obstacles resulting from seeking to engage with profit-driven micro-celebrities, as well as (c) platform affordances that limited possibilities for ethnographic research.

The particular position of stay-at-home women in contemporary China can best be understood by attending to its historical genealogy. Traditional Confucian patriarchal norms expected men to dominate outside the home, relegating women to the private, domestic sphere. In the Maoist era, however, Chinese women enjoyed high employment rates, while state-supported welfare services, such as nurseries and canteens lightened the burden of domestic labor. Women were expected to work rather than stay at home to be supported and fed by others. Housewives became stigmatized at that time (Fang & Walker, 2015). In the late 1970s, public domestic institutions were abandoned with the so-called "reform and opening up" which resulted in market individualism. Women inherited the burden of reproductive labor again as a result of the post-socialist national transformation. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that women's duties in supporting their families are being re-evaluated and increasingly recognized. Simultaneously, the expansion of social support networks has provided individuals with more options while also raising social expectations for housework and childrearing. From prenatal care to early childhood education, mothers are investing significantly more time and effort. In this scenario, more women return to the home and become housewives. Or perhaps better and more specifically, they become stay-at-home mothers as we like to consider them. Stay-at-home mothers commonly embrace new parenting and digital techniques and implement them with their children, which strengthens their ethics of motherhood (Fang & Walker, 2015).

Focusing on Douyin, which has become a rather popular platform in China, particularly after the growth of 4G and 5G mobile connectivity (estimated 600 million users in June 2022), we address the potential of short-video mobile media platforms to create hybrid communicative spaces, witnessing the performance and transformation of women's forms of labor, identity performativity, and interpretation of motherhood. By centering the self-representations of Chinese stay-at-home mothers on Douyin, we scrutinize how mobile media are used as technological devices to capture everyday lives across online and offline spaces. More specifically, we take vlogs published on Douyin as an entry point to explore the intersections of motherhood, digital labor, affective work, and platform commercialization.

This article is structured as follows. In the theoretical framework below, we connect forms of gendered, domestic, and digital labor and address the affectivity of women's work. Subsequently, we provide methodological considerations and reflections on researching the phenomenon of stay-at-home mothers in China. In the empirical section, we discuss three distinct forms of labor these mothers performed in the short videos. We suggest the term motherhood 3.0 to examine the role of mobile media in negotiating motherhood and the digitalization of labor.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Gendered Digital Labor

Digital labor refers to "companies" deriving economic value from the commonly unpaid leisure-oriented activities of everyday users of digital platforms (Gandini, 2021). Monetizing digital labor and targeted advertising reflect

a capital accumulation model underpinning well-known social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Douyin (Fuchs, 2013). In recent years, the concept of digital labor has been taken up in various disciplines to analyze the production, consumption, and reproduction activities associated with it through digital technology and media (Gandini, 2021; Scholz, 2013). Meanwhile, the global context of contemporary digitalization has witnessed a "process of dematerialization of reproductive labor" (Fortunati, 2007, p. 139). It has led to new ways of monetizing digital labor that do not always transfer monetary value to the individuals or groups performing the labor, but rather contribute to the enterprise's overall revenue. Consequently, the barrier between production and leisure has become increasingly blurred. Labor time seeps into leisure time and vice versa (Fuchs, 2013).

The domestic space is a valuable entry point for thinking about the nature of digital labor on commercial platforms (Jarrett, 2016). There are parallels between the digital labor of using online social networks and what has been traditionally considered "women's work." The feminization of digital labor manifests in its invisibility, unpaid/low wage, and marginalized status. It is also associated with feminized expectations of flexibility, passion, and emotional labor (Arcy, 2016; Duffy & Schwartz, 2018). It is gendered in two ways: performed by the female body and gendered as a form of reproductive work. Traditionally, in the domestic space, although women perform domestic tasks like cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing, the products, and services that arise from their labor are consumed directly rather than traded in marketplaces (Oksala, 2016). Similarly, some labor conducted in the digital spaces of social media goes unpaid and unrecognized, blurring the barrier between online-offline consumption and production (Duffy, 2017). Marxist frameworks regard these goods and services as having an exclusively utilitarian value, not a monetary value (Oksala, 2016). In other words, these activities are unproductive in capitalist economics.

Jarrett (2016) introduces the term "digital housewife" to describe the similarities between the unpaid work of housewives and social media users. She noticed that neither outcome gets paid, yet both generate use-value. The wage labor generated by houseworkers, and the data generated by digital labor are commoditized and alienated. Inalienable emotions, such as happiness, social solidarity, and general knowledge, as well as the social relationships they produce, are likewise of use value (Tan et al., 2020). In the dominant heteronormative conception of private domestic spaces, unpaid stay-at-home mothers produce non-commoditized products such as emotional care, whereas salaried husbands consume such care and support to generate commoditized labor hours. While the housewife's affective labor is not exploited directly through monetization, it is still integral to capitalism's long value chain (Fortunati, 1995; Tan et al., 2020). Jarrett (2016, p. 17) underlined that, in both circumstances, labor is capitalized and has socio-cultural and gendered significance; it has the potential to generate economic value through social, emotional, and affective ties; and it possesses inalienable social value and meaning.

2.2. Women's Work and Affective Labor

Affective labor refers to carrying out work that has not typically been commoditized, such as child-rearing at home or caring for sick or elderly family members (Oksala, 2016). Unlike emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012) occurring in the context of waged employment, from a Marxist feminist perspective, affective labor becomes a form of reproductive labor rather than productive labor (Mäkinen, 2021). As a subcategory of "immaterial labor," affective labor is "embedded in moments of human interaction and communication…: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community" (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 293). Leurs (2019) proposed the notion of "digital care labor" to indicate that affective labor does not only generate positive (or negative) sensations or states of mind in others, but also produces social networks, forms of community, and biopower (Hardt & Negri, 2000).

Historically, women have been the primary creators of affective labor. Fortunati (2007) argues that women's material labor in the domestic space, such as cleaning, cooking, and laundry, is commonly overlooked. More importantly, their reproductive labor (sex, pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing), as well as other fundamental parts of the immaterial realm (care, love, education, and socialization), are disregarded. In other words, it is not only the direct material inputs provided by the unpaid labor of domestic work that contributes to the household economy; rather, it is the free labor of women, including the gifting of affect, including personal and domestic maintenance that contributes (Andrejevic, 2009; Jarrett, 2014). The concept of affective labor elucidates how capital has undergone cultural and subjective shifts at the margins of expanding boundaries (Coté & Pybus, 2007), enabling people to recognize how capital utilizes social relationships and emotional intensities beyond wage employment (Mäkinen, 2021). Consequently, affective labor is not a novelty of labor exploitation; it has always been at the backbone of the capitalist chain of value generation and exploitation. What is new is how it circulates between offline domestic and online spaces, as we discuss below.

Visibility labor adds a new layer to understanding affective labor in a broader context of the contemporary digital attention economy. Abidin (2015) highlighted the connection between digital visibility labor and offline affective labor. This lens is useful to account for the domestic context of stay-at-home mothers in China. Lack of visibility compels their affective labor to become invisible; as a result, it will be further devalued and underpaid. The potential for visualizing invisible

affective labor is significant in the current social media era, where platforms serve as a crucial stage (Schwarz, 2017), enhancing the visibility, mediation, and materialization of labor in the public domain. With the framework outlined above, we can become attentive to labor as a complex, multi-faceted process, which can be generative to address the gendered division of labor in families and the meaning of what labor might mean and entail for stay-at-home mother content creators navigating offline-online lives on Douyin.

3. Methodological Considerations

This article reports on pilot research conducted in light of two research projects: Guanqin He's study "Digital Crossroads in China: Chinese Women Negotiating Migration, Urbanization, and Digitization" which explores digital experiences of female gig workers with a migration background in China; and Yongjian Li's study "Integrating Through the Digital: ICT's, Internal Elderly Migrants in China and their Place-Making." He received ethical clearance from the Utrecht University Faculty Ethics Assessment Committee—Humanities (22-027-02), while Li received permission from the Erasmus University School of History, Culture and Communication Ethics Review Board (20-14-Li).

3.1. Navigating Methodological, Ethical, and Practical Challenges

The imbalance of power between researchers and research participants can be accentuated in online environments. Researchers can lurk in communities by remaining unseen. The data collection process can increase the distance between researchers and research participants (Clark-Parsons & Lingel, 2020). As we prepared to use Douyin videos as research data, we considered the methodological and ethical challenges of our research plans. The first "ethically important moment" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) we encountered in our research was deciding over what constitutes "publicly available" data. Within the growing debate on the ethics of social media research, the consensus remains that scholars in specifically defined situations can rely on "publicly available data" when studying digital culture (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Markham et al., 2018). Informed consent is not required if digital data is considered public by those making and publishing content or when it is "naturally occurring" (Silverman, 2007) according to the majority of institutional ethics committees (Ravn et al., 2020). We agree however also that it is important for us researchers to be cognizant of the right to privacy in the digital domain, and therefore reflection is needed about how boundaries between public and private digital spaces are drawn and experienced (Mackenzie, 2016).

The binary logic constructed by how platforms conceptualize privacy in simple, technical terms—data are either publicly disclosed or not publicly accessible—is untenable (boyd, 2008). Seeking to subvert this dualism, Ravn et al. (2020) advance an understanding of "the public" based on the "imagined audience" (Marwick & boyd, 2010), emphasizing that ethical decisions should be based on knowing what users perceive as their public and how their posts are addressed to this public. In addition, each social media platform has distinctive affordances that impact research. Socio-technical affordances and the in-built functions of platforms should be taken into consideration as we navigate our research engagements ethically (Ravn et al., 2020). In this sense, we concur with the suggestion of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) to acknowledge the significance of context-specific, case-based research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

In our case, accessing research participants in the offline contexts of their daily lives would be challenging, and it has grown considerably more difficult over the past two years, as the COVID-19 pandemic has rendered in-person/offline research impossible due to social distances and travel constraints (Kaufmann et al., 2021). This was particularly the case in the context of China, where zero-COVID policies have resulted in prolonged periods of lockdown. This further complicated our desire to collect geographically diverse data across Chinese localities. However, long before the COVID-19 pandemic era, media and communication researchers started to realize that in-person interactions are no longer "the gold standard against which the performance of computer-mediated interaction is judged" (Hine, 2005, p. 4). In particular circumstances, online research methods may be preferred, or equally acceptable to offline research methods (Howlett, 2021).

The stay-at-home mothers we consider in our study orient themselves towards these platforms as a part of their daily lives, their activities purposefully occur simultaneously and constantly across online and offline spaces. The platform Douyin offers us particular methodological entry-points to study their purposeful digital mediation of everyday life. For example, content producers might choose to explicitly announce publicly their "authenticity." #RecordRealLife (#记录真实生活) is a hashtag that Douyin initiated and actively promotes; it has been watched 165.22 billion times until 24 June 2022. Videos with tags typically receive more views. Although we did not target those explicitly in our data gathering, the majority of the videos we collected were also tagged with #RecordRealLife. As people become more familiar with digital platforms in their daily lives, online self-representations may resemble offline self-representations (Griffith & Papacharissi, 2010). The genre of vlogging from a realistic perspective, in an unedited and documentary style, creates a sense of directness in real life. The creators condense their daily life into short movies and post them simultaneously on Douyin. The affordances of short video platforms promote synchronous or asynchronous author-viewer

interactions. Researchers thus can also approach their daily recordings synchronously or asynchronously via mobile devices, following the posters and their routines as if they were accessing a self-curated documentary that offers a particular glance at their personal lives. We aim to advance our understanding of short-video social media platforms as entry points for comprehending how people in their daily lives purposefully navigate between online and offline lives. In our case, by considering the online spaces curated by stay-at-home mothers we can already learn a lot about the interrelationships with their everyday life offline too.

In designing our research protocol, we explored the possibility of pursuing online interviews to allow stay-at-home mothers to co-research with us their digital media representations. However, we found that online access proved to be an insurmountable hurdle. As we conducted our research using our smartphones, we found that while Douyin enables multiple forms of information exchange (text, video, images, audio), synchronous and asynchronous, exchanges between users require users to follow each other. When users are not following one another, the interface of Douyin only allows any user to send one text message to another user until they get a response. As public accounts with at least 20,000 followers, approaching these stay-at-home mother micro-celebrities (Senft, 2008) requires either insider status (Mavroudis & Milne, 2016) or business identity. After initially observing the vloggers as a follower for six months as part of a digital ethnography, we noticed that they only responded to comments that had attracted a high volume of likes or comments from peers or loyal fans. Stemming from the platform affordances and the status of our research target group, we thus had very limited chances to recruit or obtain individual consent. Therefore, we finally decided to pursue an online-only research methodology. For this purpose, we created a research-only Douyin account for the sole purpose of data collection.

3.2. Data Collection

To build our corpus of data, a python-scraping program was used to retrieve videos hashtagged with #Housewives(家庭主妇) and #Stay-at-homeMothers(全职妈妈) as well as associated publicly accessible metadata from the online archive of Douyin. To ensure that diverse full-time mother representations were also included, we utilized a snowball sampling strategy to expand our search beyond these popular hashtags, for instance leading us to hashtags such as #TheRoutineOfAStay-at-homeMother and #RecordRealLife. In three rounds of scraping conducted between November 2021 to February 2022, an initial sample of 698 videos published between March 2021 and February 2022 was established. It should be noted that as a result of Douyin's anti-crawling mechanism, the corpus we used for this study does not include all the videos tagged with these hashtags in Douyin's online archive. This anti-crawling mechanism functioned as follows: When the access frequency of any same IP address exceeded a threshold it would be identified as a crawler and the IP address would be blocked. The search results can be expected to have been influenced by the popularity algorithm, but they are not limited to a particular minimum number of followers, views, or likes. Based on this, we went through the metadata and manually collected 12 accounts with the highest frequency (see Table 1). Throughout this article, we include pseudonymized account names. We purposefully sampled (Patton, 2002) vloggers with different fan bases (ranging from 20,000 to over 2 million) and from diverse geographical regions in China (including but not limited to Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen). Subsequently, we collected the top five most liked videos with associated hashtags from each account, and the sample size in the current study is 12 stay-at-home mother vloggers and 60 Douyin posts. All Chinese texts, including phrases, hashtags, captions, and comments, were translated into English by the authors.

Table 1. List of vlogger accounts (data retrieved on 31 December 2021).

Account name	Follower count	Location
Yu	257,000	Shenzhen
Di	1,454,000	Beijing
Jiajia	484,000	Shandong
Tang	445,000	Zhejiang
Meimei	20,000	Zhejiang
Wang	278,000	Zhejiang
Meng Meng	45,000	Nei Menggu
Leilei	2,224,000	Zhejiang
Han	280,000	Shanghai
Lu	50,000	Henan
Yuan	551,000	Zhejiang
Shen	45,000	Anhui

Following recommendations from the AoIR (Markham & Buchanan, 2012) for ethical decision-making, we further weighed whether the digital presence of the stay-at-home mothers on Douyin could be considered as constituting publicly available data or not. To do so, investigating Douyin's specific affordances was necessary to understand the context-specific "perceived privacy" and "perceived public data" of the stay-at-home mothers under study. Douyin's settings enable users to manage what they publish publicly. Thereby they select from a variety of privacy options. Likes, followers, publicly published videos, and recommended products will be publicly featured on their homepage (see Figure 1). Users have the option to restrict access to their following lists, follower lists, and liked videos. The profiles included in our study all are open and public-facing. In addition, the e-commerce nature of the presence of stay-at-home mothers on Douyin reminds us of another affordance worth considering. On the platform, the feature of "merchandizing on behalf" (*daihuo*) embeds an icon in the video linked to the product (Kaye et al., 2021). The homepages of all accounts included in our study had the function of "recommended product window," along with "word of mouth" and the number of products sold (see Figure 2). Such a public commercial function supports our assumption that the social media users of this community are intentionally posting content in the public domain for all potential customers to see. We also would like to acknowledge that we were limited in establishing our corpus. Notwithstanding our efforts to de-identify the visual materials of posters we stud-

ied, we blurred faces and excluded children as much as possible, although we realize that some scholars argue that modifying people's images is just as unethical as displaying the full one (Gross et al., 2003). Even if we conceal data sources and make data pseudonymous, it is nearly impossible to circumvent the ethical dilemma posed by the fact that a triangulation of pseudonymous data points may potentially be traced back to specific individuals (Ravn et al., 2020; Zimmer, 2010).

3.3. Data Analysis

Content analysis is a crucial research technique to analyze the influence of Douyin on Chinese culture and community (Yang, 2022). We followed the approach to thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2013) to analyze textual and visual data, as it is theory-agnostic and case-based. Considering the multimedia nature of user-generated content on Douyin, we employed an intuitive approach to visual data analysis. The affiliated texts, visual elements, and commentaries of these sampled videos were selected and coded for thematic analysis to search for patterns. Following the linear six-phase approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we observed patterns in the data indicating three distinct forms of labor: (a) domestic labor; (b) affective labor; (c) entrepreneurial labor is performed through digital practices. We illustrate how performing these forms of labor embodies stay-at-home mothers' agency, motherhood, and visibility to generate benefits and incomes in the following discussions.
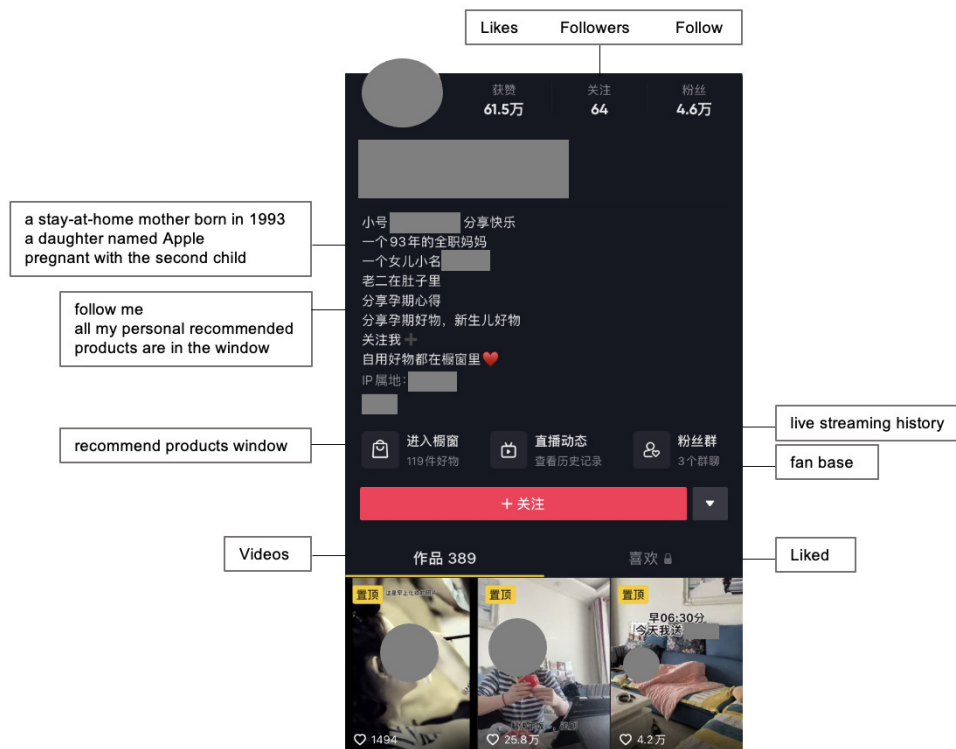
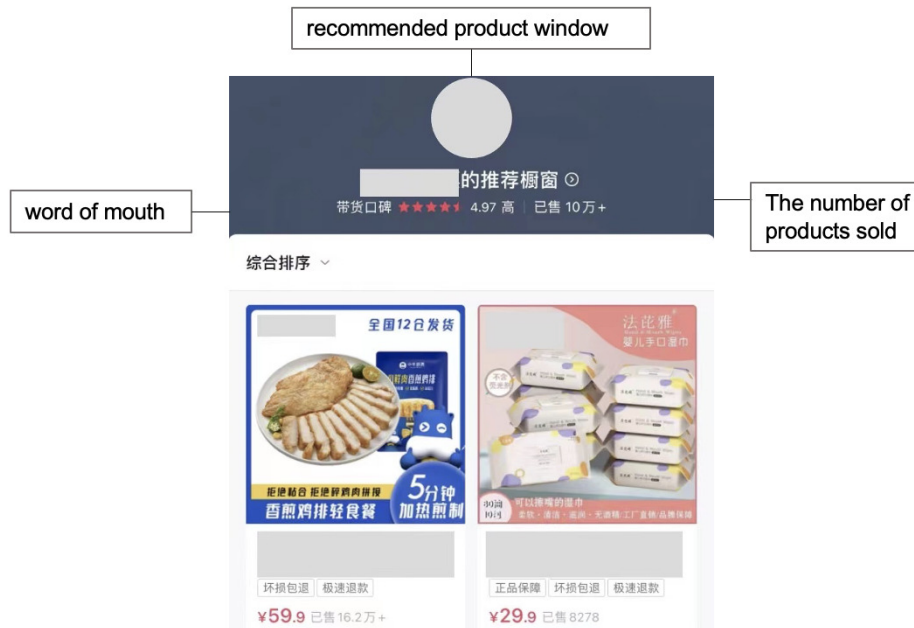

Figure 1. Meng Meng's homepage.

Figure 2. Di's recommended product window.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Motherhood as a Performative Practice: Digitally Mediated Domestic Labor

Digital media sustains performative motherhood practices, complicating the relations between online and offline spaces. Stay-at-home mothers in China are chronicling their daily lives through digital media in the form of vlogs and creating an online space for their daily performance of motherhood. In their self-representational videos, maternal identity and obligations are regularly reinforced and internalized while simultaneously can be seen as being actively renegotiated.

We specifically retrieved texts from the profiles of the sampled vloggers, based on which we generated a word cloud map (see Figure 3). In account profiles, mother vloggers identify themselves first and foremost as mothers, putting children as the priority and emphasizing their motherhood. Tang, for example, positions herself as a mother with two children. Mei Mei stresses she has been a stay-at-home mother for eight years, with an eight-year-old daughter and a six-year-old son. Meng Meng (see Figure 1) introduces herself as a stay-at-home mother

Figure 3. Word cloud of mother vlogger's profiles.

born in 1993 with an elder daughter, Apple, and a second child on the way.

As a prominent storytelling strategy, the mothers in the short videos deliver a fairly homogeneous narrative of their everyday life routines (see Figure 4, summarized by authors) which is organized around the labor of child and domestic care. It is worth noting that the stay-at-home mothers featured in vlogs are typically available 24/7, focusing their attention on children, families, and the domestic setting. As Di, one of the vloggers, said in her post: "Taking care of children day and night has developed into an obligation and responsibility." As we can see from the daily ritual visualized in Figure 5, Jiajia's cleaning routine as mediated on Douyin indicates stay-at-home mothers have to navigate normative expectations of caring, domesticity as well as generating income.

In addition to showing their daily routine and rhythms of housework and childcare, mothers share why they choose to be stay-at-home mothers and how they enjoy motherhood in their videos.
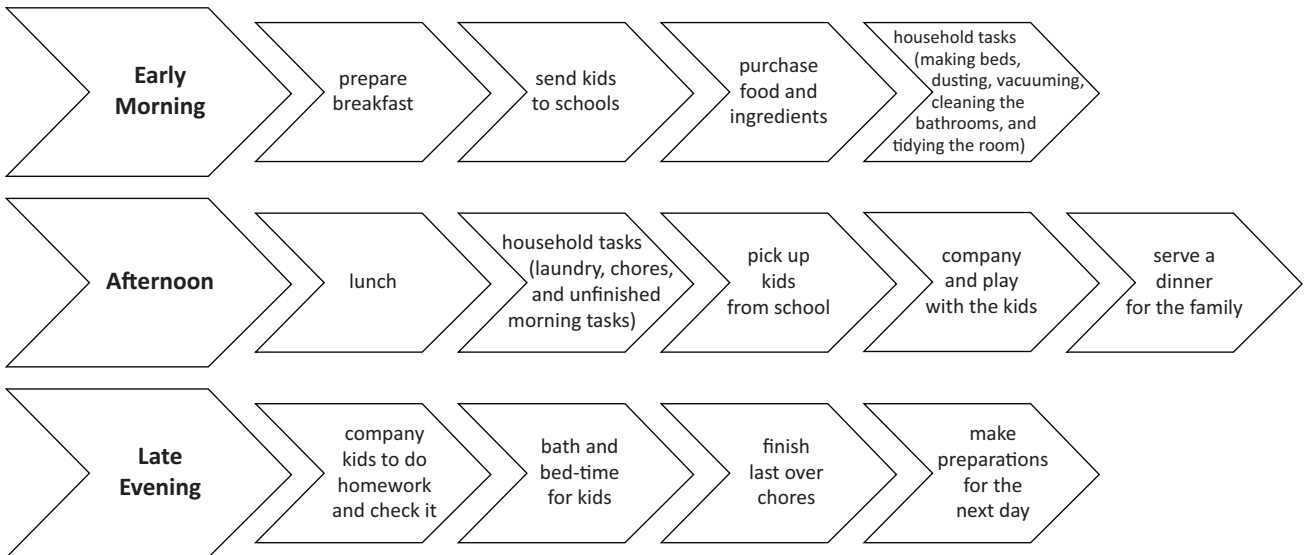

Figure 4. Timetable of stay-at-home mothers on Douyin.

Figure 5. Timeline of Jiajia's cleaning routine.

Di is the mother of two girls. She has become what Abidin and Brown (2018) described as a micro-celebrity with 1.454 million followers (as of 31 December 2021). Originally from the Shandong province in Eastern China, Di has lived a "floating" life in Beijing for nine years and has been a stay-at-home mother for four years (see Figure 6). As she states in one video:

> When I came to Beijing, I was filled with many ideals and ambitions and wanted to have my career in Beijing. Because of the family division of labor, I became a stay-at-home mother and began to take care of my children day and night….I learned to integrate with the family and take care of the family, and constantly got used to giving.

She confesses that she encountered numerous misunderstandings and unpleasant moments. Neighbors would judge her for leaving her husband to work alone to support the whole family. Family members and relatives agree she should dedicate more time to her children. Such hurtful comments impacted her feelings and lowered her self-esteem: "The years of working as a part-time vlogger on Douyin have made me confident and calm." Di acknowledges that being a vlogger brings her a strong sense of empowerment, cures her sensitivity by breaking the complete reliance on her husband's wages, and supports her family financially during tricky times. By recording and sharing her daily life as a stay-at-home mother on Douyin, she has met many other mothers from the online community. These connections fostered a sense of connectedness, mutual understanding, and empathy.

As digital technology opens up a new sphere in which mothers and their experiences are narrated, Douyin has developed into a critical arena through which mothers' stories, identities, and practices are contested and redefined (Orton-Johnson, 2017). The videos of stay-at-home mothers bring the invisible unpaid labor of women performed in the private domestic sphere into public discourse and transform it into visible digital labor, providing new possibilities for the digital continuation of motherhood through social media. Motherhood is performative (Butler, 1997). Stay-at-home mothers in the videos internalized childcare and housekeeping as their responsibilities. Their representations of motherhood in their day-to-day maternal practice, at times reinforced dominant gendered and heteronormative paradigms of family and society. Di's digital presence illustrates how the performativity of motherhood and digital mediation emphasizes the mother's initiative and self-consciousness. Performative motherhood, in this way, complicates one-dimensional understandings of female identities and motherhood practices. They are not only subordinated under patriarchal structures. They are also active agents crafting their own identities with agency. Through digital visibility, the stay-at-home mothers who volunteer to become mothers and assume childcare responsibilities are not necessarily seen as succumbing to patriarchal stereotypes of domestic labor, rather they display self-realization and self-reflection, just like Yu's monologue in her top viewed post (see Figure 7),
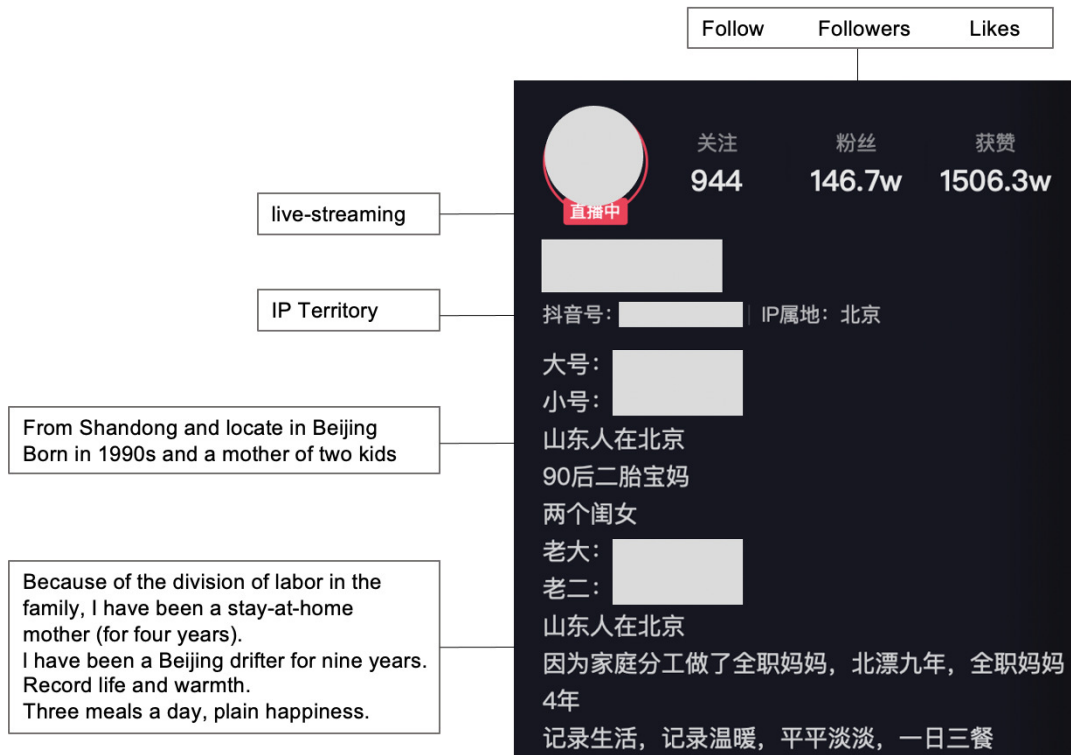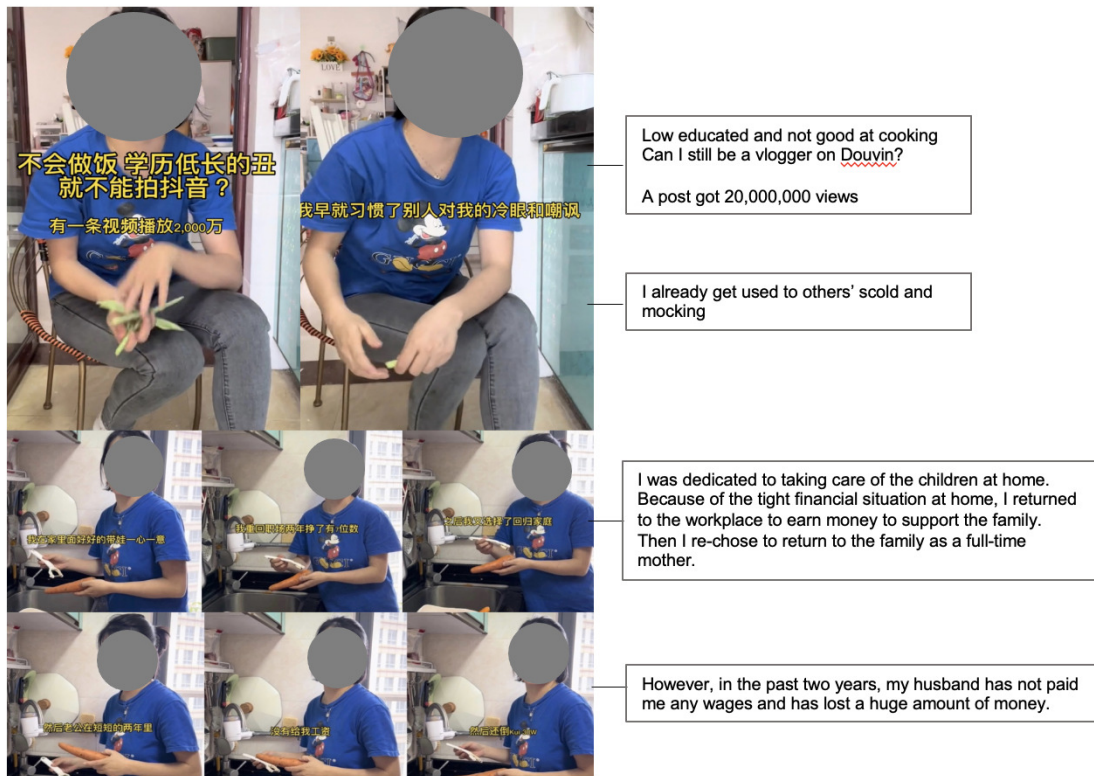

Figure 6. Di's profile.

Figure 7. Screenshots of Yu's post.

similar to other female bodies that chose to pursue other trajectories (Oh, 2009).

Daily recurrence does not necessarily imply replication, on the other hand. The advent of digital media has the potential to provide more agentic representations of how stay-at-home mothers deal with diverse challenging scenarios and resolve everyday issues, thereby regaining a sense of independence. "Recording daily real life" was a common theme in the mothers' profiles. Shen emphasizes in her profile that each video is "real life." However, their confessions in the videos reflect a tension between making rational choices of developing their careers and being devoted stay-at-home mothers to keep their children company and cared for, echoing Michel Foucault's concept of the paradox of subjectivation (Foucault, 1982). That is, possibilities for agency lie not outside of but within the existing power structures. Performativity enforces, rejects, or reinterprets norms with each repetition, exerting agency (Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1978). Each re-enactment of motherhood reinforces and challenges normative conceptions (Oh, 2009). As Banet-Weiser (2015) suggests, the mere act of making non-normative identities visible comes to stand as a political act in and of itself. The visibility of motherhood becomes empowering, shattering what digital housewives perceive to be the cultural silence surrounding maternity (Van Cleaf, 2020). Through their representations (see Figures 5 and 7), stay-at-home mothers can digitally exhibit their typically unseen domesticity and obtain recognition and support from online communities and followers. Meanwhile, this interaction consumes and requires substantial affective labor.

4.2. Sharing Intimacy: Mother Vlogs as Affective Labor

Stay-at-home mothers and their self-presentations on Douyin frequently include details of family life, as well as intimate relationships. Mäkinen (2021) points out that although these presentations may not offer a comprehensive picture, vlogs draw an audience precisely because they promise authentic depictions of a person's personal life and emotions, eliciting a sense of connectedness and empathy within the audience. In the videos, the mothers frequently share personal details and demonstrate apparent genuine emotions when interacting with others. This contributes significantly to their perceived credibility, authenticity, and intimacy as micro-celebrities (Abidin, 2015; Raun, 2018). By narrating their personal lives with ordinariness and everydayness (Abidin, 2018), and using affective registers, mother vloggers can build a relationship of trust with their followers. For instance, Di revealed that her luxury mansion in Beijing was purchased by her husband's parents. Jiajia opened up about her own childbirth misadventures. The 33-year-old has been outspoken about showing her white hair to the camera in answering viewers' questions about why she appears elderly. Yuan engaged commenters in a discussion regarding her complaints about her husband's passivity. By sharing relatable experiences, the mothers form networks with peers sharing similar experiences and

emotions. As it remains a choice to do so, the emotional exposure of stay-at-home mothers should be understood as a particular form of affective labor (Marwick, 2013). The mothers strategically cultivate digital intimacy. Their authenticity generates a significant following of committed fans which can be monetized.

Affective labor and digital labor are complementary. The convergence of digital and affective labor represents a site of political, economic, and social importance (Kelsey, 2019, p. 44). Through digital platforms, stay-at-home mothers can become inextricably linked:

> It was like seeing my daily routine, day after day. (Wang's comment)

> I feel deeply connected, and I am going through the same ordeal myself. Stay-at-home mothers are cheering together. (Jiajia's comment)

> May every mother love, embrace life, and grow stronger. (Leilei's comment)

These remarks taken from the comment section illustrate how mothers receive emotional support. The online affective interaction space results from two-way interaction. An intimate relationship between vloggers and followers can be established and developed, making it possible for affective solidarity to circulate. Simultaneously, empathy generated online is spatially transferred online and offline. The comments not only arouse empathy but also serve as a forum for sharing knowledge and assistance. Viewers can ask about various aspects and details in the comments section, and mothers can supplement information from the videos or share commercial product information in the form of text comments.

However, we recognize the vulnerability of this affective labor (Mäkinen, 2021) and realize that intimacy and openness can result in vulnerability. Through digital media, a relationship of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2010) is developed by these stay-at-home mothers. While their video comment areas remain rife with questions and cyber-bullying, they respond actively to malicious comments. Despite demonstrating the difficulties inherent to being a stay-at-home mother, the vlogs remain positive and cheerful, displaying their confidence in living life. In this state, the subject constantly imagines the achievement of ideals and, in their unreality, clings to painful hope. Pleasure "sticks" to various cultural objects (such as the family) creating an imagined "cloud of possibilities" (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2010). Vlogs get (over)determined to be pleasurable, and their acquisition is viewed as a path to live the "good life" (Berlant, 2010). Cruel optimism reveals the deep-rooted alienation of female labor (Kelsey, 2019). This is also a form of strategically performed digital labor that favors commodification, as audiences may be more inclined to follow those micro-celebrities that provide a positive, inspirational outlook on life.

4.3. Making Money on Douyin: Platformed Entrepreneurial Labor

Douyin has become a site where stay-at-home mothers as micro-celebrities seek to exploit their labor and transform themselves into "mumpreneurs" (Archer, 2019). Scholars have found that Chinese mothers are experiencing a context-specific "double bind" revolving around the contradiction of being a devoted mother and a career woman (Lazar & Sun, 2020). Stay-at-home mothers on Douyin, weaving digital environments into their daily offline lives, actively participate in the mammoth capitalist digital empire of Douyin and (re)produce what we refer to as "platformed entrepreneurial labor."

The boundaries between public and private, domestic, and societal, have already been blurred and intertwined since the early days of neoliberal capitalism, which has affected every aspect of life. Different from the conventional e-commerce business model of "people looking for goods," Douyin's "interest e-commerce" product sales model is "products looking for customers." Within this business model, Douyin and the platform economy stemming from it redefine the boundaries of labor in the contemporary Chinese context and point to a turn towards "immaterial labor," enabling the commodification of immaterial service, cultural product, knowledge, or communication (Hardt & Negri, 2000). As a form of platformed entrepreneurial labor, stay-at-home mothers actively engage in Douyin e-commerce, monetizing the online traffic of their obtained attention from their followers and viewers. For example, Jiajia shares that she livestreams every night after her child's bedtime, and sells children-rearing-related products, such as food, clothing, or cleaning products. In June 2021, Di reached 5.25 million yuan in her live streaming sales (see Figure 8). There is also an e-commerce entry (recommended product window) within her profile where her followers can directly purchase the products that she recommends. Those with high sales and attention will get a certification from the platform as a "high-quality e-commerce author" (see Figure 9). It will show up on their profile page, which in turn will attract more followers and clients.

Since representations of stay-at-home mothers in vlogs seek to convey an embodied authentic experience, many other mothers from their community, as viewers and consumers, could be enticed to consider their recommendations. The merchant-customer relationship between stay-at-home mothers and other follower-viewers mirrors the traditional commentator-mummy blogger's relationship in the motherhood 2.0 model. Yet, we highlight a notable difference here. The affordances of Douyin enable all the followers of a vlogger to receive instant replies or join a fan-based chat group where they can share and exchange information in sync. This is in contrast to blogs, where creators and followers could only engage by leaving comments and receiving responses, and where instantaneous two-way communication was not afforded. A typical sentence shared

Figure 8. Di's live streaming sales in June 2021.

among these vloggers' profiles goes like this: "Thank you for your likes and attention." These mothers are aware that viewer feedback will impact their standing as micro-celebrities. Similarly, viewers could also guide them with their remarks and questions, shared during their live streaming or in the comment sections, such as "Dear, what mask are you using? Which brand do you recommend?''

This demonstrates that in the age of short videos, immediate interactions and feedback are expected.

Platformed entrepreneurial labor as a mediated mixture of forms of domestic, affective, and digital labor illuminates our understanding of stay-at-home mothers' agency and subjectivity. They navigate systematic and structural exploitation of neoliberalism and capitalism by performing motherhood in the context of the platform economy. This provides opportunities to generate their own income and feel better rather than solely having to rely on their "breadwinner" husbands, as indicated in Di's case discussed above.

Albeit we recognize the empowering role of the Douyin platform and its affordances in monetizing the platformed entrepreneurial labor of stay-at-home mothers, it is necessary to note that this form of delivery still conforms to a fairly traditional hetero-patriarchal and neoliberal framework of exploitation. In addition to performing domestic labor, they also need to manage their relationship with their followers as potential customers, all the while exposing their daily lives to the camera and being subject to observation and judgment, becoming datafied and monetized by Douyin.

4.4. Motherhood 3.0 in the Age of Short Videos: The Online and Offline Space Nexus in Digital Motherhood Practices

Through the analysis of three distinct forms of labor performed by stay-at-home mothers on the platform Douyin, our findings demonstrate the process by which short videos further blur boundaries between online

Figure 9. Yu and Leilei are certified as high-quality e-commerce author.

and offline spaces, thereby developing and complicating motherhood 2.0. As previously stated, the term "motherhood 2.0" described the presence and visibility of mothers on so-called web 2.0 platforms such as in particular mummy blogs, alongside for example real-life television shows. We propose that motherhood 3.0 extends the original paradigm, with the focus on the immediate interactive relationships between mother influencers and content consumers, specifically including mothers with lower education or migration backgrounds from non-western-centric contexts and their labor performance on short-video platforms. It further points out the eagerness of self-representation of Chinese stay-at-home mothers with a more nuanced focus on their distinctively situated performance of motherhood on short video platforms.

Douyin's multi-functionality has resulted in a multi-layered context, shaped by synchronous communication and experienced porous boundaries between communities and celebrities. The spatial-temporal affordances of Douyin provide opportunities for connections across time and geographical constraints, enabling mother vloggers to produce video content, live stream, and interact with followers whenever and wherever they want by using their smartphones. The convergence of online and offline space encourages the circulation of offline domestic practices and provides new platforms and means of communication for the reconfiguration of mothers from being "absent present" online and offline to "doubly present " in their domestic sphere and public online community. These spaces that are embedded with digital motherhood practices further magnify the affective and invisible domestic labor performed by stay-at-home mothers while simultaneously enhancing the visibility of mother vloggers. The entanglements of online and offline labor and spaces provide mothers with extra opportunities for income, which is also an example of platform labor as stated previously. The three forms of labor interrelate and co-constitute each other as boundaries between contexts collapse. At the same time, these forms of labor may allow for a renegotiation of the subjectivity of stay-at-home mothers, the division of labor, and their family relations.

5. Conclusion

This study explores Chinese stay-at-home mothers' self-presentational videos on Douyin and considers the three distinct forms of labor they perform in the videos. Recontextualizing motherhood 2.0 in the age of short videos, we update the concept to motherhood 3.0 by demonstrating how stay-at-home mothers in China use Douyin to perform their motherhood and bring their private offline lives online and become publicly visible, while their labor becomes visible and monetized.

Mobile media platforms have the potential to offer opportunities to address the aforementioned dilemma of aspiring to be both a devoted mother who can

company and take care of their children and a more independent, self-reliant woman through the commodification and monetization of their various types of labor. However, we acknowledge that the digital economy's exploitation and alienation of labor cannot be divorced from recognizing patterns of sustaining capitalism and reproducing hegemonic heteronormative and patriarchic representations. The uneven inclination between motherhood practices and its commercializing process is associated with multiple online and offline normative spaces (Van Cleaf, 2020). Furthermore, it shows that Foucauldian power-knowledge structures duplicate power systems in which individuals feel bound to power dynamics that regulate their offline lives in a supposedly value-neutral setting (Georgakopoulou-Nunes & Bolander, 2022). This study demonstrated stay-at-home mothers "work" in public spaces, albeit online, other than performing reproductive labor in the domestic space, which could be a promising development as it makes them visible on their own terms. The findings of the current study add color to feminist media studies research by revealing the interrelationships between various forms of gendered labor across online and offline spaces performed by Chinese microcelebrities on the Douyin platform.

We can become accountable for the limitations of our study by acknowledging that our methodological approach enabled us to obtain a particular "partial view" (Haraway, 1998, p. 590) of stay-at-home mothers' digital practices. Douyin, with its particular affordances coupled with the particularities of the micro-celebrity digital culture of stay-at-home mothers it fostered, rendered it virtually impossible for us to recruit participants or establish trust relations needed to pursue in-depth interviews. This challenge became even more complex resulting from COVID-19 health pandemic lockdown measures. These factors together led us to pursue empirical data gathering through an online-only methodological approach. This approach allowed for gathering a particular set of original empirical data: our study has indicated Douyin can serve as an intermediary for researchers to carry out an observational study of performances oriented towards particular public audiences, in our case audiences in pursuit of watching authentic mothering practices.

We recognized the heterogeneity of the stay-at-home mother community, but as we are tied to the information provided by the authors on Douyin, we were unable to make claims about the class identities of mother vloggers. This highlights the significance of follow-up ethnographic research with stay-at-home mothers. Although in methodological reflections we may suggest mining this seemingly endless world of data points, these data points in our analysis mustn't be divorced from the individuals who have given life to them (Patterson, 2018). The videos Douyin users choose to share on the site tell us stories about the way they perceive the world, the way they see themselves, and the way they want to be considered by others (Patterson,

2018). As researchers, with the constant evolvement of social media spaces, we need to ensure that our ethical stance complements the affordances of the platform and its user cultures and that we let the practices and preferences of the communities we study guide our methodological decision-making.

As Douyin continues to flourish, we have witnessed the potential for women with lower education and rural to urban migration backgrounds to become online micro-celebrities. Moving forward, further research could look into how these women are motivated to make videos, as well as experience changes and challenges in physical spaces. Therefore, it is vital for researchers to consider alternative and creative approaches to network vloggers, and micro-celebrities, and to constantly optimize and reflect, for instance, on how to negotiate the multiple identities of researchers involved and their ethical dilemmas when conducting digital ethnography. Last but not the least, we specifically highlight the opportunities and relevance that Douyin as a platform provides in decentralizing and (re)contextualizing western-centric analytic notions in non-western contexts research.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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