UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

CHINESE FEMALE REPRESENTATIONS ON SHORT-VIDEO APPLICATIONS AND THEIR PERCEPTION – DOUYIN(TIKTOK) AS A CASE STUDY

Dissertation to Universidade Católica Portuguesa to obtain a Master's Degree in Communication Studies – Communication, Marketing and Advertising

By

Shuwei Zeng

Faculdade de Ciências Humanas

March 2023

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Under the supervision of Prof. Carla Ganito

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Thank you and appreciation to each person who strives to create a more equal society.

Abstract

Gender studies and media scholars have highlighted that female representation in media has impacted how women perceive themselves. In China, prior studies have suggested that the one-dimensional and marginalized female images in media since the 1980s have had an impact on the change in Chinese women's gender identity. Surveys and research have proposed that women's identity has transformed towards traditional norms which tightly associate their value with marriage and domestic responsibility. Several studies argued that the issue of problematic female representation had partially progressed with the popularity of social media, including Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok). However, recent literatures suggested that too little emphasis has been placed on the female representations of Douyin and its reception of women.

This dissertation strives to provide an understanding of how women's representations were constructed and perceived on short-video applications in China, using Douyin (Chinese version of TikTok) as the case of the study. The study focuses on the gender perception embodied in the representations posted by accounts presenting as women and their reception of audiences presenting as women.

We have employed a qualitative methodology, using content analysis and semiotics to analyze our samples. Samples were selected from popular short videos and relevant comments both posted by accounts presenting as women. Through data analysis, the study revealed a wide range of female representations of Douyin, including ones corresponding to the traditional gender identity, ones partially aligned with it, and ones against it. The result of the study argued that most audiences presenting as women have endorsed representations not corresponding to the traditional gender identity. It also suggested that an insufficiency of representations contradicted the traditional identity of Douyin.

The preliminary results of this study throw light on the understanding of the construction of female representations in the Chinese digital environment. Furthermore, the outcomes of this research have contributed to understanding the preferable representations of female users of Douyin, potentially improving cultural products designed for women.

KEYWORDS: Douyin (TikTok), Female Representation, Feminism Study, Chinese Social Media

Resumo

Os estudos de género e dos media salientaram que a representação feminina nos media teve impacto na perceção que as mulheres têm de si próprias. Na China, estudos anteriores sugeriram que as imagens unidimensionais e marginalizadas das mulheres nos media desde 1980 têm um impacto na mudança da identidade de género das mulheres chinesas. Foi proposto que a identidade da mulher se transformou em normas tradicionais que associam fortemente o seu valor ao casamento e à responsabilidade doméstica. Vários estudos argumentaram que a problemática da questão da representação feminina tem progredido parcialmente com a popularidade dos redes sociais, incluindo Douyin (a versão chinesa de TikTok). No entanto, literatura recente sugeriu que foi dada pouca ênfase às representações femininas em Douyin, e à sua receção pelas mulheres.

A presente dissertação procura compreender como as representações femininas foram construídas e percebidas em aplicações de vídeo curto na China, utilizando o Douyin (versão chinesa de TikTok) como caso do estudo. O estudo centra-se na perceção do género incorporada nas representações afixadas pelos relatos apresentados como mulheres e a sua receção de audiências apresentadas como mulheres.

Utilizámos uma metodologia qualitativa, com recurso a análise de conteúdo e semiótica para analisar as nossas amostras. As amostras foram selecionadas a partir de vídeos curtos populares e comentários relevantes, ambos afixados por relatos apresentados como mulheres. Através da análise dos dados, o estudo revelou que havia uma vasta gama de representações femininas em Douyin, incluindo as correspondentes à identidade tradicional de género, as que se alinham parcialmente com ela, e as que se opõem a ela. O resultado do estudo argumenta que a maioria das audiências que se apresentam como mulheres apoiam representações que não correspondem à identidade tradicional de género. Também sugerimos uma insuficiência de representações contraditórias com a identidade tradicional em Douyin.

Os resultados preliminares deste estudo lançam luz sobre a compreensão da construção de representações femininas no ambiente digital chinês. Além disso, os resultados deste estudo possivelmente contribuem para a compreensão das representações preferíveis das utilizadoras femininas de Douyin, melhorando potencialmente os produtos culturais concebidos para as mulheres.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Figures

Index of Tables

Introduction

The study aims to understand the construction of female representations in short-video applications, and their reception of audiences presenting as female in China, resorting to the analyses of female representations in Douyin (Chinese version of TikTok) and the relevant top liked comments from audiences presenting as female.

1. **Motivation and Contribution**

The earliest motivation for conducting this study stems from a piece of news of the representations provided by the account 50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours on Douyin. In the fall of 2020, a story of a 56 year old aunt who abandoned her family and self-driving to travel alone around the China has been rapidly popular on the Chinese internet. Her story appeared in Chinese media and even in foreign media, including the New York Times. Chinese women have left comments under her videos, expressing their similar experiences and struggles, asking for others' help and encouraging each other. Some of them claimed that the representation of the 56 years old aunt added a crucial piece of the puzzle of the public construction of women – within an extended period, women only had been described as beautiful young girls or old grandmothers in the media. Middle-aged women have disappeared from the media, making it difficult for them to find a gender role model outside their social network.

During the period, a considerable group of middle age married women who often silent and being ignored suddenly surfaced in the media, shocking many people. Indeed, this appearance is related to the population of short-video applications and the resulting decrease in the threshold regarding an individual speaking and being heard by the public. Before the population of short-video applications, limited by educational level, economic situation and social position, women, especially ordinary middle-aged women, often lost the war for representations in media. They were described as one-dimension images and even absent in the media. They were often muted. Now, what releases their mute and allows them to express their opinions on media? And what are they speaking?

Another motivation corresponds to the backtracking of gender identity in recent China. Since the economic reform in the 1980s, the gender identity of women began to move

closer to the traditional gender identity. They have been encouraged to leave their careers to take up domestic responsibilities, prioritizing their family's well-being over their personal growth. This backtracking is controversial the economic development – from 1990 to 2010, China's GDP increased, but women's structural poverty has become increasingly prominent (Wu, 2009). This shift is considered relevant to the problematic female representations in media, for example, the fourth wave of women-go-home debates and the absence of a positive female image. On this basis, when some muted women are able to release their voices, will this retrospection of gender identity change? Or what will women consider when they receive different representations from media which construct a woman as irrelevant to the traditional gender identity? Will they accept and agree with these representations?

This dissertation strives to provide an understanding of how women's representations were constructed and perceived on short-video applications in China, using Douyin (Chinese version of TikTok) as the case of the study. The study focuses on the gender perception embodied in the representations posted by accounts presenting as women and their reception of audiences presenting as women.

First, although Douyin has become a crucial social media in China, research related to Douyin has mainly focused on its algorithm and advertising model. Few studies have been carried out on the women's image of Douyin. Second, studies regarding the women's image in Douyin are mainly provided by *Bytedance*, the mother company of Douyin. These studies described an overview of female users' data without analysis of specific representations and the reception of audiences presenting as female. Finally, this study wants to provide an understanding of the social construction of gender identities in the Chinese digital environment and the related perception from the perspective of women. This description can also serve the production of preferable cultural products for women.

2. Research background

From the perspective of feminist theory, gender identity has been defined as a cultural product rather than an intrinsic feature (Andermahr et al., 1997; Beauvoir, 1973; Butler, 1986; Butler, 1990). Gender identity is not fixed, but is formed gradually by imitation and repeated action of social norms (Butler, 1986). The gender identity is formed by the

cultural contexts (Giroux, 2010; Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004; Tuchman, 1978). Thus, to some extent, female representations in the media are a crucial in terms of the gender identity formation: "*The way women perceived themselves and were perceived was ineluctably shaped by the ways in which images of women were constructed and communicated to the population at large.*" (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, p.135)

In China, the construction of gender identity can be divided into three phases. Before 1949 the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the identity of women was defined by the social norms "*the three obediences*" and "*the four virtues*" (Luo & Hao, 2007), which limited women's life and their social networking in their families. As belongings of men, the role of women was tightly linked to wife, daughter and mother whose duty was to serve a family and maintain their beautiful appearance (Sun, 2012; Wu, 2009; Luo & Hao, 2007). After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, guided by Marxism's theory, the traditional limitation of women was abolished. Women's identity was defined by political power, which described women as persons equal to men in terms of rights and capacities (Luo & Hao, 2007; Wu, 2009). However, during this period, the biological difference between men and women were ignored (Du, 2003; Barlow, 1994; Chang, 2010) – there was no concept of "women" or "men" but the concept of "state person" for all genders (Zuo, 2005). The degeneration resulted in the backtracking of gender identity after the economic reform in the 1980s, which referred to "returning to be a lady" for women (Luo & Hao, 2007; Chang, 2010; Shen, 2016; Wu, 2009). With the change in the economic structure of society, women's identity has reoriented to traditional femininity in feudal China - beautiful appearance and responsibility of housework (Du, 2002). In accordance with a series of wide-ranging surveys held by the National Bureau of Statistics of China and the All-China Women's Federation in 1990, 2000 and 2010, descriptions corresponding to the traditional gender identity have been endorsed by a considerable amount of respondents, including "*men ought to work in society while women should be responsible for the family*", "*women should have a good marriage than a good career*" and "husband's *development is more important than the wife's*". Notably, the endorsement rate of these descriptions has gradually increased from 1990 to 2010, particularly in terms of the endorsement from female respondents. Xu Qi (2016) added that the tendency to return to the traditional gender concept is common in all social groups, regardless of their professional, educational level and resident location.

The social construction of women's identity has been affected by female representations constructed in traditional media (Bao, 2003; Feng & Xie, 2015). Through watching and imitating the models of "Modern Women" in the media, Chinese women gradually agree to the valorization embodied in the models, which related to the sexualization of women (Bao, 2003; Shen, 2016). Four waves of "women-go-home" debates on media contributed to make women perceived themselves as laborers suitable for domestic work rather than social work (Song, 2011). Rather than narrated their own stories in the middle of the stage, women were constructed as an optional and marginalized role on the media (Yang & Du, 2017; Feng, 1998; Chen, 2013; Liu, 2014). The absence of women's voices exacerbated the marginalization and stereotyping of female representations.

Meanwhile, several studies proposed that the female's voices have enlarged and been easily to heard on the social media compared to the conventional media (Chen, 2013; Yang et al., 2015; Jiang, 2013) , which is supposed to relate to development of media and the resulting decreased threshold for women to introduce themselves to the public (Chen, 2013). Especially, the threshold decreased more significantly on short-video applications, which allowed their users to introduce their issues without requirement of educational level and social position. As a kind of medium, short-video application developed sharply in China. Douyin, one of the most famous short-video applications in China has already achieved more than 600 million daily active users in 2020, which was equal to 60.6% of internet users in China ([CNNIC], 2021). Thus, it is supposed to have a significant impact on its users. Besides, it is noticed that the female voices are increased and diverse on Douyin (Chinese Women News, 2020; Douyin, 2022).

3. Research Problems

There were two main questions that the dissertation intends to answer. Each of them was corresponded to a widely accepted traditional gender identity in China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1990, 2000, 2010).

First, do the female representations on Douyin show a resistance of the traditional gender concept that "women belong to domestic responsibility" and be broadly received by audiences presenting as female?

Second, do the female representations on Douyin show a resistance of the traditional gender concept that "a good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career" and be broadly received by audiences presenting as female?

4. Methodologies and data collection

The approach to empirical research adopted for this study were qualitative methodologies. By employing methodologies of content analysis and semiotics, the study conducted an analysis of samples selected from popular short videos and relevant comments both posted by accounts presenting as women on Douyin.

The study was conducted in two phases. The first phase of study intended to answer the first research question. In this part, we selected ten video samples and relevant comments from the popular hashtag on Douyin #Stay-at-home moms and #Daily of stay-at-home moms. The video samples were the top 5 liked short videos published by account presenting as women, under each of the two hashtags. Prior to the study, the collected video samples were cleaned to remove duplicate videos and videos that did not have valid information relevant to the study. The comment samples analyzed in this phase were the top ten liked comments published by audiences presenting as female from each of the video samples. Douyin's algorithm automatically processes the sorting of top liked videos and top liked comments on February 10th, 2023. In addition, the definition of audiences presenting as female is this study is based on their gender label on the personal page of Douyin, and the video content they published – regarding accounts without gender labels on the profile page of Douyin, they will only be categorized as female accounts when they have published more than 50 short videos or have achieved 1000 likes, and some video contents have shown that they are women.

The second phase of the study focused on answer the second research question. In this part, we investigated female representations in twenty videos sourced from two Douyin accounts and relevant comments. The two accounts were selected because they presented themselves as women, they have achieved considerable amount of likes and followers, and they provided diverse female images in their videos. The video samples analyzed in this phase were the ten most liked videos from each of the two accounts. The comment

samples analyzed in this phase were the top ten liked comments published by audiences presenting as female from each of the video samples. Douyin's algorithm automatically processes the sorting of top liked videos and top liked comments on February 25th, 2023.

In each phase, analysis are conducted on the basis of methodologies of content analysis and semiotics, to provide quantifiable and valid data from the context. Results and findings of these two parts of analysis will be examined and compared at the discussion of the thesis.

5. Structure of the dissertation

The overall structure of the dissertation takes the form of six chapters composed of two sections. The first section sets out a theoretical framework grounded in media research and gender studies. Chapter 1 introduces the object of our study, Douyin (Chinese version of TikTok), and the studies related to short-video applications and representations. Chapter 2 focuses on drawing an overview of the gender identity evolution in China based on previous gender studies. Through Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, we strive to render a comprehensive view of the focuses of our research – Douyin, representation and Chinese women.

The second section of the dissertation is devoted to investigating female representations of Douyin. Chapter 3 is concerned with the methodology used for this study. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 describe the data we collected and conduct a detailed analysis based on the data. Chapter 6 presents a discussion based on the research findings, compares it to the previous research, and strives to answer our research questions.

The dissertation concludes by suggesting several potential implications of our study findings and the direction of further research.

PART I THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Chapter 1. Short-video applications and representation

"Media and communications are a central element of modern life, whilst gender and sexuality remain at the core of how we think about our identities." (Gauntlett, 2008:1)

Over centuries, human beings have applied media as an extension of themselves (McLuhan, 1994), using media as "*important agents in the public process of constructing*" (Fursich, 2010:114). With the significant consumption of media, people are filling up with that information from the media, even though they may not have exact consciousness about this. (Gauntlett, 2008). By being surrounded by diversities of lifestyles in the media (Beck, 2002; Gauntlett, 2008) and being encouraged to "*formulate their identities beyond the confines of orthodox norm*" (Awan, 2007:186), the media consumer are influenced by media on their cognition of identity. As Bolter and Grusin (1999) say, "*We see ourselves today in and through our available media*".

Recently, with the prosperity of communication technology, people have spent considerable time on short-video applications. According to the APP Annie's statistics (Jan 2022), TikTok, one of the short-video applications, has surpassed Instagram and WhatsApp in terms of the monthly average consumption over the world in 2021, which was equal to the monthly average time people spent on Facebook. However, could we define these short-video applications as media, to research their influence?

1.1.Framing the short-video applications

Short-video applications are mobile applications that permit users to create, edit and share video content within five minutes via digital platforms (Kaye et al., 2020; Zhou, 2019). These platforms are based on the technology foundation of Web 2.0, flourishing with the increase in internet users (Kaye et al., 2020).

One of the earliest international short-video applications, Vine, was supposed to be launched in 2012 (Issac, 2016). Even though it was shut down by Twitter in 2016, its

legacy persists in various digital media including Snapchat, Musical.ly, Facebook and Instagram (Kaye et al., 2020). In 2020 and 2021, Instagram and Facebook successively launched their short-video functions *Reels*, and highlighted it as the fastest-growing content format (Reuters, February 22, 2022). Musical.ly was acquired by Byte Dance and renamed TikTok in 2018 (Kaye et al., 2020).

According to the ranking report of App Annie (Jan 2022), the three most-downloaded mobile applications in the world in 2021 are TikTok, Instagram and Facebook – TikTok is a short-video application while both Instagram and Facebook applied the short-video function named "Reels". According to the data from the 2019 Internet Trends Report (Meeker, 2019), short-video applications have been the main cause for users to spend more time using their mobile phones. In sum, short-video applications have been influential media.

In China, *Kuaishou*, *Douyin* and *Meipai* are three major short-video applications tailored for social entertainment (Kaye et al., 2020). Inside, *Douyin* is the Chinese version of TikTok coined in 2016 by Byte Dance (Zhao, 2021). Owning to the restrictions of the "Great Firewall" on the internet of China mainland (Kaye et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2021), even though TikTok and Douyin are regarded as two different versions of one application owned by one company, indeed they operate as two separate platforms: Douyin in China mainland and TikTok in the rest of the world. Hence, the dissertation chooses to use "Douyin" instead of "TikTok" to mention the Chinese version of this application.

Short-video applications industry has progressed fast in China. The earliest short-video application in China, the *Kuaishou*, was launched in 2013. Until October 2018, short-video platforms in China have already reached 648 million users, which is equal to 80% of Chinese internet users(China Internet Network Information Centre [CNNIC], 2019). Among these short-video applications in China, Douyin is the one that reaches the most users. According to the annual report of Byte Dance (2020), until December 2020, Douyin recorded more than 600 million active users for one day – it is equal to 60.6% of internet users in China ([CNNIC], 2021). Douyin is also considered the main used short-video application by China's young generation (Ge et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, should we define these short-video applications as media, especially, the digital media?

McLuhan (1994) proposed a basic definition of the medium. Under his theoretical frame, things which are the "*result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology*" (Ibid.: 7) could be considered as one of the media. Vehicles are media, as they extend human's foot in exploration of the world; YouTube is media, as it extends human's eyes to scenarios around the world. In this term, short-video applications can also be defined as a kind of media as they permit users to introduce their affairs to other audiences by creating and sharing short videos on these applications. In this case, these short-video applications also meet the media definition from Humphreys (2018) that media are "*all the channels and means through which people share information that is not face to face or the tools with which people communicate with others about a shared reality*" (Ibid.:8).

Furthermore, Ganito (2016) offered another definition of media, which is "*something that generates a codified transmission of symbols within a predefined framework and structures signs between sender and receiver*" (Ibid.:24). When the transmission of symbols "*is created, distributed, and received in digital form"* (Earnshaw, 2017:2), it could be defined as digital media (Bazarcı, 2020).

Short-video applications are built on the technology foundation of Web 2.0 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), allowing users to generate short videos and transmit these visual and auditory signals to other users through the application. Thus, short-video applications are consistent with the definition of digital media.

Different from some traditional media as mass newspapers, digital media is generally considered as an advance on traditional media in terms of reach and usability (Earnshaw, 2017). On this basis, Kaye et al. (2020) elaborate on three key features of short-video applications: low-cost production, highly spreadable content with strong social attributes, and blurry boundaries between producers and consumers.

In terms of the increased chance to access and interact with information, digital media enable the worldwide user to create, share and view content via Internet-based channels

regardless of the limitation of geographical location and time (Earnshaw, 2017; Murthy, 2018). Meanwhile, digital media permit users to selectively interact with either broad or narrow audiences, presenting the user-generated content in real-time or asynchronously (Carr & Hayes, 2015). In some situations, access to digital media are regardless of the consumer's economic position - whether individuals from the low-income bracket or middle-income countries have a chance to access it (Jeffy and Doron, 2011; Katz, 2008; Wesolowski et al., 2012;).

Besides, the threshold of freely representing personal opinions in digital media has declined (Humphreys, 2018). Unlike traditional media, digital media permit users to introduce their affairs to the public regardless of their educational level and social status. Firstly, people could attract the public interest just by introducing one of the ordinary pieces of their life instead of search uncommon points to create an exquisite script. Humphreys (2018) indicated an example named "pointless blog" to explain this. The blog had over 5.4 million subscribers and over 436 million views on YouTube until 2016. The blogger began by self-proclaimed documenting and sharing small pieces of his quotidian chronicling, "*something that everyone does within the genre*" (Ibid.:39). Then he added some small daily vlogs, including the behind-the-scenes outtakes of the documented video. To some extent, this channel's content is similar to personal diaries. Secondly, digital media permit users to transmit information via formats including photos, recordings and videos, regardless of their literacy level. Especially in the case of short-video applications, producers only need one of these applications on their mobile phones for producing and publishing their videos. These applications combine functions of filming, editing and publication, which permit their user to film their daily life, then edit it, and add background music, filters, watermarks, etc., to the video for personalization and beautification (Zhao, 2021).

Bolter and Grusin (1999) propose that digital media's consumers are simultaneously the subject and object of content. An excellent example is Twitter, a social networking tool that permits user to publish their message/tweets within the 140-character limit and receive the message from others (Kwak et al., 2010). Humphreys (2018) finds that most users utilize the Twitter for sharing updates about their daily lives and staying informed about the activities of their friends and celebrities. They create the media content while consuming the content. As Bolter and Grusin (1999) argue, "*we are that which the film*

or television camera is trained on, and at the same time we are the camera itself "
(ibid.:220)

Compared to traditional media, another advance of digital media is regarding immediacy and hypermediacy. It is necessary to involve a term *Remediation* coined by Bolter and Grusin (1999) to explain this advance. The term *Remediation* is used to describe the logic "*by which new media refashion prior media forms*" (ibid.:273). Rather than be created out of nowhere, new media always construct themselves by interpreting the work of earlier media, as each act of mediation requires another act of mediation as a material of reproduction (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). As McLuhan (1964) argues that "*the 'content' of any medium is always another medium*" (ibid. pp.23), the new technology always adds itself to the technology we already have: The print media is an advancement of writing and copying (Stöber, 2004); electrical telegraphy is an "*improvement in telegraphy*" (Coe, 1995: 10); mobile phone is a device combined existed technologies (Ganito, 2016).

The remediation between media is a mutual and constant process – each media recursively influences, reproduces and replaces the others, to remake themselves and to affirm their contemporary cultural status in the competition with other media: "*Whenever one medium seems to have convinced viewers of its immediacy, other media try to appropriate that conviction*" (Bolter & Grusin, 1999:9). For instance, when the computer interface applies the content and form of television, television also remediates the windowed interface of the computer by multiplying screens (Johnson-Eilola, 2001). Media have to employ two logics – immediacy and hypermediacy – to remediate the others,.

The immediacy is the logic that media seek to erase themselves (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). In other words, the media desire to create an illusion for the consumers that the mediated experience is not mediated, as if they were presenting at the event and participating in it (Lombard & Dition, 1997).

Media have to employ hypermediacy to fulfill the users' demand for immediacy, which refers to reconstructing themselves as a medium combined with diverse materials and technologies (Johnson-Eilola, 2001). By combing diverse communication technologies, including text, pictures, audio and video (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Henderson & Bowley, 2010; Obar & Wildman, 2015; Earnshaw, 2017), social media seek to provide a mediated

experience closer to reality. It permits users to have person-to-person interactions similar to the real world (Earnshaw, 2017), shape a self-representative avatar and link the online avatar to the offline social and emotional life (Vasalou et al., 2008).

In the age of television, audiences could only communicate with audiences physically behind them. In the age of YouTube, audiences could also communicate with others audiences worldwide by publishing forum comments below the video. In Asian countries, the forum comments of video platforms even turned into *Danmaku*, a way that combines immediacy and hypermediacy (Wu et al., 2019). Rather than display comments asynchronously below the video, some Chinese video platforms permit their user to publish comments while displaying the video and display them immediately overlaid the video screen. Short video platforms, including Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), inherited this function from the previous video platforms. The below figure (Figure 1) is a translation of a print-screen of a short video published in Douyin. The video demonstrates a scenario in that two policemen are watching a New Year celebration firework show. Viewers participate in the video by publishing *Danmaku* and responding to others' *Danmaku*: One says in the *Danmaku* "*Be safe*", and others respond as "*Happy new year everyone*". This design provides users with a pseudo-synchronous effect (Wu et al., 2019), as they are co-creators of the video and can communicate with other viewers in a "synchronous" way.

Figure.1 A translation and explanation of print-screen of short video with Danmaku on the Douyin (Chinese version of TikTok). It can be accessed via https://v.douyin.com/AMoK379/. Accessed at 26th, January 2023.

The experience is as same as Lenny Nero described in the futuristic film Strange Days, "*This is life. It's a piece of somebody's life. Pure and uncut, straight from the cerebral cortex. You're there. You're doing it, seeing it, hearing it . . . feeling it.*" (Bolter & Grusin, 1999:3).

1.2. Douyin (TikTok) as a short-video application

As mentioned before, TikTok is an application which permits its users to film, publish and share videos normally in less than 60 seconds(Kaye et al., 2020). *Douyin* is the Chinese version of TikTok coined in 2016 by Byte Dance (Zhao, 2021).

Especially, Douyin has a significant group of female users. According to the report of China Women's News (2020), 69.2% of active users of Douyin are female, and the

contents of Douyin created by them obtain more comments, views and likes than other content. Besides, this report also observed that in Douyin that female representations have become more diverse and unconventional. Some studies argued that this phenomenon is related to the specific algorithm of Douyin (Feng & Liu, 2021; Fan, 2020).

Douyin's content distribution strategies are highly dependent on the AI algorithms invented by Byte Dance: Rather than receiving information by proactive search, users passively receive content on Douyin through the personal recommendation of the algorithm (Zhao, 2021). Once a user opens the application, Douyin will automatically play the recommended short video in a full-screen version (Figure.2). Users do not choose content as they do on Instagram or YouTube, but only decide whether they like the current content or not. If they are not interested in the current one, they can shift to another by swiping up or down. The immersive design reduces the potential exit cost of the user by avoiding their consideration in choosing between various options, which increases the probability of using Douyin constantly (West et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2014)
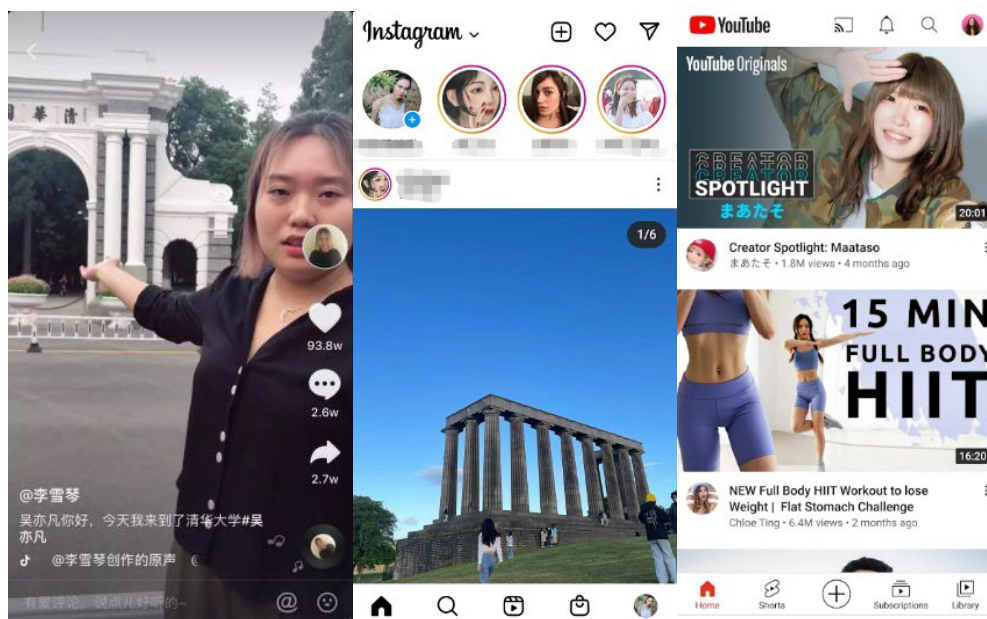
Figure 2. the open page of Douyin, Instagram and YouTube (From left to right).

By making the auto recommendation as the only option, Douyin provides an extremely passive acceptance experience to the consumer. To guarantee the result of this strategy, Douyin applicated a few creative algorithms.

First, Douyin applied an invention patent known as "A Global Interest Discovery Recommendation Method and Device" to construct a global algorithm to accurately categorize short videos:

> "(They) build the interest tags of stratification according to content recommendation set, and then calculate the relevant degree of each interest tag in described interest tags set. (They) create a user interest explore model based on the interest-association model and the collection of users' data. Based on the association of each interest tag and the interest tag that the user already marked, the application is able to match the potential interest tag of the user and recommend the content with the potential interest tag to each user." (Chen et al., 2019, the description of the pattern translated from Chinese by the author)

A video will be labelled with multiple interest tags by this algorithm. For example, the interest tags of a short video related to a football tournament can vary from *sports* to the hair cutting of a certain football player. This labelling pattern has potentially resulted in a sophisticated and accurate video distribution of Douyin.

Second, Douyin draws the consumer's persona based on a time-effectiveness algorithm to distribute content more accurately to the user. By using a stream computing method to dynamically deal with users' profiles (Zhao, 2021), the algorithm of Douyin can update synchronized the user's persona according to the user's action. One example is that Douyin will recommend short videos based on the user's geographical location. Suppose that there is a user named Jason. His GPS record showed that he regularly accessed the Douyin in Lisbon. With the collection of this GPS record, Douyin possibly regards that Jason is living in Lisbon and distributes short videos related to daily life as Lisbon citizens to him. When Jason accesses the application at the Porto, the application will regard him as a traveler and recommend him the videos regarding travel, journey and holiday.

Besides, Once one user decides on whether like or dislike the current video or swipe to the next one before the completion of the current one, the algorithm synchronized renews his portrait and planning for a new recommendation strategy (Zhao, 2021).

At last, the distributed algorithm of Douyin is in a high degree of decentralization (Chen, 2019). Douyin uses the partitioned data buckets method to distribute new short videos:

> "The platform divides users into several small batch buckets according to a certain randomness (such as a group with the same user's ID tail number). When the platform launches new content, it will first use one of the small batch buckets to test the content recommendation effect. The four-basic metrics are the number of views,

likes, replays, shares and completion rates, each of which has a different weight. When the comprehensive score of these evaluation indicators reaches a specified value, it means that this short video has the potential to be a popular video. Then this video overflows into a medium batch bucket to do the test again. Contents of different sizes of buckets will get different levels of views. The recommended content is filtered by layers to ensure quality. The top-performing video will be continuously overflowed all the way up to the large batch bucket or even the whole platform." (Zhao, 2021:6)

In other words, the primary factors driving views of content on Douyin are the quality of the content rather than the popularity or personal networking of its creator. It provides a possibility for fresh content creators - although they are fresh to Douyin, their content can also be broadly viewed. In this situation, ordinary users may also stand out by introducing fascinating issues in their daily life. One example is an account named *Zhangtongxue*, whose short videos in Douyin gained 50 million likes in two months after creating his account (Xinhua News, 2021). His contents are all related to his ordinary rural life.

1.3. Influence of Media

How media influence the public and to what extent can the media impact the public has been one of the central concerns throughout the history of media research (Fursich, 2010).

Prior to the 1920s, even though they were various articles regarding media, these articles were only claims or denouncements rather than academic writing – they neither applied the scientific perspective, nor drew conclusions based on value-free criteria. Research regarding the effects of mass media within the framework of science began in the late 1920s (Lowery & De Fleur, 1995). Hence, until World War II, the earliest academic writing related to media has been influenced by popular values. During this period, with the awareness of political propaganda (Fursich, 2010), the media was regarded as a powerful and omnipresent entity, which had the capacity to directly and immediately manipulate its audience. The media consumer was considered a passive object of media content, which always receives and responds to all messages from media in a particular model regardless of the difference of each individual. (ibid.)

This theory is named Magic Bullet Theory (Fursich, 2010). It assumed that:

> "The media present messages to the members of the mass society who perceive them more or less uniformly. Such messages are stimuli that influence the individual's emotions and sentiments strongly. The stimuli lead individuals to respond in a somewhat uniform manner, creating changes in thought and action that are like those changes in other persons" (Lowery and De Fleur, 1995:23).

After World War II, when media studies began to adopt an empirical social science approach, scholars encountered significant challenges in measuring the media's impact on audiences concerning the Magic Bullet Theory. Neither in the laboratory experiments nor in large-scale surveys could scholars find any noticeable change in behavior and attitude affected by media on the same scale as the Magic Bullet Theory (Ibid.). The results of some studies even contradicted the theory. In a study concerning a presidential election, people's choices were significantly affected by interpersonal interactions rather than by newspapers, campaign advertising and other mass media (Lazarsfeld, 1968). In some studies, social variables of audiences, including wealth, educational level and nationality, could affect the audiences' perception of messages from media (Lowery & De Fleur, 1995). Besides, consumers' responses to media content can be affected by their motivation, learning ability and intellectual ability of the consumer (Hovland et al., 1949). In general, it is interpreted that not all audiences would receive and respond to the media's content to the same extent.

Confronting these studies' results, the Magic Bullet Theory is merely out of media research. Nevertheless, scholars could not find an alternative theory for it (Lowery & De Fleur, 1995). Variables of these studies varied from diverse categories, which caused extreme difficulty in generating a particular formula based on it. People only knew that certain media content would affect particular kinds of people to a limited extent in some environments. Thus, scholars applied a conservative theory, the Selective Influence Theory, which argued that media was an indirectly affecting agent. This agent was not powerful enough to establish new values or concepts but only distributed and enforced the existing ones (Fursich, 2010).

With the prosperity of the household penetration of a new medium – television in the families of America and other developed countries, a new academic wave related to the impact of media arose between the 1960s and 1970s to study the impact of the new media in daily life (ibid.).

Regarding personal behavior, researchers from social cognitive theory argued that the models from media, including television and films, can change consumers' emotions, attitudes and behaviors (Lowery & De Fleur, 1995). With the development of communication technology, later researchers found a similar influence from various media: intensive media exposure to tobacco and alcohol can influence viewers to use them (Anderson et al., 2009; Chang et al., 2014; Hurtz et al., 2006); mediated violence is related with the children and adolescents subsequent aggressive behavior (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Daly & Perez, 2009; Krahé, 2014); media exposure to idealized "perfect body" is in connection with the body dissatisfaction and the cosmetic surgery (Ashikali et al., 2017; Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Yamamiya et al., 2005).

Scholars also found that people considered media content a part of their reality, even a part of themselves. It is argued that television blurs the line between the fictional and the real to an extent previously impossible. (O' Guinn & Shrum, 1997). Lombard and Dition (1997) argue that even though the viewer knows it is illogical, they can still talk to the character on the television. In Japan, some characters in virtual games have their own fan clubs, while a magazine name Virtual idol is made to promote the hobbies and life experiences of the virtual characters as if they were real humans (ibid). Bolter and Grusin (1999) claim that humans use the media to define themselves both culturally and personally. The affiliations among the digital media, including the newsgroup and email, constructed the networked self, which leads humans to live simultaneously in cyberspace and reality.

Meanwhile, with the increase in daily media consumption (Lowery & De Fleur, 1995), the influence of media on its consumers has become more imperceptible. As a major medium of the 1990s, the consumption of television was as common as "*the food they eat for the way their faces look in the morning; it is something so much a part of day-to-day existence, that it remains invisible as something to be analyzed or consciously considered*" (O' Guinn & Shrum, 1997:279). The same situation also happens in digital media. Humphreys (2018) mentions that when people check information on their smartphones during breaks or transit, they are usually unaware of what they are doing – "*it was just a force of habit*" (ibid.:33). During this process, consumers have been infused by a considerable amount of information from media, "*even if they don't see it as 'information', and even if they say they're not really paying much attention to it*" (Gauntlett, 2002:2).

In general, since the 1960s, many media scholars have found that media can have a long-term impact on people in various areas rather than only distributing or enforcing some concepts that already exist. Recently, mass media have had "a central or at least an important role in contemporary society when it comes to defining and explaining issues of civic concern" (Fursich, 2010:115).

In addition to the studies regarding the social impact of media, another approach to media studies has been developed since 1960. Frankfurt School created a new cultural-critical paradigm to study whether the cultural industry (mainly mass media) has manipulated its consumers by providing discourse in favor of the dominant class, and served as a tool of domination (Chandler & Munday, 2016). Under their framework, culture is not a simple reflection only affected by economic status. Indeed, culture is considered a product involved in reproducing the status quo. Consumers of the culture cannot resist the attraction of consumerism in the cultural industries.

For this reason, Frankfurt scholars stressed the necessity to apply the critical paradigm to break out of the circle of cultural reproduction controlled by the dominant class. One example provided by Richard Dyer (1984) is the stereotypes of homosexual people in films. By using demeaning and offensive stereotypes of homosexual people, heterosexual society attempts to educate the public to define the homosexual group as the aliened one in the society to bolster the heterosexual hegemony.

Soon afterwards, influenced by the interdisciplinary cultural studies movement, some audience-focused studies argued that the consumers could also resist the cultural hegemony and even erode the mainstream discourse on the mass media (Fursich, 2010). Discussions and debates about whether the mass media or the audiences occupy the dominant position have happened for decades, but researchers widely agree upon one certain concept: media and cultural studies inevitably involve representational politics, as the media discourse is always regarded as the constitutive of people's worldviews, representations of themselves and others (Sommier, 2014; Durham & Kellner, 2001).

1.4. Representation

The concept of "representation" is coined under the frame of cultural-critical paradigm, in order to help researchers understand the media's content as a resource to "*establish norms and common sense about people, groups and institutions in contemporary society*" (Fursich, 2010:115).

As Hall (1997) mentions, representation is the signifying practice for producing shared meaning that "connects meaning and language to culture" (ibid.:15). In other words, it permits humans to use language to exchange some meaningful issue or to represent the world to others. Here, the term *language* is not only limited to written words or spoken sounds of one particular language. Indeed, the term is used in a broad way – "*any sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign, and is organized with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning*" (ibid.:19) is considered as a language. From this point of view, in media studies, representation is "*a text (in any medium) which is the product of such processes*" (Chandler & Munday, 2016:585).

There are three accounts or theories related to the representation – reflective, intentional and constructionist (Hall, 1997). The reflective approach suggests that representations in media are reflections of things or how things should be in reality, acting as a mirror of reality. The intentional approach notes that representations only represent the intention of the media producer. The constructionist approach argues that representation is an artificial product rather than just a simple reflection of the real world. Representation is the process by which humans organize signs into the language to refer to either thing in reality or in a fictional world to communicate to others.

This dissertation is based on the constructionist approach to representation. Firstly, this approach has had the most remarkable influence on recent cultural studies (Hall, 1997). As the previous section shows, recent media scholars advocate that audiences are not just absolutely passive in understanding the media content as the intention of the media producer. Instead, audiences have the ability and power to reinterpret, negotiate and even refuse some content (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004; Lowery & De Fleur, 1995; Fursich, 2010). Secondly, the researched object of this article, Douyin, is a digital medium. It is argued that digital media have the power to facilitate the creation of new modes of life

(Gauntlett, 2002) by providing abundant life models which are "*well beyond the dozens that youth may encounter from their families or peers*" (Ward and Grower, 2020:8.2) in real life. In this term, representations in digital media are not just a mirror of reality.

In the constructionist approach, meaning is not just a natural reflection of material in the real world (Hall, 1997). Most people from variant cultures are able to exchange meaning without the base of the material world - some simple examples in English are "thinking", "love", and "dream". Also, meaning is not inherent in things themselves. For instance, both the Netherlands and France's national flags are manifested in blue, red and white. What decided the flag means Netherlands or France is not the colors themselves, but the way that people managed the color to manifest. Colors do not have a natural meaning for nations – or people cannot distinguish the Netherlands' national flag and France's national flag – but the process by which people code the color can express the meaning of different nations.

Thus, the constructionist theory argues that meaning is an artificial product constructed by the human being. People organize signs in a specific order to tie to a concept in their minds and pass it on to others. During this process, meaning is created and fixed by the relation between signs and concepts. Signs are just signs – whether they are sounds, pictures, or letters – they carry no meaning individually. (Hall, 1997).

Hall (1997) also argues meaning has to be analyzed from a special cultural perspective. People from distinct cultures have different signifying systems to transfer concepts to language to exchange meaning effectively in their group. Even if there is the same sign, that can have an absolutely different meaning within a different culture. Both Portuguese and English have a word written in the same form - "data". However, in Portuguese, it means the date, while in English it means the statistics.

The codification method varies from different conceptual and linguistic universes that Hall (1997) named culture. The heritage or sustainability of the signifying system is depended on a set of fixable social conventions in the group: new members learn the convention and unconsciously internalize the signifying system behind the convention, or the "*cultural perspective*" (ibid.:22).

Hence, as the product of the meaning production process, media representations are influenced by socio-cultural factors and should be examined within a framework of specific social and cultural conditions of a given country (Luo & Hao, 2007).

Chapter 2. Gender identity and representation

2.1. Representation and gender

In feminist theory, gender is a cultural construction rather than an innate attribute (Andermahr et al., 1997; Beauvoir, 1989; Butler, 1986). Beauvoir (1989) points out that gender is not determined by any biological, psychological, or economic figure. Rather than being born as a woman, she argues, one indeed becomes a woman, a role created by civilization.

Butler (1986) proposes another perspective to understanding the gender. She suggests that gender is constructed through a series of repeated actions and performances. Rather than have a fixed gendered body, people first have a non-gendered body, and then they perform a series of acts in front of society to acquire a particular corporeal style and cultural significance of "gender".

She named the gender construction process a "project", as this process is gradual and continuous during whole life:

> "Although we 'become' our genders, the temporal movement of this becoming does not follow a linear progression. The origin of gender is not temporally discrete because gender is not originated at some point in time after which it is fixed in form. In an important sense gender is not traceable to a definable origin precisely because it is itself an originating activity incessantly taking place." (Butler, 1986:39)

For this reason, her theory permits the fluidity and changeability of gender identity – people can change their gender just by changing their acts.

Butler also points out that "*gender is a contemporary way of organizing past and future norms, a way of situating oneself with respect to those norms*" (Butler, 1986:40). Women are forced to cite social norms of "women" to qualify themselves and remain a subject. For this reason, femininity is not a choice for women, she addresses, but a forcible citation of norms "*whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment*" (Butler, 1993:232).

In sum, if gender is performative and changeable via changes in actions, then the resources that can provide compelling models of gender norms should have an essential role in gender construction.

Media, especially mainstream media, has been defined as an important resource to provide compelling models of gender norms (Ward and Grower, 2020), because these models are abundant, attractive, and normally "*one-dimensional models of rules and behaviours that appear regularly*" (ibid., 8.3). It is also argued that the mainstream media has almost monopolized what the masses can see, and merely the thing manifested to the public exist in society (Ganito, 2010).

In this situation, as Pilcher and Whelehan (2004) elaborate, the way women perceived themselves has been shaped by the representations in which women are constructed, described, and introduced to the public.

Therefore, representation has been one of the studies' focuses since the second wave of feminism: "*representation is a political issue. Without the power to define our interests and to participate in the decisions that affect us, women – like any other group in society – will be subject to the definitions and decisions of others*" (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004:139)

These female studies regarding representations have often focused on two issues: quantity and diversity. Quantity refers to the underrepresentation or the lack of female roles, which is considered a signal that women's values are depreciated in some research (Ward & Grower, 2020). Diversity is related to types of women representations – whether women are represented in a way that reflects their complexity and humanity, or they are categorized as some one-dimensional stereotypes.

Many studies have observed the impact of stereotypes in the area of diversity. Tuchman (1981) argues that representations of women in the American media from the 1950s onwards were limited to certain classical models: sexual objects, housewives or roles regarding catering or domestic service. She names the phenomenon as a "symbolic annihilation of women", in which many kinds of women's lives were not reflected or remediated in the media. Indeed, it is recognized as a metaphor that women and their

interests are neglected, marginalized and excluded by media production (Ganito, 2010). Tuchman (1981) points out that this annihilation of women's representations has had an impact on teenagers and children regarding their gender. They considered some actions or career ambitions "*could not be realized because of their sex*" (ibid.:36).

Many studies observed a similar influence on female subjects as Tuchman's research. Exposure to gender stereotypes in media is associated with stronger support for traditional gender roles among adolescents (Ward & Grower, 2020). Gorham (1999) adds that if people are always simulated by certain media representations, they will automatically prime a stereotypical interpretation of this kind of representation. It is argued that exposure to female representations on television shapes young women's opinions regarding motherhood, marriage and women's careers (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2014). A series of examinations also elaborated that exposure to an idealized female image causes a negative effect on the mental state of audiences presenting as female, including body dissatisfaction and anxiety (Kennard et al., 2016).

However, it is argued that early research on stereotypes in media representation did not take into account the initiative of the audience. These studies are limited to a "stereotype" of media that "*audiences are passive and fully accepting of the dominant gender stereotypes the all-powerful media communicate to them*" (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004:168).

With the progress of theories related to media's fluence, the role of audiences is re-defined. The interpretation of media representations could be negotiated or even rejected by consumers, depending on the social-economic and cultural position of the consumers (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). In this situation, the meaning of media products is no longer unshakable but rather polysemic and constructed through negotiation between institutional producers and audiences (Ganito, 2010)

Hence, third-wave feminism studies have redirected their attention from stereotypes to comprehending the way how gendered reality is constructed through representations.

Lauretis (2004) asserts an idea that gender is a product of a set of technologies: "*construction of gender goes on today through the various technologies of gender (e.g. cinema) and institutional discourses (e.g. theory) with power to control the field of social meaning and thus produces, promote, and 'implant' representations of gender*" (Ganito, 2016:48). In this situation, rather than a reflection of the previous reality, representation is recognized as a constitution of reality. Besides, she argues that the focus should not be limited to the representation itself, but also on how it becomes absorbed subjectively and individually.

Hence, the focus of studies related to the representation of third-wave feminism shifted from the stereotypes to the understanding of how the gendered reality is actually constructed via representations. New methodologies, including semiotics, have been applied to studies of representations to understand the whole process of production and consumption of representations from the cultural perspective.

2.2. Gender identity in China

Based on the performance theory of Bulter (1993) that one's gender is defined by one's repeated action, the definition of Chinese women is able to be divided into three parts.

The first part existed in the period before 1949, the establishment of the People's Republic of China. During that period, Chinese women were defined by the feudalist social norms "*the three obediences*" and "*the four virtues*" (Luo & Hao, 2007). To become a woman, one had to act as what these norms require: be obedience to her father and brother before marriage, to her husband in relationship, and to her son if she is widowed (*the three obediences*); and she should have good moral character; she should only speak some appropriate words (not sarcastic or mocking anyone) when necessary and decrease her self-expression; she should be prudent, restrained and tender; and she should devote and contribute wholeheartedly to her family (*the four virtues*). In general, women were objects that belonged to their male family members, which resulted in their shaping themselves according to the man her master's requirements. By way of explanation, to become a woman was to act as a good wife, daughter and mother, which were roles defined by the relationship with their family members rather than defined by herself at that period.

Particularly, there were two key features within these social norms essential to acting as a woman: the domestic responsibilities (Chen, 2003; Wu, 2009) and the thin and immature beauty of appearance (Sun, 2012).

The domestic responsibilities included the housework and the duty of educating their children into talents. Guided by the social norms "*the three obediences*" and "*the four virtues*", women's lives and social networking were limited in their families. It was argued that women should only be educated in housework skills rather than literate or academic knowledge because they should stay at home for housework instead of going out for social work. Ethical women were described as literate or without academic knowledge (Chen, 2003). In order to further confine women to their houses, women were also required to have foot binding, a technique that broke and tightly bound the feet of female children between 4 and 5 years old to remain their feet of the children's shape and size, which physically stifled women's ability to communicate with the world outside of their family (ibid). Thus, family, particularly their husbands and children, have been all of women's life. To some extent, under the "*the three obediences*" that required women to obey their husbands and sons, women's life quality was determined by their husbands and sons, which resulted in the necessity of women to devote themselves to supporting their husbands and educating their sons.

Besides, it was recognized that women had an essential role in the transformation and socialization of the further generations, particularly in terms of turning them into laborers in conformity with the rules and ethics of feudal society (Zhang et al., 2012). Hence, women were forced to devote themselves to the education of their children, which was regarded as their natural duty. Besides, it was considered that the only social achievement of being a woman was to have a successful son – normally, it referred to a significant social position and property. To arrive at this achievement, women have paid more attention to children's education (Chen, 2003). This close attention regarding children's education has remained until today.

The other key feature of being a woman was to have a thin and immature beauty of appearance. It referred to a standard of beauty that woman should have a frail, vulnerable and nearly-skeletal-thin body shape, and a weakened, restrained and shy emotional situation (Sun, 2012). In sum, it was a kind of beauty which easy to be conquered,

controlled and dominated by men. In addition, this sort of beauty was transient: once a woman was no longer young, her beauty disappeared. A woman without this beauty would become a valueless person (Sun, 2012; Wu, 2009).

This situation changed in 1949. According to the Marxist maxim, the new Beijing government launched a series of "egalitarianism" policies on gender issues (Chang, 2010; Wu, 2009), which liberated women through public power. The first law of the Beijing government, the Marriage Law of 1950, liberated women from the feudal social norms "*the three obediences*" and "*the four virtues*" and allowed them to act on their own intentions. The Constitution promulgated in 1950 permitted Chinese women to have equal rights with men in all aspects of political, economic, cultural, social and family life. The Electoral Law of 1953 offered the same electoral rights to both women and men (Luo & Hao, 2007). In addition to laws, the Beijing government applied some policies to encourage and guarantee women to join social work as well as men, which resulted in a ten times increase of employed women from 1949 to 1958 (ibid.). With the strong advocacy of the state and the support of the corresponding labor and women's protection systems, women identified themselves as the same creature as men who held up half the sky of the country (Wu, 2009).

This liberation of women was tightly linked to the ideology of Marxism, which collocated personal identity under classes, ethnicities, and nationality (Sun, 2012). Zuo (2005) names it "state feminism", as the identity of gender was rooted in policies in that period, and the biological difference between females and males was denied (Chang, 2010; Wu, 2009; Sun, 2004; Du, 2002; Barlow, 1994). Rather than liberating women in accordance with men, Zuo (2005) claims that there had neither "women" nor "men" in China, but only the identity of "state person" for all citizens. Nevertheless, this desexualized liberation resulted in a situation that women imitated or acted as what men were acting in many aspects of personal life, instead of making men closer to women (Sun, 2003). Hence, Sun (2003) argued that it still unconsciously followed the patriarchal value that men were superior to women when advocating equality between men and women. Besides, while encouraging women to undertake social work, it did not completely break the gendered labor division that women should be responsible for housework (Fang, 2011). A woman who experienced that period claims, in an interview regarding gender responsibility in 2011: "*I still think that women ought to undertake most of housework, (as the old saying*

goes) 'Men are for social work and women are for housework'. At the time that I was working, generally men did not do housework. It was often the women who did (it). " (ibid.:221)

This state feminism terminated in the late 1970s, corresponding to the economic reform of China that shifted the economic model from a planned economy to a government-oriented market system (Luo & Hao, 2007). Rather than being the direct planner of the economy and controller of enterprises, the Beijing government turned into a market regulator. Therefore, the promotion of women's participation in social work through the administrative power of the state is shattered. Women were no longer distributed to working positions by the government but had to contest for a position by themselves. Nevertheless, the principles of the market economy – free competition and survival of the fittest – did not concern the physiological differences between males and females and the ongoing gender division of domestic responsibility in China, which resulted in a significant difference regarding the cost of self-development between women and men, allocating women in a vulnerable group in the labor market (Li & Wang, 2021).

The economic reform reconstructed the social labor division by locating male workers in a favorable position. It resulted in the concentration of female employees in marginalized industries, embarking on labor-intensive and low-paid work (Luo & Hao, 2007; Wu, 2009). Observations related to the feminization of poverty include girls dropping out of school, the resurgence of the porn industry and the trafficking of women were founded (Wu, 2009). In addition, since the 1980s, with the promotion of workforce optimization, females have been defined as "low-valued" laborers and removed from social work (Song, 2011). Meanwhile, voices that women should stay at home rather than participate in social work began to be recovered in the social discourse:

> "There are voices that... accused women liberation is 'based on the expense of the development of productive forces'; (Or) complaining that female employment increases 'men's working hours and fatigue'; (Or) claiming that 'women scoop out a spoonful of the rice in the socialist cauldron (which means the fruit of socialist labor) that is not equivalent to the quantity and quality of their work'; Or applying the physiological determinism (which argues) women's physiological characteristics affect their social work; Or attempting to recreate a patriarchal cultural logic that men are strong and women are weak by criticizing and mocking the 'iron girl'(women who had masculine behaviors) and the 'cream boy'(men who did not have masculine behaviors)… it seems that the rejuvenation of the nation, the

overcoming of anxiety related to modernization and the reordering of society lie in consolidating and restoring the traditional gender order." (Sun, 2012:345)

The discourse related to the desexualized equality between males and females disappeared with the abolition of the gender defined by the policy. In the 1980s, there was a popular promotion to "find the masculine" and "return to be a lady", which was considered a backlash against the politicization of the concept of women before the economic reform (Wu, 2009). However, the tendency of "returning to be a lady" was considered to correspond to traditional femininity in appreciation of the feudal society of China – beautiful and weakened appearance and domestic responsibility (Du, 2002). It is proposed that the development of this tendency was related to the females' economic struggle confronted with the economic reform. Women noticed that they were challenged to have pay and position equal to males in the labor market, because they had to undertake more housework than men. Their pursuit of professional positions would even affect their pursuit of getting married. Hence, within the dilemma of options between "have a good job" or "have a good marriage", most women placed their future on the marriage and shaped themselves based on the traditional identity of being a wife and mother (Sun, 2012; Zhao & Lu, 2004).

Regarding the social promotion of "return to be a lady", a series of wide-ranging surveys held by the National Bureau of Statistics of China and the All-China Women's Federation in 1990, 2000 and 2010 provided some arguments.

The surveys have applied probability proportionate to size sampling method to select samples from Chinese citizens between 18-64 years old, including females and males, varied from the residential location in China, level of education, marital status and professional occupation. Each survey includes nearly 20 thousand valid samples. In each survey held every ten years, respondents are asked about their opinions related to some gender descriptions to observe Chinese cognition of certain gender concepts for a long time. Hence, these surveys can be considered a high-reliability resource in exploring the changing trends of gender concepts within the 20 years.

In these surveys, it is shown that the approval rate of the description "*men ought to work in society while women should be responsible for the family*" rose gradually: 44.2% of

respondents agreed with this statement in 1990, which rose to 47.5% in 2000, and it even arrived to almost 60% in 2010 (Xu et al., 2014). Inside, 54.8% of female respondents concorded with the description in 2010, which recorded a 4.4% rise compared to the data in 2000 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2010).

Another statement, "*women should have a good marriage than a good career*", obtained 44.06% pros in 2010, a 10% increase from 2000 (Xu et al., 2014). 48% of female participants exposed their agreement with this concept, enlarging 11.3% from 2000 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2010).

In the survey of 2010, it was also recorded that 57.37% of respondents agreed with the concept that the "*husband's development is more important than the wife's*" (Yang et al., 2014). Although the description of this concept in 2010 is slightly different from the previous one – it was expressed as "*women should avoid surpassing their husband in social status*" – but the enhancement of approval rate regarding this concept is significantly sharp from 2000 to 2010, recording a three-times rise.

In sum, there is a backtracking of traditional gender concept, including being a women is being responsible for housework and marriage is more important than professional career, between 1990 to 2010. It is also argued that the backtracking of gender concept between 2000 and 2010 is not a single phenomenon limited to a specific group but a general situation for all social groups, regardless of their age, position, and educational level (Xu, 2016). Compared with men, women's gender identity has demonstrated a large backtracking (ibid.).

In general, there is a backtracking of traditional gender concepts between 1990 and 2010. The backtracking is mainly presented in two concepts: "women should be responsible for the family" and "marriage is more important than a professional career for the women". It is also argued that the backtracking of gender concept between 2000 and 2010 is not a single phenomenon limited to a specific group but a general situation for all social groups, regardless of their age, position, and educational level (Xu, 2016). Compared with men, women's gender identity has demonstrated larger backtracking (ibid.).

In addition, regarding the concept that being a woman should be beautiful, some studies expose that appearance anxiety has become a serious problem among young Chinese women (Li et al., 2022). Since 2017, China has become the world's second-biggest aesthetic medicine and surgery market, with more than 15 billion euros in annual industry output value (Deloitte China, 2021). In 2018, 89% of aesthetic medicine and surgery consumers were female, while 75% of them were below 35 years old. (ibid).

A study aimed at university students from different zones of China shows that 59.67% of female respondents have moderate anxiety about their appearance (Li et al., 2022). Another survey of 10 thousand internet users shows that 59.6% of female respondents have anxiety regarding their body shape, and 25.6% of female respondents report social phobia because of their body shape (Momo, 2021).

2.3. Gender representation Research in China

It is argued that the backtracking of the gender concept of women was also associated with the representations in Chinese media (Bao, 2003; Feng & Xie, 2015; Fan, 2020). This issue could be observed from two scopes: the one-dimension female representation in media and the absence of a woman's voice in media.

In terms of the one-dimension female representation, investigations are often focused on the sexualized images of women (Bao, 2003; Luo & Hao, 2007) and the description of women naturally belonging to domestic work (Song, 2011; Wu, 2009).

The sexualized images of women merged in China after the 1970s, which associated women's value with beauty rather than their contribution to society (Luo & Hao, 2007). Between the 1950s and 1960s, media in the Chinese Mainland were strictly controlled by the government, acting as tools of policy propaganda (Lee, 1990). For this reason, images of women in Chinese media were based on the Marxist view of women during this period. Some studies on magazines and artworks between the 1950s and 1960s proposed that female characters were described as heroical, powerful, brave, independent and self-confidential to contest with males (Luo & Hao, 2007).

Nevertheless, after the economic reform in the 1970s, the decline of state control of media (Lee, 1990) and the development of consumerism in China contributed to a recreation of female images in media. It is observed that women were blatantly used as pin-up girls in publications - a survey held by New China News Agency in 1982 proposed that pin-up girls existed on the cover of more than 25% of popular magazines. Besides, young and beautiful females were often featured on poster-size wall calendars. (Luo & Hao, 2007). Furthermore, these cover girls were constructed as enticing and beautiful girls in settings of leisure and entertainment, rather than powerful and competitive characters located in the social working area before the economic reform of 1978 (Johansson, 2001). Even female magazines had contexts linking women's value to their beauty (Chang, 2010). Zhong (1997) proposed that "*the cultivation of cultural context of women concentrated in their beauty in recent China*" (ibid:187).

It is argued that these female representations in media had an impact on Chinese women. By imitating these "fashionable models" in media, women gradually agreed with the values embodied in these representations that beauty was essential to being a woman (Bao, 2003; Shen, 2016).

Moreover, the image that women inherently belong to domestic responsibility has predominantly been presented in various media campaigns promoting women to reintegrate into family life.

From 1978 to 2011, four waves of "women-going-home" debates have been held in Chinese media (Song, 2011), describing women as "less-valued labor" with low quality and efficiency (Wu, 2009) who naturally ought to belong to domestic work. The scope and impact continuously grow within these four debates.

The first wave of the "women-going-home" debate happened in a female magazine *Chinese Women*, in 1988 (Song, 2011). In September of 1986, the Beijing government launched two laws related to employment contracts that permitted enterprises to hire workers according to their own and market needs instead of the government's plan, which was in accordance with the shift from a planned economy to a market-oriented economy. After that, a climax of workforce optimization was observed across the country, particularly reflected in the layoff of female workers. Under the theory that female laborers were worse than male laborers, female graduates also met an exclusion in the labor market. There was even a classification of low-valued labor as "*old, weak, sick, disabled, and female*" in society (Song, 2011:8). Face this situation, in 1988, a debate on women's way out in China was held in the magazine *Chinese Women.* The debate was initiated by discussions related to two cases in the magazine, including a fired female labor in the city and a group of housewives in the countryside.

In the urban case, a female labor was fired because she often had to ask for leave to take care of her kid. Thus, she wrote a letter to the magazine to introduce her situation. It caused a social discussion: why women suffered from social punishment for fewer working hours in the office, even if their childbearing and childcare were also considered a contribution of reproduction to society?

In the rural case, it is observed that the number of housewives had increased from 5% to 84% in a Chinese village after the 1978 economic reform. The magazine explained that the phenomenon was related to guaranteeing the maxim benefits for a family. Keeping a woman at home ensured her male family members could focus on manual labor. Since men were considered better equipped to work long hours in the fields of agricultural labor, this arrangement was a way to maximize family benefits. The case resulted in a discussion about whether a woman should return home to be a housewife to guarantee her family's benefits.

Compared to later waves of the "women-going-home" debate, discussions in the first wave of debate in the 1980s were gentle. The center of this debate was women's questioning towards society in accordance with their injustice suffering in the economic shift. However, the debate became fierce during the second wave of the "women-going-home" debate in the 1990s. The key issue of the debate in the 1990s was to ask women to accept, at least temporarily accept, the gender injustice brought about by the market from a male perspective.

With the rapid growth of the economy, the controversy between sexual equality and enterprise benefits has become fierce in China in the 1990s. Hence, a "women-going-home" debate started by a theory advocated by Zheng (1994) in his publication *Sociological Reflections on the Equality of Men and Women*, which argued that women should naturally be located in the house. Based on social Darwinism and market liberalism, he argued that women were low-valued workers, as their working hours inevitably decreased for pregnancy and childbearing, and their physical capacity was weaker than male laborer's. Under this frame, he accused the previous policies related to female issues as an advanced liberation conveyed by the use of administrative power, which disrupted family relations. In this disruption of family relations, the mighty men support as much domestic work as the weak women, resulting in family conflicts and confusion. He proposed reallocating the weak women and the mighty men to the correct place with the correct pay by supporting the recent mechanism that challenged women to be employed, and enforcing the patriarchal culture of gendered role division.

Zheng (1994) 's theory has drawn many discussions, especially in the Chinese academic circle. Even though there were thousands of criticisms towards his view, two arguments in his views, "women as disadvantaged labor" and "men and women have different natural duties", were repeatedly cited as arguments in subsequent "women-going-home" debates.

In 2001 and 2011, the focus of the third and fourth wave of "women-going-home" debates shifted from theoretical discussions to practice suggestions. Two proposals discussed at the national congress of China respectively in 2001 and 2011 caused the third and fourth wave of "women-going-home" debates on Chinese mass media.

Within the third and fourth wave of "women-going-home" debates, it was discussed whether the administrative power should be involved to encourage women to stay at home instead of working in society, to guarantee the maxim profit for their families (Song, 2011).

The 2001 congressional proposal was grounded in an economic perspective, claiming that bringing women home could save the cost of maids and baby sisters, and provide her families with an additional emotional value regarding motherhood and wifehood. It also argued that bringing women home was a solution to the issues related to employment. Hence, it proposed that the government should persuade some women to be housewives per the economic needs of society and families. In addition to the economic perspective, the proposal proposed in 2011 provided a cultural perspective that housewives can "*improve the happiness and completeness of the family as well as the overall happiness index of the society*" (Song, 2011:9).

In general, it is argued that the media have represented a female image to the public that women are naturally responsible for childbearing, childcare and other domestic work within all these debates. From the initial of these debates, when the female worker faced discriminating professional treatment, her question and solution depended on the society instead of her husband's involvement. Discussions had been held regarding whether society should be responsible for it while ignoring the necessity of male involvement. Even in the recent one, the fourth wave of debate, domestic work was still described as a natural duty of women. When studies and reports found that female workers had careers

more difficult than male workers' because they had to be responsible for more housework than male workers, it was suggested that female laborers should stay home and be housewives. In that situation, they only needed to take one responsibility. The solution regarding the dilemma of women in the discussion on media reinforced again the gender identity that domestic responsibility is fundamental to women (Song, 2011; Wu, 2009).

In addition to the one-dimension female representation in media which is often associated with domestic responsibilities, the absence of a woman's voice in media is also a focus to female studies regarding representations in China. Bao (2003) argued that rather than being observers and viewers, women are the object being observed in conventional media. She questioned: how can the media represent females fairly if the perspective is always male? If women can only have access to several types of female representations on the media, how can they believed that they have opportunities to achieve their career ambitions irrelevant of these female representations?

A research shows that only 23.3% of the characters are women in Chinese elementary school textbooks, a medium to which children have daily exposure. Beside, only 19.2% of female characters exist as protagonists while 5% of them have names and appear independently these textbooks (Yang & Du, 2017).

An investigation of conventional newspapers (Feng, 1998) found that 90.79% of dialogues are spoken or referred to by male characters, while only 9.21% are by female characters. Only 16% of the individual news characters are women. Among the main characters who have positive effects in the news, women account for only 17.72%. In addition, in the samples of 18619 pieces of news, there are only 175 reports with the theme of women, women's problems or women's movements, accounting for only 0.9%.

Some studies related to social media also observe the same phenomenon of the absence of women's voices. Weibo is a Chinese social media platform whose function is similar to Twitter and recorded 511 million daily active users until 2020 (Weibo, 2021). Chen (2013) argues that only 12 % of the daily top ten popular *weibos* (a term to mention the content published by Weibo users which is equal to tweets) were published by female accounts. Within the samples collected in two months, she notices that there are 25% of days without any voice from female accounts in the daily top ten popular *weibos*. Through

random sampling research, Liu (2014) points out that 50.61% of *weibos* related to female images between 2012 and 2013 were negative.

Although women's voice is still insufficient in media, the proportion of female voices in social media has increased compared to the conventional media in China (Chen, 2013; Yang et al., 2015; Jiang, 2013). It is argued that this change relates to the decline in the threshold of speaking to the public. In the era of traditional media, the right to speak to the public was almost controlled by conventional media agencies, including newspapers, magazines, and extensive enterprises or media groups. Only people from these agencies have the possibility to be heard by the public (Chen, 2013). However, in the era of social media, these agencies no longer dominate the right to speak to the public. Chen (2013) proposes that only 27% of daily top ten popular *weibos* in her samples are launched by the accounts of traditional media agencies, while the rest of samples are published by individuals. Hence, women as individuals have more possibilities to allow the public to heard their voices.

With the promotion of short-video applications, the right to speak of female individuals has been extended more. A report launched by Chinese Women News in 2020 shows that women participants are more than men in Douyin, who also published more short videos than men. The report points out that short videos produced by women attracted more accumulative views, comments, likes and shares than men (Figure 3). The report adds that these short videos produced by women have been a main resource of context consumption of Douyin. Incredibly, within the accounts with more than 100 thousand followers, female accounts achieve 2.4 times of likes, 1.8 times of comments and 1.8 times of followers compared to male accounts' average daily data (Douyin, 2022).
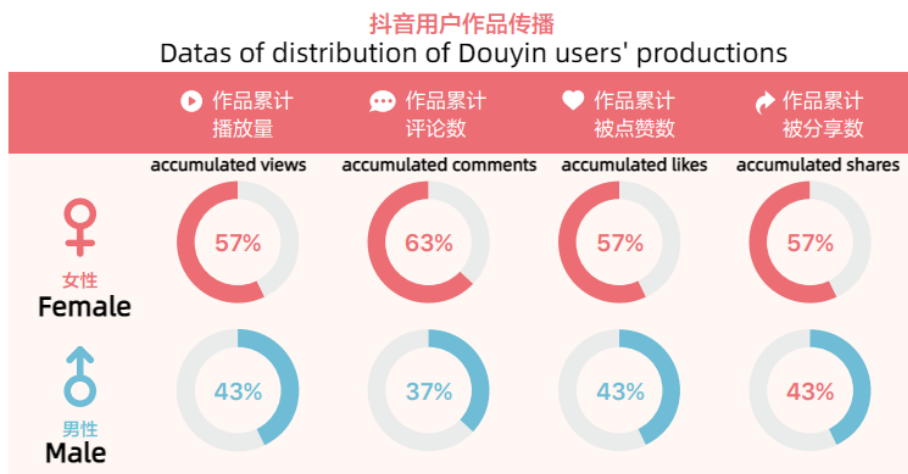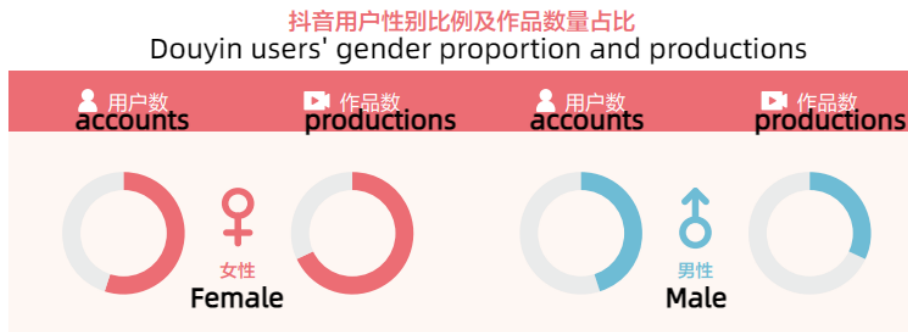
Figure 3. Douyin Users' gender proportion and production data until 2020, diagram cited from China Women's News report *Listen to you – report on the way how women express themselves*, 2020:5, and translated by the author.

Even though there are still some problems related to the right to speak of female individuals, including the insufficient proportion of female influencers among the top 500 key opinion leaders on Douyin (Douyin, 2022) and the lack of elderly female producers of short videos (ibid.), compared with the social media Weibo established in 2009 where female accounts still had fewer influences than male accounts(Jiang, 2013), the situation of Douyin can be considered a relatively apparent progress.

Meanwhile, different from the one-dimensional female representations in the conventional media, female representations in Douyin are supposed to be more multi-dimensional and varied in professional occupations and aesthetic preferences (Chinese Women News, 2020). Even compared with the previous social media Weibo, the female representations in Douyin are more diverse: top influencer female accounts on Weibo are

mainly engaged in fashion and entertainment area (Jiang, 2013), while the top influencer female accounts of Douyin vary from fashion, music, Japanese comic, creative technology and cuisine sharing (Chinese Women News, 2020).

PART II EMPIRICAL WORK

Chapter 3. Research methods and design

3.1. Theoretical grounding of Research

As mentioned in the previous section, reports from Chinese Women News (2020) and Douyin (2022) argued that women's voices have increased on Douyin, which resulted in multi-dimensional female representations.

Therefore, a series of questions are raised: what are these female voices really speaking? Do these voices convey any representation regarding rebellion against traditional gender images? What is the reception from the audiences presenting as female related to these representations - will women really receive these rebelling voices and even have a trend to follow up these models in their comments?

That is the purpose of the study: to understand whether and how the diverse female representation on Douyin has resisted the traditional image of Chinese women and their perception of audiences presenting as female.

Recently, most studies on female representation in Douyin focused on the number of representations instead of its reception from women (Fan, 2020; Dong, 2019; Liu & He, 2022). However, recent literature suggested that too little emphasis has been placed on the female representations on Douyin and its reception of women.

This research is grounded in the theoretical basis of culture studies, media research and gender studies.

Hall (1997) argues that culture is a shared conceptual and linguistic for a certain group to interpret the world around them: "*To belong to a culture is to belong to roughly the same conceptual and linguistic universe, to know how concepts and ideas translate into different languages, and how languages can be interpreted to refer to or reference the world* "(ibid.:22). Carey (1992) regards communication as a culture where reality is produced and transformed (Ganito, 2016). Medium, as the means through which communication occurs (Chandler & Munday, 2016), is supposed to be able to change

reality (McLuhan, 1964). Fursich (2010) proposes that representations serve as constitutive of culture, through which the media create reality and normalize particular values. Thus, the analysis regarding media representations can help to understand how reality is produced within certain cultures.

In a feminist research perspective, gender is not a natural feature but a product of the society (Beauvoir, 1989; Butler, 1986). People perform a series of acts in front of society to acquire a particular corporeal style and cultural significance of "gender" (Butler, 1986), which provides a theorical basis to interpret people's gender identity from their behavior and the related representations on media. In addition, the way women perceive themselves is inevitably influenced by representations where females are constructed and described on the mass media (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). Hence, the study of female representation on media is an essential theme in the feminist studies, as Marshment (1997) mentioned, "*Without the power to define our interests and to participate in the decisions that affect us, women – like any other group in society – will be subject to the definitions and decisions of others*" (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, pp,139).

To interpret these female representations, it is necessary to involve the corresponding cultural context, as the "*representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture*" (Hall, 1997:15).

For this reason, the study combine methodologies of content analysis and semiotics.

Content analysis is a methodology that applies standardized measurements to a sample of texts in order to identify antecedents, correlates, and consequences of communications, yielding quantifiable and valid data from the context (Bell & Milic, 2002; Krippendorf, 1989). Hence, the current study uses content analysis to gain quantifiable data and insights into samples from short videos on Douyin.

Semiotics is a methodology adapted to analyze the meaning of media contents and the process of meaning production (Wong, 2013). Since representation is a crucial part of meaning production (Hall, 1997), the involvement of semiotics can help to understand these representations better.

Semiotics is a term coined to describe how signs convey meanings (Beltrán, 2018). Saussure(1976) argued that signs should be analyzed into elements: the signifier and the signified (Hall, 1997). Signifier refers to the sign that people use to mention a concept in their mind, and the concept itself is signified. As signifiers do not have a natural and fixed relationship to the signified, the interpretation of signs is dependent on the relation between them and other signs in a cultural system. For example, the color red has the meaning of "stop" in the traffic light system while significates "republican" in the American political content. The interpretation of signs also relies on the decodification of the receiver. The receiver must decode each encoded signifier to interpret its meaning.

The process of interpretation of meaning ties deeply to the culture, Barthes (1972) argued. He explains the meaning into two levels: *denotation* and *connotation*. *Denotation* is the process of how a signifier is associated with a signified in a particular culture. For example, the signifier *carnation* describes "*a small flower that has a sweet smell and is usually white, pink, or red*" in English, according to the Cambridge dictionary. *Connotation* is the process in which people who share the same culture associate the signifier with cultural themes or concepts. For example, the signifier *carnation* often links to the Abril 25th Revolution in Portugal, while it often associates with the mother's love in China. Barthes (1972) named the level of connotation the level of myth. For Barth, the function of myth is to turn particular social meanings, especially the ideologies from the dominant class, into readily acceptable common sense about the world.

Considering the female representations in Douyin as a combination of signs, the application of semiotics can provide a framework to understand how these signs function to provide meanings, especially the myths among them.

3.2. Research design

Combining content analysis with semiotic analysis, we suggest the following hypotheses and methodology to understand whether and how the diverse female representation on

Douyin has resisted the traditional image of Chinese women and their perception of audiences presenting as female

Due to the traditional gender identity of Chinese women includes various elements which cannot be fully discussed within this study, two representative image are chosen for the further analysis: "women belong to domestic responsibility while men belong to social work" and "a good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career". Both of them have widely reception in Chinese people, which is proposed within a series of wide-ranging surveys held by the National Bureau of Statistics of China and the All-China Women's Federation in 1990, 2000 and 2010 in the previous chapter. Besides, there are often regarded as two essential figures in terms of discussion of the regression of gender identities in China (Yang et al., 2014; Xu, 2016).

Broadly, our research questions are:

1. Do the female representations on Douyin show a resistance of the traditional gender identity that "women belong to domestic responsibility" and be broadly received by audiences presenting as female?

1.1. What do the female representations show? Do the heroines in these short videos willingly accept and act on this traditional gender identity, or do they resist it?

1.2. Are these representations are broadly received by audiences presenting as female?

2. Do the female representations on Douyin show a resistance of the traditional gender identity that "a good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career" and be broadly received by audiences presenting as female?

2.1. What do the female representations show? Do the heroines in these short videos willingly accept and act on this traditional gender identity, or do they resist it?

2.2. Are these representations are broadly received by audiences presenting as female?

To answer these questions, this study is conducted into two parts.

The first part corresponds to hypothesis 1. In this part, contents under two popular hashtags of Douyin #*daily of a stay-at-home mom* and #*stay-at-home mom* are selected for the analysis object. The selection has two reasons.

First, compared with single women and wives engaged in paid social work, stay-at-home wives are a more standard model with the traditional gender division that "women belong to domestic responsibility". Especially, in China, the domestic responsibility of women includes housework and the education responsibility of their children (Chen, 2003). Thus, stay-at-home wives who have children are suitable objects for the study.

Secondly, according to a report from Douyin in 2022, female users have shown high participation in popular topics related to family, children raising and marriage in 2021. Significantly, a popular hashtag #*daily of a stay-at-home mom* achieved 2.09 billion views in 2021(Douyin, 2022). Until February 22nd, 2023, views of the same hashtag arrived at 6.56 billion. Hence, videos and comments from this hashtag can be considered more representative in studies of the gendered labor division that "women belong to domestic responsibility". Except for the hashtag #*daily of a stay-at-home mom*, a similar hashtag #*stay-at-home mom* which records 9.13 billion views until February 22nd, 2023, is also chosen as the study object. Since Douyin permits its users to upload a short video with multiple hashtags, the involvement of the hashtag with similar words can provide a more comprehensive sample.

The first part of the study includes two stages. One stage corresponds to video content, while another aims to analyse the videos' comments.

First, we chose five videos most liked and coined by female users respectively from the two hashtags to construct the video sample groups. Douyin's algorithm automatically processes the sorting of liked videos on February 10th, 2023. Due to Douyin permitting a video to be published with many hashtags, some videos appear simultaneously in the sample group of #*stay-at-home mom* and #*daily of a stay-at-home mom*. In this situation, the duplicated video with lower sorting will be replaced by the next one in the sorting order. Besides, videos shorter than 10 seconds or videos only showing a cute sleepy baby are removed from research samples because they did not contain valid information regarding the research purpose. Finally, ten samples are chosen as following tables (Table.1 & Table.2):

Table 1. samples collected from videos under Douyin hashtag *#daily of a stay-at-home mom* with translation of videos' brief introduction and likes/comments (translated by author), February 10th, 2023.

# daily of a stay-at-home mom	Video-D1	Video-D2	Video-D3	Video-D4	Video-D5
Publisher	Little Longlong of Dear Lin	Daidai	The elder sister – Yang the beauty	Mom of Chenhao (Mother of four children)	Hanyao V Hanlu
Introduction	**Pregnant and then being stupid for three years?** #daily of stay-at-home mom #be a happy mom #Family Daily #A scene under surveillance @DOU+ Assistant @Douyin Assistant	**It feels so good when the child falls asleep, staying up is not staying for a night, but a short period of freedom** #daily of stay-at-home mom # daily vlog	**Quickly ask and answer - the answer can only be directly from the mouth rather than the brain! Oops, it's an easy win, just costs two pieces of durian!** #Mom would not have any tricks on you #daily of stay-at-home mom # daily vlog when kids study online	**Mom is willing to drag her tired body and accompany you through countless early mornings, although others are still sleeping** #A life with three children #daily of stay-at-home mom	#daily of stay-at-home mom #daily of stay-at-home mom with two kids #Children who are difficult to be woke up
Likes	1103K	666K	616K	567K	496K
Comments	103K	8.974K	87K	33K	40K
Accessed Link	https://v.douyin.com/SgBnD9U/	https://v.douyin.com/SgBKN4n/	https://v.douyin.com/SgSryq2/	https://v.douyin.com/SgSYSbq/	https://v.douyin.com/SgSbyVp/

Table 2. samples collected from videos under Douyin hashtag *#daily of a stay-at-home mom* with translation of videos' brief introduction and likes/comments (translated by author), February 10th, 2023.

# stay-at-home mom	Video-S1	Video-S2	Video-S3	Video-S4	Video-S5
Publisher	Wang Xiaoyu (two daugthers)	Xiaxia & Sean	Mother of Wutian in a reinitiating situation	Daily of Sister Yan, a mother of three	Dahua living in Beijing as a stranger
Introduction	#Stay-at-home mom #Raising children **There is no empathy in the world, unless you experience it yourself, how many men can insist on watching it?**	**It's eight and a half months old. What kind of virtues did I accumulate in my previous life to give me such a cute and well-behaved son. My husband asked me why he has to sleep on half of the bed for such a little bear! Hahaha because he is my baby!** #couple daily life #Stay-at-home mom #baby diary #How cute human babies can be	**My last video became popular, and many mothers became angry: How can a mother abandon the custody! Let me clear a statement: I will fight for it!** #single mother #Stay-at-home mom #widowed style marriage	**This is my "one take care for four" life. My husband works outside to support the family, and I take care of the children and my mother at home. We have a different division of labor, but all of us are working for this family...** #One for four #Stay-at-home mom #Filial piety is the first of all good deeds @Douyin Assistant	**After the family fell asleep, I started to do housework in an immersive way. After cleaning, it was so tired... I am the epitome of most stay-at-home moms who are not just raising a child at home** #Stay-at-home mom #living in Beijing
Likes	973K	778K	760K	567K	389K
Comments	54K	82K	60K	21K	37K
Accessed Link	https://v.douyin.com/SgPFtqs/	https://v.douyin.com/SgP6Dd3/	https://v.douyin.com/SgfKYTQ/	https://v.douyin.com/Sgf3Hef/	https://v.douyin.com/SgPk5J8/

These video samples will be analyzed from six scopes:

1. the heroine(s)' appearance, including age, facial features (makeup or skin care) and apparel.
2. the location where the video is filmed, for example, house, grocery store, school.

3. the main action of heroine(s).
4. background voice, dialogue and subtitle.
5. (if it has) the action of male adult character(s).
6. Brief introduction of the video wrote by the creator of video.

In the second stage of the first part of the research, we select the ten most liked comments published by accounts presenting as female under each of these video samples to create a corpus of commentary to understand the female viewers' reception of female images in videos. The most liked comments were sorted algorithmically by Douyin on February 10th, 2023. It is worth noting that Douyin has a complicated algorithmic system that sorts comments through a set of measurements combined with parameters of likes, dislikes, replies and published dates. Due to the immense database size, it is impossible to manually calculate the exact order of comments based on the parameter of likes. Hence, to avoid the possible interference of other elements expected for likes as much as possible, the comment samples do not include comments with less than 300 likes.

Furthermore, comments published by accounts presenting as male and unknown gendered accounts are removed from the samples. There are two standards for judging whether the account is presenting as female or not: firstly, all accounts that indicate themselves as women on their profile page of Douyin are categorized as accounts presenting as female; secondly, regarding accounts without gender labels on the profile page of Douyin, they will only be categorized as accounts presenting as female when they have published more than 50 short videos or have achieved 1000 likes, and some video contents have shown that they are women. After then, comments from the creator of this video and comments with commercial advertisements are removed.

After the filtered process, 46 pieces of valid samples (16 pieces from hashtag #daily of a stay-at-home mom and 30 pieces from hashtag #stay-at-home mom) are collected. Keywords were extracted from each comment, categorized and analyzed (a comment can include more than one keyword in it).

The second part of the research corresponds with the hypothesis 2 related to the traditional gender identity "a good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career".

In the first stage of this part, two representative female accounts are chosen to be the study object. The option takes into account several factors.

First, the hashtag *#a good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career* only achieved 2006 thousand views until March 9th, 2023, which means a lack of representativeness of its contents. Similar hashtags *#a good marriage* and *#a good professional career* only gain respectively 7962 thousand views and 2808 thousand views until March 9th, 2023. Compared with the hashtags related to the gender identity "women belong to domestic responsibility" which occupied billions of views, these hashtags regarding "a good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career" do not have enough representativeness. Therefore, selecting some popular female accounts which have diverse female representations related to the gender identity "women belong to domestic responsibility" can provide more representative samples in comparison to using the contents from related hashtags.

Second, in selecting samples, we considered the number of followers and interaction data (number of likes and comments) on the account. Since the study aims to explore whether and how these female representations resist traditional gender identity and how they are received by audiences presenting as female, this study tends to choose accounts with significant followers and views whose productions have significant interactions with viewers.

Two Douyin accounts have been selected as the resource of study samples: the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* and the *Lawyer Longfei*.

The account *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* achieved 2308 thousand followers and approximately 24.31 million likes until February 25th, 2023. Her top 10 liked videos received approximately 2.54 million comments until February 25th, 2023.

This account has been popular suddenly in the autumn of 2020, acting as a symbol of rebellion against value that sticks women to marriage and housework responsibility – the heroine ran off from her husband and other family members at her 56 years old, and began driving alone to travel around China. To some extent, she totally abandoned the housework responsibility, although she had not divorced then. At the moment that she

left the house, she still regarded divorce as something that would hurt her. However, through her two-year's journey, her concept has been changed and eventually chose to divorce.

Her video is considered to "*expressed the thought of many Chinese wives who never lived for themselves*" and exposed that "*Men often require women according to the traditional standard of women (women for family responsibility), but self-require as the modernist one (not responsible for all family cost)* ", claimed by the top liked comments under this video. In October 2020, she started driving and traveling around China, and published videos regarding her journey and daily life on Douyin.

The account Lawyer Longfei achieved 9728 thousand followers and approximately 54.15 million likes until February 25th, 2023. Her top 10 liked videos received approximately 2.68 million comments until February 25th, 2023.

"*She helps us women to find a way in difficult situations… I found a way out of my struggle by watching her short videos on Douyin*". A audiences presenting as female commented on the first video launched by the *Lawyer Longfei* on Douyin, after the account has suspended for more than 50 days and reactivated.

The owner of the account, Zhang Longfei, is a 39 years old female lawyer who connected with her followers through Douyin live broadcast every day, offered solutions to their legal questions related to marriage, and cut the clips of the live broadcast into short videos uploaded on her Douyin account. The questions she solved were diverse, including most of the difficulties that Chinese women face in marriage: family violence, bride-price, custody, family oppression and having an affair. Also, the background of followers varied from female senior executives to uneducated housewives. She recorded their experience and represented them to her audiences.

Her videos included her consultant cases and her personal opinions and experiences regarding women's personal development and marriage. In her videos and broadcasts, she often encouraged the followers and viewers to provide suggestions and share their similar situations with the protagonist in the story.

In sum, except for their significant influence, which is reflected in the number of views and likes, the two accounts provided diverse female representations. The *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* provided a female image that left her family and husband to travel alone at 56 years old. Her representation is continuously changing: she left her house as a woman with worries; however, with the continuous experiences of challenges, she turned into a woman who appreciated her independence and chose to divorce. As a lawyer specializing in marriage law, the *Lawyer Longfei* offered various female representations who have left or are seeking to quit the marriage in her short videos. Hence, these accounts are representative samples in the study of whether the female representations of Douyin resist traditional gender identity "a good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career".

In the first stage of the second part of the research, we chose ten videos most liked respectively from the two selected accounts to construct the research sample groups. Douyin's algorithm automatically processes the sorting of liked videos on February 25th, 2023. Finally, research samples are collected as following tables (Table.3 and Table.4):

Table 3. samples collected from videos under Douyin account *the 50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* with translation of videos' brief introduction and likes/comments (translated by author)*,* February 25th, 2023.

	Video-A1	Video-A2	Video-A3	Video-A4	Video-A5
Publisher	*50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours*				
Introduction	**The reason for traveling two years without going home is that my trip is a little different** #Self-driving aunt responds to two years without going home #Self-driving aunt goes away for two years to go home for the first time #Electric XiaoEr outdoor power	**I have traveled to these places in 2022. My life is very short, only having the morning and evening and spring and autumn, what I want in life is peace and freedom** #There are still 100 days to New Year	**The road ahead is clear, may us meet at the top of the mountain (live at 9pm)** # Self-drive # Family # Travel @Douyin Assistant	**Myself travelling alone with a car-top tent. Everywhere I arrive is the home. The weather turns cold, I going to the south** #Self-driving #Travel #Camping @DOU+ Little Assistant	**Self-driving aunt, her journey is like this, is it tired or spontaneous** #Self-driving #Caravan travel #50-year-old self-driving aunt finally happily got a caravan #Alone person should love themselves more
Likes	1159K	693K	503K	495K	344K
Comments	65K	42K	23K	20K	22K
Access Link	https://v.douyin.com/BErmeo7/	https://v.douyin.com/BErcKUp/	https://v.douyin.com/BErnC8u/	https://v.douyin.com/BEr9Kpk/	https://v.douyin.com/BErg7GU/

	Video-A6	Video-A7	Video-A8	Video-A9	Video-A10
Publisher	*50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours*				
Introduction	It is better to go, having this house on wheels, I have less wandering than the first departure. But this time I have one more goal #Self-driving aunt restarting self-driving journey #Let's go with Caravan #Ride the wind and waves, the old baby	Many people know me through my video forwarded by others, now I sticks my original video, thank you for your attention	Time is rushing, do not miss the sunset views #self-drive #oppo #opporeno8	To be able to travel around, to breathe freely, to gorge on chili, is the day to shine! #Life shining time #Douyin hot memory 2021 #Married for 30 years and finally have chili freedom @Douyin hot topics #Let us go to the future together	I want to be a good sharer and continue to work hard to create sharing content more valuable #what means (having) 500 thousand people and tripling income in six months
Likes	286K	261K	252K	231K	229K
Comments	19K	32K	8.20K	16K	6.96K
Access Link	https://v.douyin.com/BEbxJhn/	https://v.douyin.com/BEbCWrM/	https://v.douyin.com/BEbyn9W/	https://v.douyin.com/BEg1ygd/	https://v.douyin.com/BEgmpma/

Table 4. samples collected from videos under Douyin account *the Lawyer Longfei* with translation of videos' brief introduction and likes/comments (translated by author), February 25th, 2023.

	Video-L1	Video-L2	Video-L3	Video-L4	Video-L5
Publisher	*Lawyer Longfei*				
Introduction	**Both my husband and my mother-in-law have a very extreme personality. My life and my children's lives are threatened. What should I do**	**About the issue of women beaten in barbecue restaurant, the victim girl should ask for compensation**	**Longfei is a middle-aged woman who is trying to get money, thank you for not discarding me, thanks and heart**	**Three years can be transferred to a lifetime**	**I made myself better after the divorce, now what should I negotiate with my ex-husband regarding issues of my child**
Likes	611K	319K	301K	283K	213K
Comments	91K	15K	17K	15K	34K
Access Link	https://v.douyin.com/BEDAUcg/	https://v.douyin.com/BEULt8L/	https://v.douyin.com/BEyJNNv/	https://v.douyin.com/BEProBA/	https://v.douyin.com/BEPegbt/

	Video-L6	Video-L7	Video-L8	Video-L9	Video-L10
Publisher	*Lawyer Longfei*				
Introduction	Longfei knows that I am not worthy to the praises. Please do not praise me, that is killing me. I am a middle-aged woman who is serious about making a living, that's all, many thanks	I want to break up with my boyfriend, but he threatened to kill me and to spread my private photos. How should I do?	Why I argue with the hating people in the live room every day	Married sisters, come to the commentary area to share what you think of the film #Titanic	I admit, I am not a wonderful lawyer, thanks to the sisters do not discard me, and I will always try my best
Likes	208K	185K	179K	179K	169K
Comments	12K	32K	14K	23K	15K
Access Link	https://v.douyin.com/BEnU9so/	https://v.douyin.com/BEnG7eh/	https://v.douyin.com/BEWkaUj/	https://v.douyin.com/BEWbUhs/	https://v.douyin.com/BE7SUF5/

These video samples will be analyzed from six scopes:

1. the heroine(s)' appearance, including age, facial features (makeup or skin care) and apparel.
2. the location where the video is filmed, for example, house, grocery store, school.
3. the main action of heroine(s).
4. background voice, dialogue and subtitle.
5. (if it has) the action of male adult character(s).
6. Brief introduction of the video wrote by the creator of video.

In the second stage of this part of the research, we selected ten top liked comments published by account presenting as female under each video sample to create the sample

group of comments. These comment samples are used to understand the female viewers' reception of female images in videos.

The most liked comments were sorted algorithmically on February 25th, 2023. The selection and screening is equal to the method of the second stage of the first part of research. After the filtered process, 130 pieces of valid samples (68 pieces from video samples from the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* and 62 pieces from video samples from the *Lawyer Longfei*) are collected. Based on their contents, these comments are encoded respectively. Keywords were extracted from each comment, categorized and analyzed (a comment can include more than one keyword in it). Table 5 presents an overview of the corpus of comments.

Table 5. overview of the corpus of comments (after cleaning), collected at Feb 25th 2023.

Comments from	50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours		Lawyer Longfei		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Total pieces of comments	68	100	62	100	130	100
Total of keywords	89	100	67	100	152	100
keywords with positive attitude towards the representation in the video	48	53.93	35	52.24	83	53.21
keywords with negative attitude towards the representation in the video	11	12.36	2	2.99	13	8.33
Others keywords	30	33.71	30	44.78	60	38.46

After analyzing, some genres of females representations emerged from the data. These genres and related commentaries will be interpreted in the following chapter. Chapter fourth relates to the first part of study regarding the gender identity of "women belong to domestic responsibility". Chapter fifth interpret the second part of study corresponding to the gender identity "a good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career".

Chapter 4: Mothers trapped at home: Obedience, Struggle, and Resistance

4.1 Images of stay-at-home mom's representations

After analyze, three major genres of the image of "stay-at-home mom" emerged from the data: (1) Sacrificing mothers, (2) Humorous mothers and (3) Mothers seeking for equality. Inside, the (1) Sacrificing mothers matches the gender identity "women belong to domestic responsibility", while (2) Humorous mothers and (3) Mothers seeking for equality show a progress regarding the traditional gender identity to some extent. Each one of them will be presented later.

4.1.1. The female image implied in the "women belong to domestic responsibility"
However, at the beginning of the research, it is necessary to introduce the female image implied in the gender identity "women belong to domestic responsibility" for further comparison with the images that emerged from our samples.

In accordance with previous studies, the gender identity "women belong to domestic responsibility" includes two main features: women served for housework (cleaning, washing, and food preparation), and women served for supporting their husbands and educating their children (Song, 2011; Sun, 2012; Wu, 2009; Wu, 2021; Zhang et al., 2012). The underlying logic of this gender identity is sacrifice: as a daughter or wife, a woman should sacrifice her personal development change, supporting her father, brothers and husband to apply their opportunities; as a mother, sacrificing herself to benefit her children is often an obligation. The more the mother sacrifices, the greater she is (Wu, 2021).

Regarding the feature that women served for housework, women are required to complete all household chores independently and willingly, which is considered their duty (Sun, 2012). Based on the duty theory, women's domestic work is neither worthy in the social discourse nor in the marriage law (Wang, 2015). Meanwhile, men, who are often regarded as responsible for social work, are often irresponsible in domestic work: in the survey held by the National Bureau of Statistics of China and the All-China Women's Federation in 2010, women are responsible for three times of housework compared with men.

Regarding the feature that women served for supporting their husbands and educating their children, a remarkable keyword is the intensive mothering mentioned by Hays (1996) (Wu,2021).

Wu (2021) argues that the qualified mother is a woman whose life is child-centered and who has devoted intensive time and emotional and physical energy to child rearing, which is similar to the concept of intensive mothering (O'Reilly, 2010), especially in that mothers invest considerable time and energy in child rearing under the guidance of experts. Tao (2016) pointed out that mothers in China have recently been portrayed as the first and best nurturers of their children, which is essential and irreplaceable. Besides, in a paternalistic environment, the educational level of children is regarded as a result of the effort of their family, especially their mother. For this reason, Chinese mothers are required to devote themselves wholeheartedly to child rearing and become experts in child development who can provide the best conditions for children. All their mission is to raise an excellent child. Remarkably, the highly market-oriented stratification of labor in the period of the social transformation after 1990 and the development of consumerism in China cause a revival of traditional identification of women (Jin, 2013), which requires working women to move from the workplace to the home to fulfill their natural responsibility of raising children. Due to the fierce education competition, current Chinese mothers have to arrange and plan the educational resources for children, and even take particular courses to suit the educational necessities of their kids (Jin & Yang, 2015). Yang (2018) names this phenomenon "educational broker of motherhood", which refers to women as brokers of their children, managing the educational resources for them.

In addition, a presupposition underlying recent motherhood in China that the value and achievement of a mother only depend on her sacrifices and contribution to a family rather than on herself as an individual also reinforced the intensive mothering (Wu, 2021). Jin and Yang (2015) assert that the ideal mother has to dissolve her ego for her children, including redesigning their life, changing their life patterns for their kids and giving up things they wanted. Only by giving up all her expectations related to herself can a woman become a qualified mother who offers unconditional love and concern to her children. Wu (2021) adds that in Chinese culture, the mother is also seen as a symbol of forbearance and suffering, which has resulted in social norms that obligate women to willingly and gladly sacrifice themselves once they have a child. With similar logic, social discourse

often praises mothers who hide their sacrifices as perfect role models who demonstrate a "willing and glad" attitude. As a result, women rarely complain about their housework, which has contributed to the social discourse that considers housework alone while raising children as easy labor.

Based on the perception that housework and child rearing are easy to finish and "women have nothing to do in the house", women are constantly being asked to be "better" women while they are undertaking domestic responsibility, which often refers to the beautiful appearance. For example, the "Hot Mother"(Shen, 2014) image refers to the criteria that a qualified mother should keep her sexy body shape and beautiful appearance and achieve success in her professional career while taking care of the children. It pretends to display an illusion for women that nothing has been changed after giving birth: "*(the reports and news related to)Most of women who are categorized as Hot Mother will emphasize that it does not have any traces of childbirth on their body*" (Shen, 2014:74). Indeed, it treats the female body as a sexual object that should be shaped according to the male gaze.

Compared with the female image implied in the gender identity "women belong to domestic responsibility" in China, the three major female genres that emerged from the Douyin video samples will be discussed.

4.1.2. Sacrificing Mother: drag her tired body for the family issues

Sacrificing Mother is a sort of representations of stay-at-home moms in which mothers always prioritized their children and struggled to deal with housework without help from other family members. This sort of representations occupied 40% of the samples. Videos regarding Sacrificing Mother were filmed at home, using simplistic edit and rearrange techniques with simple subtitles. Some of them were filmed by cellphone and edited by *Jianying*, an official editing tool published by Douyin (Official Website of Jianying, 2023) that provides video editing services on the cellphone. Most of the videos related to Sacrificing Mother had no male characters. Even when there was a male character, he acted as a background or stage prop that had no function in advancing the plot or influencing its development. In addition, the name of Sacrificing Mother's Douyin account often includes their children or their family location. For example, there are

"*Mom of Chenhao (Mother of four children)*" which is the creator of video sample D4, and "*Dahua living in Beijing as a stranger*" which is the publisher of video sample S5.

The name "Sacrificing Mother" is referred to their sacrifice to maintain a delicate balance between their children(s), husband, family elders and other responsibilities that the social discourse requires a woman.

The sacrifice is able to be noticed in some samples. In video sample D4 (Figure.4), the heroine of the video, the "*Mom of Chenhao (Mother of four children)*" have to get involved in her daughter's learning review every morning while dressing up the daughter. When she was doing this, the father stayed in the bedroom without any participation. After sending her daughter to school, she was exposed to the camera how to prepare a dedicated and nutritional breakfast for her two sons with dietary supplements. During breakfast preparation and other housework, one of her sons stayed on her back. In the following scenes, she showed an amusement area for her sons, full of toys for intellectual development. After her son played in that area, she fed him the nutritional breakfast. However, she did not have time to make her own breakfast and took her breakfast by eating a cookie.

Within the short video, the creator attempted to create an image of a dedicated mom who can sacrifice everything to provide good conditions for her children. She spent much time to prepared nutritional breakfast for her children, while she did not have time for her own breakfast. She dressed up her daughter, but she just wore a pajama when she went out of the house and sent her daughter to school. In sum, she treated the children raising as her duty which is the priority of her life, and she can sacrifice herself to ensure her children's benefit.

Figure 4. Video sample D4, published by *Mom of Chenhao (Mother of four children)*. It can be view via https://www.douyin.com/video/6967134245760371981, accessed at 10th, February 2023.

Especially, when the content creator ignored her breakfast for taking care of her daughter, she adds a subtitle: "*After divorced and re-married…I do not want you(my daughter) to suffer any uncomfortable because of your mother's incompetence. No matter how hard it is, I would not use someone else's resource to support you*." She took the responsibility of caring for the daughter to herself, not to her current or former husband. Although her sons were born in this marriage, the responsibility of raising them was still hers. She performed the traditional gender identity that women belong to domestic responsibilities accurately, while men had nothing to do with it.

And when this sacrifice did not produce the perfect result she expected, she fell into guilt and remorse for not fulfilling her duty - to maintain a family in which her children and husband lived comfortably. When one of her sons fell asleep in the chair while she was making breakfast for him, she mentioned in the subtitle that she felt "*guilty and distressed*", because she allowed him to sleep in the chair which was not as comfortable as a bed. This made her feel that she was not a responsible mother. Sacrificing Mothers treat their children as the priority one, and willing to sacrifice themselves even for a slight benefit of their children.

In addition, Sacrificing Mothers enjoy and take pride in the self-sacrifice-action, as the "*Mom of Chenhao (Mother of four children)*" wrote at the end of her video:

> "Childhood is very short, and babyhood is even shorter. I know the accompany is crucial for you, even though the hardness (of raising you) is not ordinary people can afford. I have been falling apart many times and then self-healing myself. It costs much more than others to raise you (in such a situation), but I can be rewarded for much more happiness. Each day I encourage myself: cheer up!"

She also added an introduction to the video "*Mom is willing to drag her tired body and accompany you through countless early mornings, although others are still sleeping*". She reinforced the sense of self-sacrifice by using the background music "*mother in a dream*", a Mongolian song that expresses one's love and yearning for the deceased mother. In the lyrics, even though the mother is deceased, she still "*care for me… mother's kindness is unforgettable forever*".

The "willing and glad" sacrifice is popular in the video samples regarding Sacrificing Mothers. In video sample S4 created by "*daily of Sister Yan, a mother of three*", even though two of her kids are able to take responsibility for some housework (one is 15 years old and the other is nearly 9-10 years old), she has still undertaken all the housework. There is also a "mother's sacrifice" within different generations in this short video sample. When the content creator was feeding her hungry and paralyzed mother, her mother refused to eat and persuaded her to have dinner first. The content creator wrote in the subtitle, "*I know that my mom is always worry about me… that is the mother*". Here, the mother is again a role that often concedes her happiness for her kids' benefit, as the video's background music "*willingly and gladly*" indicated in its lyrics: "*live together with you forever, willing to pay my life for you*".

The domestic duty regarding the education of their children also appeared in the samples of Sacrificing Mothers. In the sample D4 created by "*Mom of Chenhao (Mother of four children)*", the heroine had to participated in the review of study content of her daughter every morning.

This "willing and glad sacrifice" discourse further reinforced that raising children is women's natural duty rather than men's. Since super-mothers had the ability and willingness to support their children individually, fatherhood was unnecessary and disappeared into these samples.

Meanwhile, it is argued that the ideal woman often hides her self-sacrifice to expose her "willing and glad" attitude. Women often finished domestic work alone and silently to satisfy the ideal woman image. In this case, the difficulties faced by stay-at-home mothers are ignored and underestimated, which reinforces the absence of fatherhood in child rearing - fathers think that child rearing is so simple that they do not need to get involved.

The cover of self-sacrifice can also be noticed in the samples. In the video sample S5 published by "*Dahua living in Beijing as a stranger*", the heroine started to organize the mess after all her family members were asleep and cleaned the house alone until one in the morning. She argued in the subtitle of her video that she could not sleep when she realized that there were too many issues waiting for her to solve: "*a messy kitchen with dirty tableware, a untidy living room, a sanitary waiting to clean, and even the dirty clothes of my daughters and my husband's shoes*." Her husband was completely absent during this process. Neither did the content creator indicate that her husband should involve in the domestic work, nor should her family realize how hard her work was.

Another responsibility of being a woman and a mother comes with the prosperity of consumerism: balancing her work and family while maintaining her beauty and sexy body shape (Shen, 2014). The compliance of this responsibility is observed in video sample D2 provided by "*Daidai*" (Figure 5).
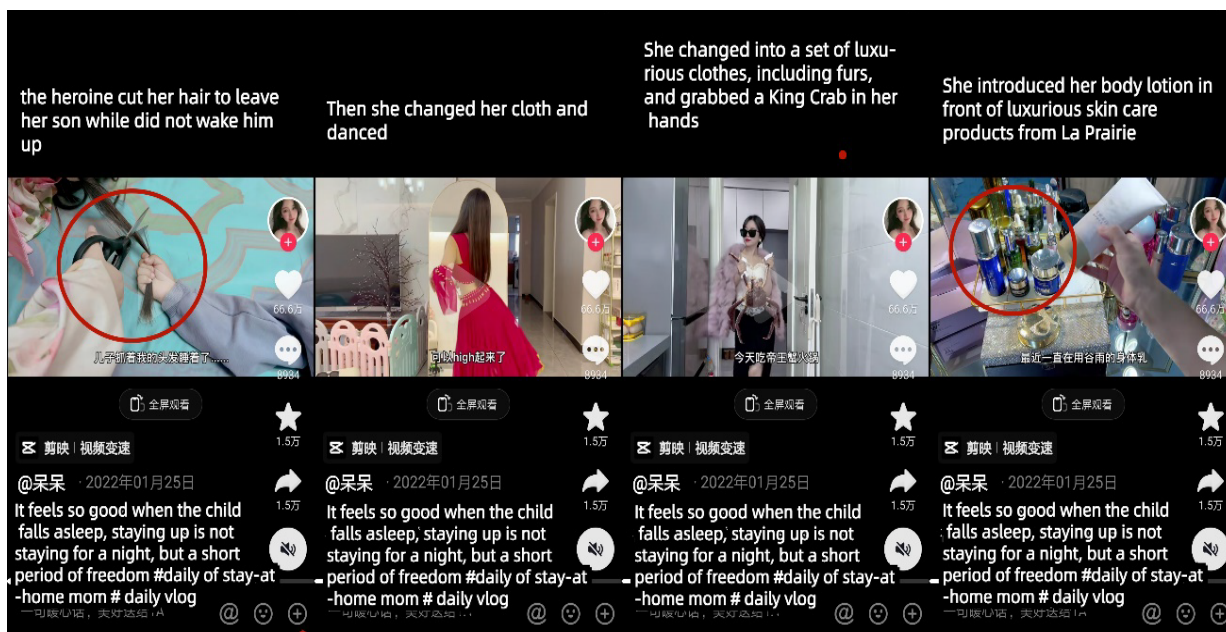
Figure 5. Video sample D2, published by *Daidai*. It can be view via https://v.douyin.com/SgBKN4n/, accessed at 10th, February 2023.

In the initial scenes of the sample, the heroine cut off the hair held in her baby's hand to leave her baby sleeping alone. Even though it was an exaggeration, it still presented such a valuation: Children are often the priority. Mothers should abandon things for the children's comfort, even insignificant comfort.

After leaving the baby's bedroom, the heroine changed her pajama into a beautiful belly-dancing costume and started to dance in front of the camera. After dancing, she changed into a luxurious suit with a fur coat, sunglasses and pearl earrings, holding a huge king crab, walking in a model way towards the camera setting in the kitchen. These elements in the scenes can be categorized into two groups based on their functions: the belly-dancing costume, her dance, and the luxurious suit created an atmosphere in which the heroine succeeds in maintaining her beautiful body shape after giving birth. Giving birth and being a mother had no influence on her beautiful value as a wife; the fur coat, sunglasses, pearl earrings and the huge king crab were used to illustrate a sense of luxurious life, which was corresponded to the traditional gender identity that undertaking the domestic responsibility is the best way for women to live in good condition, as their husband would be responsible for the financial support.

Guo (2019) criticizes that the prosperity of consumerism resulted in a promotion that women should accept the traditional gender responsibilities and be satisfied with consumption paid by the father in the family. For some women, an ideal lifestyle is to have a husband who covers the expenses but is not often present in the house (ibid.).

Wearing another beautiful dress, the heroine continued to show how to prepare a hot pot for her husband alone, taking into account his preferences and serving him handmade noodles by imitating the performance of a professional chef. When she performed for her husband, her husband sat back in the audience and continued eating without a glance at her. After dinner, she took a bath and entered her bedroom, introducing her skincare advice in front of a table of luxurious skin care products.

Through these scenes, the content creator attempted to illustrate a female image who compliance her beautiful responsibility while serving her husband and child. Although this video has been filmed from a perspective of humorous farce, it is categorized as Sacrificing Mothers rather than the Humorous Mothers in the next section: In this video, no attempt to resist or against the principle of traditional motherhood is noticed – the content creator still allocated her child in the priority and sacrifices for that, finishing housework alone in accordance of gender responsibility. At the same time, it seems her husband was not responsible for the housework. She attempted to illustrate that the giving-birth and raising children have no influence on her body, which indeed contradicts her previous action – cutting off the hair to liberate herself from her child. It is just an illusion, a cover-up of "nothing happens".

The similar "young, beautiful and living a luxurious lifestyle paid by husband" image of mothers was popular once in Douyin. A related challenge tag named *#Mother of Liyuqing* achieved 4.07 billion views until February 10th, 2023. The tag originated from a short video posted by a stay-at-home mom named "*Little Zhouzhou*" [1] at March, 2022, in which she spent three hours taking care of her body, making up and dressing up, "to win the mother of one of my sons' kid garden colleagues in the competition of beauty when both of us are picking up kids from kid garden".

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[1]: The video can be view via https://v.douyin.com/SgmY7Bt/, accessed at March 14th, 2023.

Since the video posted by "*Little Zhouzhou*" has become popular rapidly, women begun to imitate it and post videos regarding how they prink to win over others' mothers in the beauty competition. Indeed, these videos linked the value of women with her beauty and reinforced the gender identity regarding women responsible for domestic work rather than social work.

4.1.3. Humorous mothers: Be a mother whose child is not the most important

Humorous mothers are related to a sort of female representation in these video samples that women show their unperfect motherhood to the audiences in a humorous and farce way. These videos are filmed at home, including the living room, bedroom and kitchen, and accompanied by pure live sound or brisk and freak music. For example, the background music of sample D1 is named "*The Noob Song*". The stay-at-home moms appeared in the camera with household clothes and casually managed hairstyles. It is argued that these settings were staged to tighten the distance between the content creator and audiences while providing a sense of intimacy, familiarity and immersion in reality, increasing the effects of their self-deprecating jokes. This sort of videos occupies 30% of our samples.

In contrast to Sacrificing Mothers, Humorous mothers did not emphasize their self-sacrifice. Instead, they expressed a female image that they were more important than their children, which is defiance in accordance with the traditional female image that women belong to domestic responsibility. Nevertheless, their defiance was gentle, as they used comedy to cover up their defiance. Rather than questioning relevant gender labor division and the absence of fatherhood, they made jokes about their incompetence in caring for their children, which indeed internalized gender norms.

In sample D1, a video posted by "Little Longlong of Dear Lin", the heroine showed a self-deprecating joke by forgetting the baby holding in her arm and finding the baby around the living room. In the video, she took care alone for two kids. She held a baby in an arm and used another hand to swift the cell phone, gently pushing the empty cradle by her leg. Suddenly she realized that the cradle was empty and started to find the baby panic-stricken. After looking around the living room, she finally realized that the

baby was holding in her arm and kissed the baby happily. She added some movie clips of people patting their foreheads at the end of her video, which means "oh I see". To increase the self-deprecating sense of the video, the content creator not only used "*The Noob Song*" as the video's background music, but also added an introduction to the video "*Once pregnant, and then being stupid for three years?*" to make jokes with herself.

Compared to the traditional female image that praised women who prioritized their children over themselves, the female image constructed by video sample D1 is contracted. The woman was no longer being compressed into a parenting tool; she was a real person who had the interests and entertainment necessary, and to some extent, she forgot her child when she satisfied herself with her necessities.

Similar female representation had been illustrated in sample D4 published by "*The elder sister – Yang the beauty*". The heroine got her son's money box password in the video through a tricky game. It is one of a series of videos in which the video creator attempted to educate and influence her son related to his usage of *lucky money*.

In China, *lucky money* is a significant income for children. In the Spring Festival, children will receive a red envelope with money from each family's elders in the name of *lucky money*. In China, it is as common as Christmas presents for children. In the Shandong province where the content creator lives, the average of money in each envelope is 491 CNYs (NetEase Data, 2021) which is equal to 16.5% of the average monthly disposable income of residents in Shandong in the same year (Shandong Provincial Bureau of Statics, 2021). Hence, the education for children to use properly *lucky money* has been a common and essential issue in China.

At the start of the video, the heroine appeared to the camera with a dish of durian, her son's favourite food. Using a very exaggerated tone and body movements, she persuaded the son to play a game of hot seat questions with her to get the durian. The elementary school boy agreed. After raising some questions regarding common sense, including "*what is mom's name*" and "*what is the result of one plus one*", suddenly, she asked her son: "*what is your money box's password?*" The son replies rapidly: "*It is 000*". A big smile bloomed on the face of the heroine. Then she ended the game and announced her

son's winning after asking him more common sense questions to mask the password box issue.

At the end, when the mom shared the four pieces of durian with her son, she said: "*Mom is older than you, so I have these two bigger; and you are the young, so you have these two smaller. Is it OK for you?*" The son agreed. This scene is also a progress in terms of against the classical image of "willing and glad to sacrifice" women – the mother does not distribute the bigger and better one to the son while leave the worse one to herself.

In these short videos, Humorous Mothers are showing their daily life in a farce way, in an attempt to use humor to make a response to the issues frequently encountered in parenting. For example, the alone parenting in the sample D1 and the financial education issue in the sample D4.

Similar response existed in the sample D5 published by "*Hanyao V Hanlu*". In this sample, the heroine solved the problem that how to efficiently wake her two daughters up by using an amusing way.

The short video started with some scenes in that the mother alone prepared breakfast for her children, which included a variety of nutritional pastries. When the preparation finished, she left the kitchen to the bedroom of her daughters, turned on the light, and opened the door, loudly yelling to the daughters: "*Hanyao and Hanlu, Get up! (It is) seven 点 (o'clock) (and) twenty 分(minutes)!*" – here, a special form is used to construct the sentence because that is the way how the video demonstrated: the mother used a way that mixes both English and Chinese in one sentence to wake her kids up (Figure 6).

Figure 6.   Video sample D5, published by *Hanyao V Hanlu*. It can be view via
https://www.douyin.com/video/7052465949756198159, accessed at 10th, February, 2023.

Embedding English words in Chinese sentences is a common method to produce personalized humor content in the current Chinese internet discourses (Gong, 2013; Cui, 2016). In addition, the stay-at-home mom pronounced the English words in a strange accent, which was also a popular way to produce amusing content in the Chinese internet. For example, in 2022, a man who pronounced the English word "thank you" as "ShawnQ" in his Douyin video has gained a tremendous views and likes in few days [2]. His viewers has been interested in the way he pronounced and imitated his pronunciation. Finally, his pronunciation "ShawnQ" turned into a Chinese word "栓 Q" and became the top 10 voguish words in Chinese Internet in 2022 (Chinese Language and Characters Newspaper, 2022).

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[2]: Video link: https://v.douyin.com/Sguc1EG/ , accessed at March 14th, 2023

69

Expect for using the English-Chinese mixed way to speak, the content producer of the sample D5 also posted a series of short videos in which she used strange ways to wake her daughters up, including singing "a song of wake up", putting coins under the daughter's pillow to pretend a wake-up-fairy and imitating the way how the FBI broke into houses in the film. She introduced this series of short-videos with a hashtag #*efficient tricks to solve (kids) difficult in getting up*.

In sum, the Humored Mothers use a slapstick method to deal with the tension issues they meet in the parenting situation, turning these parenting problems into a "funny experience encountered in daily life" that people often laugh about it. Through this comedic technique, they present a female image in contrast to the traditional one which requires women to "willingly and gladly" sacrifice themselves for family issues. In the representations shown by these samples, women expressed their anguish and frustration regarding domestic responsibility.

In some samples, women played the role of their children to have the freedom to solve questions in a childish way. By pretending to be their children, women had a short humorous moment to leave their domestic responsibility unchecked. For example, in video D4, when the heroine noticed that she was unable to offer financial education to her son, but she had to do so in accordance with the domestic responsibility of women, she pretended to be a child and used a childish trick to take her son's money. It was not an appropriate method to solve the issue related to financial education; she only took away the money to escape from the necessity of providing financial education. The situation in video D5 is similar. Faced with the problem of cultivating her daughters' independence to make them arrive at school on time, the heroine turned this question into a drama farce through a series of ridiculous actions. She presented an attempt to escape from domestic duty. In addition, these representations revealed a real and serious dilemma that women faced in undertaking domestic responsibility, rather than beautified and covered them with discourses that women were willing and glad to undertake the family issues. To some extent, it is a progress.

Nevertheless, the method they used to express the anguish and frustration related to the traditional gender identity is a comedy – they provoked laughter by showing their different behavior from traditional mothers, and even laughed at themselves silly (in the

introduction of sample D1) or cunning (in a commentary published by the content creator of sample D4). This manifestation turned their struggle into a farce: Indeed, it is not a question of gendered labor division, but a problem of their incompetence to compliance the gendered responsibility. Besides, when they exposed these dilemmas regarding child rearing to their audience, they never questioned the absence of fathers – there were no male characters existed in these samples. Only women were supposed to face and solve these questions in these video clips.

Hence, although the image of Humored Mothers has made some progress, it has not profoundly questioned or completely subverted the traditional female identity.

4.1.4. Mothers seeking for equality: resistance of "willing and glad" sacrificed female image

Mothers seeking for equality referred to a sort of female representations which have shown their resistance to the classical gender identity. The location where their videos were filmed includes their house and the area outside of the house. These videos were accompanied by pure live sound or soft music. This sort of video occupies 30% of the sample group.

The resistance related to classical gender identity was revealed from various aspects of these video samples. The first resistance was the image that women ought to gladly and willingly deal with housework which was their natural duty.

In the video sample S1 posted by "*Wang Xiaoyu (two daugthers)*", the content creator resisted this kind of female image by making her husband to experience one day of her daily life stay at home. The owner of account added an introduction of the video "*There is no empathy in the world, unless you experience it yourself. How many men can insist on watching it?*" (Figure. 7)
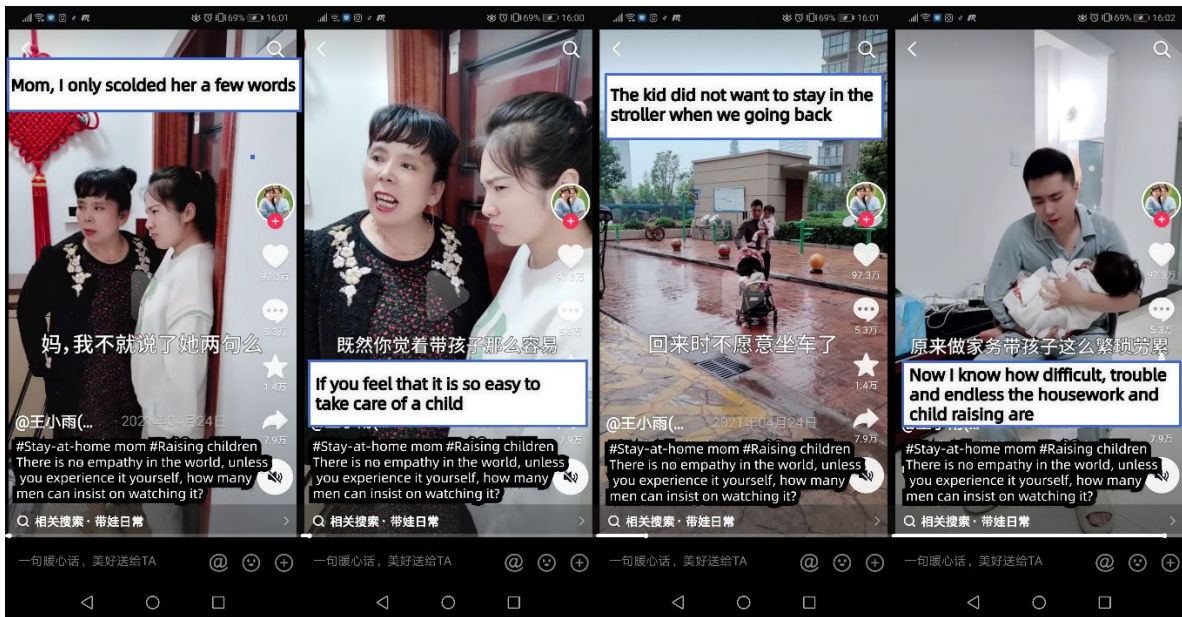
Figure 7.   Video sample S1, published by *Wang Xiaoyu (two daugthers).* It can be view via https://v.douyin.com/SgBnD9U/ , accessed at 10th, February, 2023.

The short video begun with a dramatic conflict. The heroine was led by her mother-in-law walking towards the house door. Her husband, the only male character in the video, chased after her, holding their two-year-old child and yelling: "*it is not necessary to take her out, mom! I only scolded her a few words!*" The mother of the husband responded, "*If you feel that it is so easy to take care of a child, then you should try it yourself!*" Then she and the wife leave the house. Then a subtitle appeared, which symbolized the husband's thought: It is just taking care of the children and do some housework. How difficult can it be?

At the next day, the husband showed that how he experienced a day of taking care of his daughter and the family issues independently, as what her wife suffered in the past two years. After staying up late to deal the issues related to children, the husband had to get up early since his daughter was woken up. Being the only adult stayed at home, he had to bring the restless child to the grocery shop, and divided a part of his attention on the child while shopping. When they arrived home, his arms were sore from holding his daughter who did not want to sit in the stroller.

After cleaning the dirty kitchen, he prepared a lunch for his daughter which was refused by his daughter. In addition, he had to hold the child in his arms while he was making his

own lunch to avoid her from getting injured. When he collocated vegetable into the wok, his daughter suddenly cried for hungry. After he fed her, everything inside the wok were burnt. Thus he had to feed himself fast food, which was the first meal he had until the midday.

When the child was napping after lunch, the husband realized that he was finally available to wash clothes and clean the house. These housework were more tiring than he thought. When doing this housework, he noticed that the house would be disordered without a daily maintenance. He realized his wife had to do these fragmented housework while the child cried for innumerous reasons frequently. Although he had already finished many housework after 10 hours' working, but there was nothing change significantly in his house - He merely maintains the normal function of family, and nothing has been changed or added to the house. However, the work was infinitive to him, as he cannot even take a five-minutes-rest because he had to pay attention to his children all the time. After experiencing these things, he started to understand his wife's daily suffering. At the end of the video, the husband yelled again: "*where are you, my wife? I need you! Now I know how difficult, trouble and endless the housework and child raising are…*"

By applying an exaggerated and dramatic method of presentation, this short video discussed a gendered labor division which regarded the domestic responsibility as a merited duty for women. Since their work was considered a duty, their contribution to the family was ignored.

Through the scenes of a social-working father role-shifting to a stay-at-home father, the content creator used her husband as a symbol to illustrate her daily domestic work, revealed the difficulty of housework and explained why women's contribution related to domestic responsibility is invisible - their contribution is to maintain everything running normally in the house rather than create something new or gain a social position with considerable income. The dislocation of gender responsibility also illustrates resistance in terms of women belonging to domestic responsibility – men can also deal with this domestic work as well as women; women can also leave the domestic responsibility to their husbands. Furthermore, it triggered a discussion of women's domestic responsibility: if men cannot afford domestic work, why did women have to suffer it? At the end of the

video, the solution of the husband regarding this domestic work is calling out his wife to take back the responsibility rather than deal with the responsibility together with his wife.

Besides, the video sample indicated progress regarding the image of women in a family. The mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law were allied to resist the oppression of the husband rather than being enemies. To explain this progress, it is necessary to involve a myth in Chinese culture regarding the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. There was a particular feminine hierarchy within the Chinese patriarchal system in the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (Xiao, 2002). Chen (2011) interpreted this feminine hierarchy as the daughter-in-law had to absolutely obey orders from her mother-in-law until she became one's mother-in-law.

The traditional patriarchal system in China is constructed by three elements: gender, seniority in the family and age (Xiao, 2002). It is argued that gender is the basement of the Chinese patriarchal system – all matrilineal relatives had a particular title different from patrilineal relatives (Ibid.). One of the common prefixes for matrilineal relatives was the word "外", which meant "others" or "outside" in Chinese. Chinese named the parents of one's mother "外祖母/others-grandmother" or "外祖父/others-grandfather" while the parents of one's father were "祖母/grandmother" or "祖父/grandfather". This setting was considered to distinguish non-core members, normally the members from matrilineal family, from whole the family-members.

On the basis of the gender element, there was a further distinguishing relied on seniority and age. The distinction only appeared within male members of patrilineal relatives, as the matrilineal relatives were the "others" of the family. The older brother of one's father and the younger brother had respectively a distinct titles that indicated their different position in the family – the senior always had a higher position and power in a family. The wives of brothers also had distinct titles based on the seniority of their husbands – wives were considered belongings of their husbands and shared their husbands' social position. It is based on an essential principle in the Chinese patriarchal system – The role of women in a family is dependent on their husbands (Xiao, 2002).

Unmarried women in a family were insignificant. They neither had family positions nor rights to inherit property (ibid.). Only by marriage can a woman increase her position in a family. However, after the marriage, a woman could only gain the basic position as her seniority was lower than the parents of her husband. She had to follow up on the orders from her husband's parents.

The only method given by the patriarchal system in China for a woman to continue to raise her position to get rid of being oppressed was to have a son. Once her son married, she became the mother-in-law of someone and had the authority to command the daughter-in-law. In this situation, a vicious circle was coined: a woman is oppressed by her mother-in-law and oppresses other women when she becomes a mother-in-law. It was an oppressive system set up by the patriarchal system but run by women. Its purpose was to make women more utterly dedicated to their mission by seeking liberation from this oppression – a mission of reproduction of patriarchy (Xiao, 2002).

Although this oppressive feminine hierarchy was weakened after the establishment of the Beijing government in 1949, the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law was still full of conflicts in the recent public discourse (Kang, 2005; Ge, 2016). Hence, there is a myth regarding the media representation which includes both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in a scene – there should be tension or conflict between them. In most situations, the mother-in-law should oppress the daughter-in-law.

In the video sample S1, especially, the representation related to the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law provided a representation reverse of the traditional image. Although the first scenario of the video expressed tension in the position and posture between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law – the scenario includes a leisurely and well-dressed mother-in-law who had a dominant position that led her daughter-in-law to a particular direction and occupied the only conversation in the video, and a hard-working, silent and "Cinderella" style daughter-in-law – their relationship was no longer under the oppressive patriarchal system.

Contrary to audience expectations, the mother-in-law helped her daughter-in-law fight against and escape from the female gendered labor division, emphasize her contribution

to the family. It is a great progress showing how women resist together the traditional gender identity rather than reinforce it based on the patriarchal requirement.

A resistance to the traditional female identity regarding sacrifices for their children is also observed in the samples. Video sample S2 created by "Xiaxia and Sean" used a monitoring record to demonstrate how her husband stopped her son from bothering her when she was sleeping. In this one-minute video, the baby tried several times to interrupt the mother sleeping beside him and finally climbed upon the mother's face. Noticing the son's action, the father pushed his son away from the mother and shook his arm to attract the son's attention to the mother. Finally, when the son tapped his mother's face to attract her attention, the father slapped him back lightly and stared at him as a warning.

The video sample constructed a female image that woman was not living for her children, sacrificing herself to guarantee the slight comfort of her children. Her feelings and benefits were considered as important as her son's, which was embodied in her husband's eyes-for-eyes action of slapping the son when the son slapped her. Besides, in the video, the father appeared and proactively undertook childcare responsibilities that attracted the children's attention from affecting his wife. This representation also served to separate domestic responsibility from women.

The third sample in the group of Mothers seeking for equality indicated a resistance to the image that women can only belong to family. In the video sample S3, the heroine *Mother of Wutian in a reinitiating situation* introduced her intention to contest for her son's custody after being a stay-at-home mom for three years and currently divorced. Looking straight into the camera with a determined glance, she stood outside her ex-husband's house and claimed she would try her best to deal with the difficulties and earn their lives.

Based on the gender identity that women belong to domestic responsibility, women are often required to concede their benefits for their children's benefits, particularly in the issue of divorce. In China, it is argued that parents' divorce has a significant impact on the psychological and behavioral patterns of children (Ma, 2020). Parents' divorce has been regarded as the family cause of juvenile delinquency (Xu et al., 2003). Thus, to provide a healthy environment for children, Chinese parents tended to maintain their

marriage until their children became adults, although this choice damaged their own happiness. Especially, women have been ascribed to be responsible for the failure of their children's educational situation, including social behavior patterns and psychological deviation (Jin & Yang, 2015), which reinforced the obstacles on women's way to divorce. Once a woman divorced, she was possibly regarded as an irresponsible mother who ignored her children's benefits, as the heroine indicated in the video, "all my relatives advised me not to divorce…They told me that I had to think about how pitiful my child would be (if I divorced)". In this situation, the action of the heroine who stood in front of the camera and admitted her divorce created a resistance to the identity that women belong to the family - she no longer put the family and their children's benefit before her own.

In addition, research showed that single-parent families had been labelled negatively in China (Xu et al., 2003), as their reputation and career development would be affected over some years. Particularly, single mothers were likely to suffer from social exclusion caused by negative social stereotypes and gender discrimination, which leads them easier to struggle in a poor circle (Wang & Guo, 2009). Single mothers were considered that have no ability to survive without the financial support from their husbands.

However, the representation of the heroine in sample S3 did not cater to this female image. She argued in the video that she would work while taking care of the child, even though it was difficult. The reason for her decision corresponded to her benefits rather than the traditional mother's sacrifice. She claimed that her choice took into account the sunk cost of the upfront investment, the emotional cost, and whether insisting on raising her children would make her happier.

In sum, the representation in the video sample S3 constructed an image rebelling against the concept that women can only belong to the family: women do not exist only for the family, husband and children; women can survive independently outside the family.

4.2. Commentary analysis

Eleven sets of keywords were extracted from the collected comments, as the following table shows (Table.6). A comment possibly extracted more than one keyword.

Inside, keywords with positive attitudes towards representations in the video samples occupied 46.67%, which was half more than those with negative attitudes. In general, audiences presenting as female showed a positive reception regarding these representations. Nevertheless, since there are three different female images that emerged from the video sample, the positive comments associated with different images will result in distinct attitudes toward the traditional gender identity that women belong to domestic responsibility. For this reason, comments will be discussed according to the sorts of female images in the video sample.

Table 6. Keywords extracted from the corpus of comments related to videos under hashtag #stay-at-home mom and #daily of stay-at-home mom		
Keywords	**Numbers**	**Proportion**
Worry about the representation in video	2	3.33%
Admired the representation in video	6	10%
Share experience similar to the representation in video	5	8.33%
Satire and being unsatisfied with the representation in video	6	10%
Women's life is too difficult	7	11.67%
Share experience different with the representation in video	10	16.67%
Advise that others should experience the life of the representation in video	3	5%
Being envy for the life of the representation in video	3	5%
Support and encourage the content creator	10	16.67%
Commend for the humorous sense of the content creator	4	6.67%
Others	4	6.67%
TOTAL	60	100%

In terms of comments related to the videos of Sacrificed Mothers, 37.04% of comments have shown their support to these representations. For example, an audience regarded the heroine as her idol: "*Idol! I am coming!*" (comment from Video Sample D2, with 600 likes). Another audience praise the heroine of the video, "*Taking care of so many people and keeping your home so clean, you will be rewarded with a good fortune*" (comment from Video Sample S4, with 390 likes).

Besides, 14.81% of comments expressed a lament of the heroine's difficult life while agree with her representation: "*beauty you are too tired… you are a good mother and a good daughter!*" (comment from Video Sample S4, with 3157 likes).

It is noticed that 44.44% of comments presented a negative attitude towards the representations of Sacrificed Mothers. Critiques were various. Some critiques were related to the fertility of the female image: "*Why do you have so many kids? You supposed to do so in a pursuit of a son*" (comment from Video Sample S4, with 767 likes). In this video sample, the heroine had three children, two elder daughters and a younger son. Her situation was catered to a traditional image in China that women continuously give birth until they have a male child who is the eligible heir of the family (Lyu, 1995). The image was based on the traditional gender that women belong to the family while men belong to social work – women were too weak to be responsible for the fortune and future development of a family in comparison to men. The comment critiqued that the heroine of sample S4 had followed similar values, and her sacrifice reinforced and served the traditional gender concept.

Some critiques focused on the silent sacrifice of the video sample's heroine. In the video sample S5, after her family members were asleep, the heroine started to deal with housework until midnight. Comments critiqued that she should not do this alone and silently behind the attention of her family members:

> "I think this series is a best sample of self-touching illusion. Children and husband can help you on housework. Why do you have to make yourself so tired? I cannot understand. I am pregnant of my second child currently. The first kid is three and half years old. My husband comes back from work to do housework, cook and play with my child. He also tickled me before going to bed to lull me to sleep" (comment from Video Sample S5, with 16000 likes).

> "I do not want to do anything once the baby falls asleep at night. I always deal with all the housework during the day. (I should) let my children watch (the working me). Let him know that his home does not become cleaned and tidy automatically when he wakes up. It is his mother who works hard to deal with it. And tell the children this (following rule). Everyone in the family has to do housework. Let him have this consciousness to avoid him to make every-thing messy" (comment from Video Sample S5, with 3008 likes)

Audiences elaborated, rather than being a woman who often willingly and gladly sacrifice herself for the family's benefits and devote herself to the domestic work, *"we shall first*

set rules for our children…"(comment from Video Sample S5, with 540 likes)*, and "the whole family should get into the habit of putting things back where they used to be."* (comment from Video Sample S5, with 331 likes).

This type of comments occupied 80% of the commentary published by audiences presenting as female in the video sample S5. They already influenced the video creator – in her further videos, the *Dahua living in Beijing as a stranger* often involved her husband when she dealing with the domestic work (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Print-screen of three videos published by *Dahua living in Beijing as a stranger* in which her husband is helping her to prepare the diner, cleaning the bathroom and the living room. Subtitles translated by the author. They can be view via https://v.douyin.com/SExYfoX/ , https://v.douyin.com/SExB1qN/ and https://v.douyin.com/SExYbtW/, accessed at 20th, March 2023.

With regards to the videos of Humorous Mothers, comments were sharply less than other types of female images. In these video samples, most comments were that people mentioned their friends and invited them to watch this video. For example, 83 pieces of the top 100 comments under video sample D3 were regarding the invitation of friends on February 9th, 2023. These invitations normally did not carry information worth

discussing and would not receive like from other audiences. Hence, there were few valid samples in the corpus of comments regarding the videos of Humorous Mothers.

However, there was still some interesting finding in the comments related to the samples of Humorous Mothers. 62.5% of comments present their support to the representation of Humorous Mothers by sharing their similar experience. Regarding the video sample D1 in which the heroine forgot that she was holding her baby and fought the baby around the house, audiences presenting as females mentioned that their memories also became worse after they were pregnant: "*I also feel that my memory is getting worse after pregnancy. I did not pass the exam of driver's license I registered before, and I have to practice driving again*" (comment from Video Sample D1, with 1615 likes); "I *have done this stupid thing too*" (comment from Video Sample D1, with 6068 likes).

Meanwhile, some comments demonstrated a negative attitude towards the representation of the Humorous Mothers. Audiences elaborated on their concerns and fears in their comments towards the action of the heroine in video D1: "*...I was so afraid that you only realized that you were holding your child when (you released your arms and) the child dropped*" (comment from Video Sample D1, with 62000 likes); "*I am so sacred that she would release her arms when she was finding her child*" (comment from Video Sample D1, with 367 likes).

Particularly, a comment refused that the forgetfulness had relation with the pregnancy: "*Just because you use to cellphone to have fun for a long time you become silly*" (comment from Video Sample D1, with 335 likes). The publisher of this comment labelled herself as a twenty-year-old girl on her Douyin personal page. The comment was supposed to be a result of the culture of women's silent sacrifice – the process of giving birth and child-rearing was considered a fundamental duty of women, which each woman had to experience and would not influence their life.

Comments related to the videos of the Mothers seeking for equality were complicated, containing diverse keywords. 52% of the comments had a positive attitude towards the representations in the video samples. Keywords in these comments includes "Being envy for the life of the representation in video", "Support and encourage the content creator" and "Share experience similar to the representation in video".

Comments expressed their envy for the life of the representation in video were concentrated at the video sample S2: "*Why do I cry? Your husband frowned and pulled the baby's hand down when he hits your face, (it seems like he is)thinking don't disturb my baby wife's rest… I suddenly envy your couple's companionship*" (comment from Video Sample S2, with 41000 likes). Some comments ever argued that this representation "*release my fear regarding having a marriage*" (comment from Video Sample S2, with 27000 likes).

Most comments regarding encourage and similar experience sharing appeared in the video sample S3. Single mothers shared their life experience in the commentary area to encourage the content creator to continue to work for custody. Their comments used simple vocabulary and syntax and often repeated words as "cheer up" and "everything will be better":

> "Do not care what others say, just live well your life. I am divorced and take care of two children by myself. My ex-husband never give me living expenses, and I have suffered a lot as well as you. I am living well now. Although I have no savings, my two babies have not experienced a lack of food and clothing. You should cheer up." (comment from Video Sample S3, with 4301 likes).

"*Cheer up, I divorced when my child was at the kindergarten. Now the child is at the first year of middle school, everything is good with us*" (comment from Video Sample S3, with 1331 likes).

In addition, some comments related to the Mothers seeking for equality elaborated the necessary of male participation in terms of domestic responsibility, especially in an environment that father are often absented:

"*If you can't understand we women's sufferings, don't call us melodramatic women. Men should experience everything (of parenting), otherwise they will never understand women's sufferings. You mother-in-law (follow with a line of [thumbs] emoji)*" (comment from Video Sample S1, with 29000 likes).

"*If my husband have to take care of the child, he will buy foods but he will not clean anything in the house. He (barely do nothing but only) sleeps when the child sleeps, and wakes up when the child wakes up*" (comment from Video Sample S1, with 1444 likes)

In sum, most of the comments accepted the female representations shown in the video. In addition, a significant proportion of women showed a dissatisfaction with traditional identity of women and a desire to untie the female identity from domestic responsibility.

Chapter 5: Women out of marriage

In this session, twenty video samples from two female accounts were discussed, to discover the female representations on Douyin related to the traditional gender image of women "A good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career".

Before the discussion, it was also necessary to introduce the gender identity of women that "A good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career".

5.1. identity of "A good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career"

This concept is rooted in Chinese culture (Yang & Du, 2017; Wu, 2009). In the feudal society of China before 1949, women were the belongings of men. Normally, women had neither economic independence nor professional career outside of the family. For this reason, their life quality has lied to their husbands, which resulted in their pursuit of a good marriage.

From 1949 to 1979, a series of policies and laws liberated women from men's belongings. Women started to be responsible for social work as well as men. However, during this period, family responsibility had not been removed from women (Song, 2011). A significant portion of women was simultaneously undertaking family responsibility and social work, while their husbands only be responsible for social work.

At the end of the 1970s, an economic reform began in China. With the development of the economic reform, a significant number of laborers were laid off in the competition for survival of the fittest (Song, 2011). Along with the laid-off trend, a discussion of "women-go-back-home" is raised (ibid.). Yang and Du (2017) argue that this trend revealed a myth in the social discourse: women's participation in social work was considered a reservoir of labor, which meant that they were only used when society needed the reservoir. Once there were sufficient male laborers in the labor market, female laborers were discarded from the entry of the market. This myth ran through the whole economic reform, and even until today. Within the four times waves of "women-go-back-home" discussion, women have been regarded as laborers that belong to family rather than to social work (Song, 2011).

In addition, with the concentration of female employees in marginalized industries embarking on labor-intensive and low-paid work (Luo & Hao, 2007; Wu, 2009) after the economic reform, women have realized that they are difficult to get working opportunity and paid equally to men (Yang & Du, 2017). Surveys from the National Bureau of Statistics of China and the All-China Women's Federation(1990; 2000; 2010) have witnessed a continuous decrease of the employment rate related to female laborers between 16 – 59 years old. In addition, a report from a Chinese applicant tracking system exposed that the average salary of female workers was nearly 30% lower than male workers in the city in 2021 (Boss Zhipin, 2022).

Hence, it was argued that many women chose to change their financial situation through marriage rather than a professional career, as women had done before the establishment of the Beijing government in 1949. They assumed they could achieve economic success by marrying a rich man rather than by their efforts of themselves. Marriage has been regarded as the second life of women (Yang & Du, 2017). The concept "A good marriage is more valuable than a good career" has been returned to the mainstream of society and has been widely accepted by people, especially female citizens (Xu et al., 2014).

By analyzing 14 pieces of literature regarding "A good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career", Yang and Du (2017) provided a definition of this concept. They argued that a good marriage should result in a rise in social position and financial situation and provide a sense of security caused by this rise. A good marriage often follows the pattern that a talented husband provides financial support to the family while the beautiful wife supports her husband and takes care of the family issues to create an appropriate living environment for him. On the contrary, a good professional career refers to women who independently gained a high professional position with a significant salary and self-development prospects. The "more valuable" was linked to a pursuit of personal development, self-satisfaction and economic condition. In sum, "A good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career" directed to the value that women should gain self-satisfaction, personal development of future and economic condition by marrying a rich man rather than independently working for it in society.

Indeed, there were three values implied in the valuation.

First, it was under the presumption that women could not create value in the labor market, which resulted in their economic dependence on men. Thus, women were collocated in positions completely dependent on men, where they were passively selected by men as goods on the shelves. This logic improved men and belittled women in the pattern of power relations to maintain the favourable gender position of men (Zhou, 2010).

Second, to be successfully selected by men, the buyers, women had to shape themselves based on a series of patriarchal standards. They had to be beautiful in accordance with male aesthetic standards, which often required women to be thin, weak and immature (Shao, 2021; Sun, 2012; Wang, 2020; Wu, 2009). Women were also required to maintain a weak status both mentally and physically – highly educated women and strong women will not be considered women (Fan, 2020; Han, 2010; Wang, 2001) in these aesthetic standards. In addition, the woman also had to shape themselves as a responsible person of housework in the family to suit the pattern that a talented husband is responsible for the financial support while the wife supports him and takes care of the family issues, and achieve their self-realization by support their family member to have success (Liu & Tong, 2017; Wang, 2015). They should also keep their chastity before marriage (Pan & Yang, 2004).

Third, women's value is strongly bound to marriage and housework. Only by marriage can women achieve self-satisfaction, personal development of the future and economic condition. Thus, a woman without marriage was described as unvalued, unqualified and mean, especially when they exceeded 25 years old (Liu & Zhang, 2013; Zhou, 2010). Based on this valuation, women were required to marry when they were young, as they would be rejected by marriage and lose their value after their 28 years old - A survey faced to 210 billion internet users shows that 65% of male respondents agreed that their ideal marriage partner is a woman aged 25-28; Since the age of 28, women's chances of getting married have plummeted (All-China Women's Federation, 2008). Particularly, women who chose to divorce were often considered as defective women to some extent (Zhuo & Lu, 2007).

5.2. relevant female representations shown in the video samples of Douyin

We have analyzed how female representations were constructed in the twenty video samples published by two popular female accounts on Douyin. It is observed that most of the video samples in this part of the study constructed a female image that contradicted the traditional female identity. Only 10% of our samples, the sample L1 and L7, have presented a woman who agrees with several concepts which valued their marriage rather than their professional career or personal development. In these samples also emerged an opposition to these concepts from video creators.

In sample L1, the video creator *Lawyer Longfei* showed a conversation with one of her audiences. The audience claimed that she had suffered domestic violence from her husband while she financially supported the family for several years. Her husband had hurt her child with a knife, which resulted in a psychiatric problem for her child. However, she never considered divorcing him until he sued her for divorce. She tightly bound her personal value to marriage – even though she had suffered domestic violence, she decided to give birth to a second child to save her marriage. The *Lawyer Longfei* expressed firm opposition to this valuation and offered suggestions to the audience to escape from the marriage.

In sample L7, another conversation between the *Lawyer Longfei* and an audience, the audience expressed her endorsement of the patriarchal requirement related to chastity. The *Lawyer Longfei* encouraged this audience to release herself from the limitation of chastity – breaking the rules regarding chastity would not influence her personal value.

In the video samples, we also found three sorts of representations with the resistance of this traditional women's identity.

5.2.1 female representations related to whether women had to marry to achieve a financial success

The image of women that values a good marriage rather than a good professional career describes women as those who can only achieve preferable material conditions by marriage. However, the video samples constructed an image that women can also achieve

preferable material living conditions by themselves. Some samples even demonstrated that leaving the marriage helps women have better material conditions. It was noticeable that these two accounts visualized the preferable material conditions into some symbols more specific, for example, money, makeup products and caravan. The visualization turned the illusive material conditions into accessible entities in reality, increasing these representations' persuasiveness.

In video samples A1, A2 and A9 published by the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours*, the heroine narrated how her material condition turned worse in her marriage. Influenced by the traditional gender identity, she once imagined that marriage could bring her enough food and clothing. Thus, she decided to marry a husband who had a decent income and a house to ensure her basic needs. However, after marrying, her husband split the bill for all of their daily cost with her. In video sample A1, she claimed, "*in the house I lived with my husband…there were many things that never belonged to me, and many things without my name*". After the birth of her daughter, the heroine even had to increase her daily expense to raise her daughter, "*I worked in a supermarket, swept the road in the early hours of the morning, made clothes for others in a tailor's shop, delivered newspapers, and finally I raised my daughter until she graduated from college*" (Video Sample A2).

In addition, she had undertaken all unpaid housework, responsible for preparing meals and cleaning the house and her husband's clothes. These labors did not bring her any economic reward; instead, she was accused of a useless and devoid of any merit person by her husband (Video Sample A9). Although the marriage life is "*a messy and everything in disorder*", she still "*had imagined that it will have any changes*" in one of her announcements related to her family situation in her Douyin account. In the marriage for more than 30 years, she never met the basic needs she pursued through marriage. On the contrary, after leaving the family, she realized that "*now I can earn my life independently*" (Video Sample A1) and even her "*income has been increased three times in half a year*" (Video Sample A10).

In her video, she demonstrated her material achievement through three symbols: caravan, mobile phone and makeup products.

Her caravan has been an important symbol mentioned and highlighted in each sample filmed by herself after March of 2022, which signified a safe home and the only object that entirely belonged to her after she was married. At the beginning of her journey, she only had an ordinary car sponsored by her daughter and a vehicle-mounted tent where she slept at night. She often parked the car in the middle of two caravans in the campsite, "*Because they (the friends she met on the way of travel) are afraid that my car is too small and (the tent is) unsafe, they often leave my (car) parked in the surrounding of their caravans*" (Video Sample A1). In the same video sample, she exposed how she has been sacred and terrified to fall asleep at midnight when she parked in a parking area without any person: "*I heard a click outside ... maybe someone was climbing (the ladder of the tent to get inside) ... I was so terrified that I cannot move out of the bed* ". For this reason, she treated her caravan brought in March of 2022 by her income from the video publication on Douyin as a real house that protected her (Video Sample A1 & A5).

This protection had not existed in her marriage. She claimed in the video sample A7 that living with her husband at home really troubled her. In this video clip, when she narrated her marriage experience, the word she mentioned most frequently is tolerance:

> "I cannot bear to live with my husband anymore… When our child was young, I had to tolerate him to offer my daughter a complete family. When she was an adult, I thought that when she had a relationship, my divorce would have a bad influence on her, so I tolerated him once more. Then my daughter had children, and I had to work with my husband to help her raise the children… After all this tolerance, now I have (moderate) depression… Living with him is stress, stress and stress".

In her video sample A6, after two years of travel, she returned to the family to file a divorce from her husband. Waiting for the completion of the legal procedures, she decided to restart her journey. At the moment of departure, she stood in front of her caravan, looked directly to the camera and said: "*having this house on wheels releases some of my worries at the first time I leave*".

The caravan also acted as an extension of her body, permitting her to discover the world outside of her family. In Video Sample A2, she introduced various regions that she has reached from January to the September of 2022. With the caravan, she finally achieved her dream of "*camp out at the foot of the snow-capped mountains in spite of the cold.*" In video sample A6, she maintained the caravan with the maintenance worker,

conscientiously learning how to change and repair the accessories of her caravan. She even decided to handmake a sofa cover for it. When she started to drive out of the city in the video, a song appeared as the background music of the video: "*Maybe the world is just like that, and no one can I talk with. Maybe I have to be silence… accept all ridicule… go forward bravely, the light of the dawn will cross the darkness*" with the subtitle "*Continue to be cosmopolitan again*".

The mobile phone also acted as a symbol of material achievement in her video. In the video sample A8 and A10, it appeared as a tool for producing videos to earn her income. Especially, in video A8, the 50-year-old-aunt displayed a new mobile phone provided by the public department of a famous brand, which meant that she had become an influencer who could earn her life by advertising for businesses.

Makeup products also served as a symbol of material achievement in her video. In the early videos, the 50-year-old-aunt often appeared on the camera without any makeup. With the increase in her revenue regarding her Douyin videos, she started to wear simple makeup when she faced the camera (Video samples A5, A8, A9). In a documentary whose trailer was the video sample A9, the 50-year-old-aunt used lipstick when she conversated with the photographer: "*I used my income to brought it*". The price of lipstick was only approximately 11 euros, but she had not purchased it when she was in the marriage: "*I did not have any time or money for this issue...*"

In general, by presenting these three symbols, the 50-*year-old aunt in self-driving tours* constructed a female representation that woman did not achieve preferable material conditions through marriage but gained it by herself.

Similar female representations appeared in the video samples launched by the *Lawyer Longfei*. Different with the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* whose content were related to her own stories, *Lawyer Longfei*'s videos included various repersentations from the consultant cases she met. In her videos, as a lawyer, *Lawyer Longfei* visualized the material living conditions into money (and expensive products which are equivalents of money). Money served as a symbol appeared repeatedly in her videos – no matter what the theme was, she often encouraged her audiences presenting as female to "try hard to

earn money" at the end of her video. The presentation of this symbol in her video included some levels.

First, *Lawyer Longfei* affirmed the justness of women's pursuit of money. Previous research elaborated that recent Chinese media have exaggerated female money worship, which indicated that mercenary women earned money by unscrupulous means (Sun, 2015). This exaggeration caused a moral panic in China that accused women who pursued money as "mercenary women" and the reason for most social problems. For example, a study exposed that 71.9% of interviewers approved of accusing the mercenary as the main reason for divorce (People.cn, 2015).

For this reason, although Chinese women agreed with the values that women should achieve material benefits from marriage rather than from professional careers, they were worried about asking for money from their husbands directly and even dared not take the initiative to ask for compensation after being infringed by men. Once they demonstrated an intention of compensation, they were likely to be accused that they had intention to be insulted to earn the compensation. Women were described as a group of people who should passively wait for men's giving rather than have their own desire. In the video sample L2, *Lawyer Longfei* showed her opposition to this concept.

The content of sample L2 was *Lawyer Longfei*'s comment related to a piece of hot news in China. In June of 2022, seven men harassed four women who were having a late-night supper in a restaurant. After being reprimanded and resisted by the victim, the seven men beat these women and caused some of them to be seriously injured. Four women were taken to the hospital, and seven men were arrested. (Global News, June 2022) Confronting this news, *Lawyer Longfei* appealed to her audiences to understand that these victims had the right to pursue compensation, which is irrelevant to having the willingness to be insulted (for money):

> "I just want to make it clear to you: if these girls accept compensation, if we hear a piece of news related to this, please be rational and be kind. We should not cyberbully these little girls just because of this. Because accepting compensation is their right, and it is also the right given by law".

Therefore, *Lawyer Longfei* showed opposition to the gender identity that women should gain material achievement by marrying a rich husband. In the video sample A6, she argued that women could not lose their own worth after marrying a rich husband. She proposed that women should recognize who they are rather than who their husbands are. For example, women should not be considered that they can absolutely share the property of their husband and abandon the improvement of themselves just because they were married.

Her opinion had reason. Under the gendered labor division, although both husband and wife participated in the management of the family and shared the ownership of family assets, the husband acted as the boss who made the productive decision while the wife performed as an assistant and housekeeper (Wang, 2015). In this situation, women often had an illusion that the family wealth was generated by themselves and that their husband's achievements were equal to their achievements. Nevertheless, the boss in charge of the production key was irreplaceable for the family-style company, while the assistant was considered replaceable and less crucial. Acting as a breadwinner, men had access to resources and capital in public areas that could help them to maintain their economic situation, which was inaccessible for women who stayed in the private area.

In addition, China's traditional "husband-and-wife integration" theory indicates that the purpose of marriage is to live together forever. Thus, couples have reason to believe that the development of their spouse is the development of the whole family, and the other one must share the achievements and benefits resulting from the development. One dedicates his/her time and opportunity costs to engage in housework to support the other to obtain means of production, including diplomas, licenses and qualifications. The one who engaged in housework is convinced that he/she can share the fruits and the corresponding economic benefits obtained by the other one, once they are in the marriage life (Wang, 2015). Under this theory, many women who agree that "a good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career" will sacrifice themselves to housework, considering that they can realize themselves by supporting the self-realization of their spouse. Especially, confronting a conflict between family and career development, most women tend to give up self-improvement opportunities to guarantee the opportunities of their husbands for the maximization of family income.

However, in legal practice, this achievement is often unshareable: Since human capital is not countable property and is inseparable from human beings, it cannot be divided when they divorce. In addition, the existing laws in China do not provide protection of human capital in marriage, which resulted in the value of housework being neither recognized in legislation nor in the market. There is also no protection related to the rights and interests of the spouse who bears more family obligations in the existing divorce relief system (ibid.). Thus, in practice, women's investment in their families often cannot be translated into their self-development.

Based on this perspective, *Lawyer Longfei* repeatedly highlighted the importance of women pursuing their self-development rather than their husband's development. She argued that only when a woman had economic independence could she guarantee her living conditions. She proposed that a good professional career is more precious than a good marriage for women in video sample L5.

The video L5 introduced an experience of an audience presenting as female of the *Lawyer Longfei*. The audience resigned from her job as a senior executive and suddenly married a man following the traditional family concept at 29 years old. When she was pregnant, she realized that her husband had a serious avoidant personality. He left the house and disappeared for half a month to escape from the pressure related to her baby. Disappointed with her husband, she decided to divorce and raise the child independently. She worked hard while raising her son, and regained a higher position and significant salary. After her husband re-established a family and stopped paying alimony, she would file a custody lawsuit with her husband. Hence, she came to consult.

After giving the legal advice, *Lawyer Longfei* repeatedly advised the audiences that only by having a precious career with considerable income can women have various opportunities in their life:

> " All of you ought to learn from this woman… You (told me that you) were hurt by your relationship, or you divorced again, or you were tired and broken-hearted. But you just never focus on your career. Take a look at she, look at this woman. She is emotionally frustrated and hurt in her marriage. (But) she focus on her career, working hard and earning enough money, which permits her to choose (to fight for the custody). (Only with these income) can you take your children with you and raise them when you want custody of your children. Go for it. All of you told me that you

are sad and broken-hearted, but none of you can struggle to study or focus on your professional career…"

Furthermore, confronting the image that women cannot achieve success in their professional career, *Lawyer Longfei* constructed an opposite image that ordinary women can also have their chance to have a professional career through her personal experience. It can be more difficult than men, but the path still exists.

In video samples L3 and L10, she exposed her personal experience to the audience. As an ordinary woman born in the countryside, she studied hard to enter a famous university, then cooperated with others to establish a law firm. Even though her business tentative failed and resulted in millions in debt, she started her career again. Currently, she has financially supported her family by consulting and selling goods on Douyin. She claims, "*I am not an outstanding lawyer. I am just an unfamous and normal one*" (Video Sample L10), but she can still earn her life independently. It is a living example from an ordinary woman to other normal women: women can also rely on their own efforts to obtain material conditions rather than clinging to marriage or attaching to men.

In accordance with those that do not have the ability to achieve their goals, she suggested they to advance themselves rather than support the family. In the video sample L4, she turned illusory goals into a particular and quantified symbol, the money, to encourage the audience to advance themselves and achieve it:

> *"If you start to study this year … to improve yourself … that is, you can make money (by it), for instance, the manicure. In three years, you will be able to be the wonderful one in the manicure industry who can design and draw marvelous things, and you will become that (perfect) role … You will make those who once looked down on you, those who did not want to dinner with you, those who did not want to chat with you and those who afraid to borrow you money have an absolutely different feeling to you… they just did not meet you in three years, but you are driving such an expensive car? "*

5.2.2. female representations related to the struggle between the molded self and the self she wanted

In accordance with the traditional gender identity, to be successfully selected by men, the buyers, women must shape themselves based on a series of patriarchal standards in order

to satisfy the conquest desire of men. Women should be beautiful and weak both mentally and physically, get married as young as possible, without high education and sophisticated ability (Zhu, 2005), and kept their chastity before marriage (Pan & Yang, 2004). The best woman should be one who stays at home and is content to be a good wife and mother, obeying her husband and only focusing on her husband, children and family (Dong, 2013). These symbols constructed together a perfect bride without the ability to live independently that had to be belonging to man.

In the video provided by the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* and the *Lawyer Longfei*, by setting up a set of symbols against the standard, they created a female image who chose to be herself in opposition to the perfect bride.

In her video samples, the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* showed a female image who stayed out of the house and family and only wanted to be herself. In the video sample A3, standing by her vehicle on an empty road and posting a statue ready to go, she expressed her opinion by the subtitle, "*I just want to ask for leave to the life. Do not be his wife, do not be her mother, do not make my life around meals and foods, do not follow up the little things in life, only be myself and to see what is happening outside my home*". In addition, 90% of her videos in the samples had scenarios shot in a moving car, campsite and nature reserve. The vehicle, campsite and nature reserve served as symbols of out-of-the-house, expressing the meaning of independence. Furthermore, the *50-year-old aunt represented an image that* women were not weakened to live independently of men in her videos by shooting scenarios in which she erected her tent, changed the tires of her car, camped at the foot of a snowed mountain, replaced the car's accessories, and linked the sewer pipe of her caravan. These are actions normally linked with masculinity in China. After solving the problems she met on the road, she claimed that she "increasingly likes the feeling of becoming independent" (Video Sample A4). Besides, she represented a female image against the traditional gender identity that women should lack sophisticated abilities. In the video sample A10, she introduced her life after leaving her house "*Although the process is very difficult, I am constantly striving… (I was) a freshman who knows nothing about video creation, through continuous efforts and practice, and now I can be regarded as a primary school graduate (in terms of video creation)*". In Video Sample A4, she even attempted to have a senior driving license that permits her to drive a bigger caravan to further areas.

The *Lawyer Longfei* also embodied the female image who chosen to be herself rather that the perfect bride in her video. Compared with feminine delicacy, she encouraged all women to be more aggressive and threatening in video sample L8, even if these actions were considered unfeminine:

> "You have to rely on yourself to have the courage that you will fight with others until death, if they want to bully you… You know that you have such temperament ... you will never be bullied…Do you know why I often scold to the person who scolded me and never be gentle in the live broadcast room? I do not rely on anyone and I have to fight for myself ".

Furthermore, regarding the molded woman who must keep her chastity before marriage, the *Lawyer Longfei* provided an opposite representation in her videos.

Chastity is a moral norm that binds women to be a virgin before marriage. Acting as an essential value of being a women, chastity is even more important than life in the values of Chinese patriarchal system (Ding, 2011). The requirement of keeping chastity still existed partly in China, as one of the basic social identity of being women (Pan & Yang, 2004). For this reason, victims of sexual crimes or threats are often afraid to speak up.

In video sample L7, confronting an audience who was nakedly sneak shot and threatened by her boyfriend, *Lawyer Longfei* encouraged the audience to fight against this stigma of chastity.

> *"*It is just a body. If your body is beautiful, others will envy your body shape (when they see the photos); If your body is not beautiful, they will not be interested in it. That is all… Do not worry (about that he will send these naked photos to your parents), all of them have seen your body when you were a baby. Do not regard this as a stain (of your life) and just break out with him now... As you are in Covid-isolation and you have to live with him for a few days more, be careful and do not be pregnant within these days… When I was 17 years old, I have realized that (naked photos did not matter to a woman)… So take it easy and go to the gym (to have good body shape)… Remember that if anyone wants to threaten you with naked photos, call the police. Do not be afraid of that*."*

By discussing naked photos or pregnancy before marriage as issues open to discussed rather than a taboo, she illustrated an image that chastity was irresponsible to being a woman. Women should not obey the chastity norms and being threaten by them.

5.2.3. female representations related to the self-realization of women out of the housework and marriage

In the video samples published by the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* and the *Lawyer Longfei*, they illustrated representations that women out of the housework and marriage were also able to realize themselves. In contrast to the traditional gender identity that women's value is strongly bound to marriage and housework, the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* presented how she escaped from marriage and housework to achieve her self-value; the *Lawyer Longfei* revealed that marriage is not an essential part of female life, even not a mean for self-realization.

In the case of the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours*, her action served the separation of women's self-realization and marriage. She mentioned in her video that she achieved her dream and found her value which was not recognized in the past fifty years after she left her family:

"*In the first half of my life, I only saw my family and children*" (Video Sample A5). "*My fist-half-life was not good, so I try not to leave regrets for myself in the rest half*" (Video Sample A6). "*I just want to do something I like in my rest of life, to go where I want and to see the scenery I like*" (Video Sample A2). "*2021 is a year that I finally realized my dream. I have been (provinces of) Xinjiang, Tibet, Yunnan, Shanghai, Guangxi, Sichuan and Hainan… I recorded the way to my dream in my videos*" (Video Sample A10).

Another symbol of self-realization in video samples provided by *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* was the pepper. Pepper served as a symbol of freedom that she could control absolutely her life, regardless of her husband's opinion. Pepper was one of her favorite foods, but her husband hated it. Thus, she said she seldom used pepper when preparing meals at home. After leaving the house, her videos related to cooking often included scenarios in which she was collocating peppers in her food. In the introduction of video sample A9, she added that she "finally have the freedom of pepper after marrying for 30 years".

In her video samples, *Lawyer Longfei* separated the women's value from marriage by demonstrating miserable marriage cases and suggesting her audience carefully consider the role of marriage in their life.

In sample L1, *Lawyer Longfei* proposed that people should not blame a woman if she chooses to solve problems in marriage by divorce. Women have no moral stigma just because of divorce. Confronting an audience presenting as female whose mother-in-law had psychiatric problems that caused her husband to hurt her child with a knife, she suggested the audience divorce rather than try to repair their marriage based on the traditional gender identity. She argued that the fundamental consideration of the audience should be her real benefits rather than her children's benefits or people's commentary on her. Besides, she mentioned that women should not put themselves in more dangerous situations just to save their current marriages – *"(the audience) should not give birth to a second child for him"* to maintain the marriage, as she already faced family violence when she was pregnant of the first kid.

In the video sample L9, by discussing a classical symbol of pure love in the *movie* Titanic*,* Lawyer Longfei opposed linking women's value with marriage and love:

> "When I was young, I watched the Titanic and thought that… If I never experienced a dramatic and vigorous love (similar to Jack and Rose) in my life, I would live vainly… But now I recognize, if Rose (gave up everything she owned before to) marry with Jack… and roves all over the world with Jack… then she will realize: she cannot afford a house with a private bathroom; having a hot bath every day is a luxury to them; their money is not even enough to pay the medical bill once she is pregnant… Will she regret her choice?"

Rather than projecting her self-realization based on the resources she had at that moment, Rose lived her entire life for Jack. However, in the perspective of *Lawyer Longfei*, this sacrifice to marriage is not an appropriate choice for Rose or women like Rose: "*Maybe I should not break the beautiful expectations of girls…But I should tell you the truth behind marriage and love*". *Lawyer Longfei* argued that, if women conformed the traditional gender identity and strive to achieve their happiness by marriage, they were likely to suffer a worse situation than they were single.

5.3. Comments: Admire for their courage and self-salvation or Compassion of their life out of family

After screening and coding, 68 pieces of top liked comments published by audiences presenting as female of the Douyin accounts *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* and 62 pieces from *Lawyer Longfei* were labelled and classified as the following table (Table.7 and Table.8) .

Table 7: Keywords extracted from video samples from the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours*		
Keywords	Numbers	Proportion
Painful suffering from the family	5	5.62%
Admire and being envy for the representation in video	16	17.98%
Consider the representation in video a role model of her life	12	13.48%
Live for herself with her place	13	14.61%
Marriage or family life is important to women	11	12.36%
Support the representation in video	20	22.47%
Earn more money or Be economic independent	7	7.87%
Similar experience to the heroine	5	5.62%
TOTAL	89	100%

Table 8: Keywords extracted from video samples from the *Lawyer Longfei*		
Keywords	Numbers	Proportion
Support the representation or her opinion in video	27	40.30%
Learn a lesson from the representation in video	8	11.94%
Hidden the truth that they have learned	2	2.99%
Compassion	5	7.46%
Share her or her relatives' experience	15	22.39%
Offer suggestion to the heroine	3	4.48%
Others	7	10.45%
TOTAL	67	100%

The most frequently mentioned keyword of the top liked comments published by audiences presenting as female related to these videos was support: 53.84% of top liked comments of videos published by the *Lawyer Longfei* expressed their support to the

account owner and her opinion shown in the video, while 53.93% of top liked comments elaborated a positive attitude in the case of the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours*.

Under the video samples from the *Lawyer Longfei*, 3.08% of top liked comments revealed an attitude conformed to the traditional female representation, while 15.48% of top liked comments corresponding to the video samples from the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* showed the same attitude.

In addition, there are different degrees of female sharing tendency shown in both comment corpora corresponding to these two accounts: 27.69% of top liked comments have shared their opinion or similar experiences in the comment corpus of the *Lawyer Longfei*; 5.62% of top liked comments from the account *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* have compared their experiences or their female relatives' experience to the experience of the heroine in these videos.

Below, the comments under the two accounts will be discussed separately.

In the case of the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours*, most comments called her "aunt" which is supposed to demonstrate the audience's affinity for the heroine. 53.93% of the top liked comments elaborated a positive attitude towards the representation of the heroine. 22.47% of top liked comments of her videos mentioned directly "support" and similar words; 13.48% of audiences presenting as female claimed in top liked comments that the 50-year-old-aunt was their role model, and they or their female relatives wanted to live in this life in the future. Especially, 17.98% of them admired and even envied the life of the 50-year-old-aunt, as they or their female relatives had suffered the pressures related to family responsible similar to the heroine, but they currently did not have the courage or condition to only live for themselves. Their worries varied from family issues to economic conditions:

> "My mother-in-law and Aunt's family situation are exactly the same, but my mother-in-law said that she would not divorce for the sake of her children. My mother-in-law has three children and all of them are married. My mother-in-law said she was afraid that my father-in-law would bring us trouble once she divorce" (comment from Video Sample A7, with 1951 likes).

"*The life you are living now is my ideal. I cried for a long time when I watched your video. I still have to make money (even if it is as hard as) biting my teeth when I dry my tears.*" (comment from Video Sample A2, with 318 likes)

Nevertheless, audiences presenting as female who reported a lack of courage consider the heroine of the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* as a sustainer and guidepost of their dreams, supporting her while wishing there will be a day they have the courage and conditions for it:

"*I do not feel aunt is selfish and merciless… I am behind with aunt, if my mom have the courage as you, I will support her as well as support you*". (comment from Video Sample A2, with 20000 likes)

"*Cheer up aunt…When we saw you, we felt we have motivation that we can have this kind of life too*" (comment from Video Sample A9, with 1281 likes)

"*When my son is grew and married, I also want to travel around and relax myself… I am so tired… I want to change my life style too*" (comment from Video Sample A4, with 856 likes).

"*Two years later I will start a life like this. I am so happy even I just think about it.* "(comment from Video Sample A5, with 2866 likes)

Besides, some comments presented an understanding to some extent regarding the actions of the representation in the videos of the 50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours. Inside, 5.62% of top liked comments argued that it is the miserable family brings the heroine into a torturous and difficult situation, and the action of her representation is "*using her rest of life to have a self-redemption*" (comment from Video Sample A1, with 61000 likes). 14.61% of the top liked comments recognized that the recent life of the 50-year-old aunt is a life that she completely lives for herself, which is a method of loving herself rather than marriage and family. 7.87% of top liked comments mentioned their support related to the heroine by encouraging her to add advertisements and sell goods in her Douyin account to gain more income to keep her economic independence. It is a special phenomenon – audiences often show a negative attitude to the advertising in the video, which is often the selling point behind paid subscription system of video platform as YouTube. Thus, it is supposed to be considered a signal of strong support related to the representation.

In addition, audiences presenting as females present their desires related to the representation of the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours*. Although her representation was quite different from the traditional one and rebelled against the value "a good marriage is valuable than a good career", audiences presenting as female still recognized her as "*a woman that many females envy*" (comment from Video Sample A2, with 45000 likes) and "*represented millions women who devoted all themselves for family*" (comment from Video Sample A9, with 19000 likes). Indeed, that exposed an aspiration within these audiences: they had the desire to live a life that only lived for themselves, regardless husbands, housework, children care and other family responsibilities.

This phenomenon was considered to refer to a predicament in the public representation of women in China. Mid-aged and elder female representations in Chinese media were always separated into a dichotomous set: either they are happy wives and mothers who devoted to serving their family; or they are unhappy professional workers those who desire a family that they cannot have (Dai, 2002). In sum, there was a lack of a widely-distributed female representation in media that woman can even be happy when she leaves the family to live her life. Without this kind of female example, the aspiration of audiences presenting as female was only an illusion – women did not recognize that they had the possibility to achieve it.

Now, the 50-year-old-aunt provided a new and real example for them, making them to realize there is also another possibility of their life. Furthermore, the cost of this kind of life is accessible – when a comment questioned "*strong economic support is the presupposition of the life of aunt*" (comment from Video Sample A5, with 1237 likes), other audiences rebutted the comment that the 50-year-old-aunt's journey had started only with her monthly pension less than 500 euros, and she earned the rest of cost on her way. That is seen to construct a new, free and accessible life paradigm to these audiences presenting as female, as the 50-year-old-aunt argued in video sample A2, "*all my wish in my life is only safe and freedom*".

Meanwhile, there are also 12.36% of top liked comments revealed an attitude conformed to the traditional female representation, in consideration that the current life of the 50-year-old-aunt was a pity, and she ought to pursue a new and fixed relationship:

"*Indeed, aunt is very pity. She does not have a lovely and stable home. Travelling seems wonderful, but she should be lonely at the silent night*" (comment from Video Sample A2, with 603 likes).

"*Aunt Su Min, divorced and find a man loved you to travel with you around the world!*" (comment from Video Sample A3, with 308 likes).

"*...buy a small house, you will be old in a day and must have a place to stably stay*" (comment from Video Sample A6, with 28000 likes).

In the case of video samples published by *Lawyer Longfei*, 53.84% of the top liked comments showed a positive attitude. Inside, 41.54% expressed their support for her representation and her opinion demonstrated in the video, while 12.3% claimed that they learned a lesson from her content:

"*...Lawyer Longfei, your blessing lies ahead.* " (comment from Video Sample L3, with 93000 likes)

"*You are right. Why do they not require compensation? Why should they be beaten in vain?*" (comment from Video Sample L2, with 43000 likes)

"*Luo Xiang (a famous lawyer in China) teaches people about criminal law and advises people to be good; You (Lawyer Longfei) teach us about civil law so that we will not be bullied*" (comment from Video Sample L6, with 84000 likes)

In addition, audiences presenting as female perceived the commentary area as a public space to interact with other women who shared similar interests and living situations, exchanged their experiences and received assistance from other women. 23.07% of top liked comments have shared their experiences. Some of them were experiences similar to the heroine of story in the video, accompanied by their insights resulted in these experiences:

> "I do not know how to connect with the sister (the client in the video) to share my experience. Thus I collocated my experience in the commentary area and hoped she could see this. My father killed my mother and my grandmother in 2019 just because of divorce. He is also an incapable man. My mother is the victim of his domestic violence" (comment from Video Sample L1, with 8111 likes).
>
> "Before the age of 25, I was a loving brain (that considered relationship is the most important issue in my life). After having a relationship with my boyfriend, I want to

have equal status with him when we struggle for our life. Thus, I, a person who graduated from a professional college, passed the exam of first-class construction engineer at one time after five or six months of study, and passed the exam of first-class cost engineer for 33 days. The persistent in doing one thing will really pay off " (comment from Video Sample L4, with 16000 likes).

Some of them were irresponsible experiences to the representation in the video sample:

"*If I marry my husband and then live a particularly hard life, how can I correct my mentality?* " (comment from Video Sample L6, with 3422 likes).

"*In the past half a month, I passed the exam compilation interview.*" (comment from Video Sample L6, with 4751 likes).

It was supposed that some audiences presenting as female considered other audiences of the *Lawyer Longfei* as shoulders to cry on or their internet friends. Thus, they shared their experiences in the expectation of receiving assistance or applause from other audiences. It was possibly related to the friendly atmosphere created by the *Lawyer Longfei* – she often called her audiences presenting as female "sisters" and asked them to provide suggestions for the heroine in her video. As a result, 4.62% of top liked comments advised the heroine, even comparing their solution with heroines in previous videos of the *Lawyer Longfei:*

> "My words sound terrible but realistic. The mother has to give up her bigger kid to hold the custody of the smaller one. The bigger child has psychological trauma now, which means an unaffordable cost to you resulted in his psychological treatment. If you fight for his custody, your shortage of money will be more obvious" (comment from Video Sample L1, with 14000 likes)

In addition, the *Lawyer Longfei* often organized her content based on the requirements in commentary areas. In the video sample L6, there were comments asking her to provide her opinions related to the recent news that women were beaten for refusing to be sexually harassed. The *Lawyer Longfei* responded to these voices in comments and presented her opinion in the video sample L2 whose introduction was "*About the issue of women beaten in barbecue restaurant…*".

It is also observed that some audiences presenting as female have shown an attitude corresponding to the traditional female image. 3.08% of top liked comments argued they

should learn this sincerely to preserve their weak and gentle image facing their husband. A traditional gender identification was embodied in these comments that intelligent women were undesirable to men. That is why these audiences had to pretend that they were not intelligent and did not have the knowledge to cater to the patriarchal standards of women.

Chapter 6. discussion of the study's finding

In China, various studies observed a social change in that the gender identity of women has experienced a shift from more equality to tradition since 1980 (Xu et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2014; Wu, 2009). This shift is mainly characterized by two factors. Firstly, women are expected to be responsible for domestic work rather than social work. Secondly, their professional career and personal growth are often considered less valuable than their marriage (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1990, 2000, 2010).

Pilcher and Whelehan (2004) proposed that the public construction of female representations is considered to have an impact on women's perception of themselves. Prior studies in China also have noted that the shift is tied to the one-dimension female representations (Bao, 2003; Luo & Hao, 2007; Wu, 2009) and the absence of a woman's voice in the Chinese media (Feng & Xie, 2015; Wu, 2009; Song, 2011; Yang & Du, 2017).

As mentioned in the literature review, prior studies found a surge in the representation of women in terms of both quantity and the dimension of representation with the transition from conventional media to social media (Chen, 2013; Yang et al., 2015; Jiang, 2013), and subsequently from text-and-picture-based platform Weibo to short-video-based platform Douyin (Chinese Women News, 2020; Douyin, 2022). It is assumed that this corresponds to a significant decrease in the threshold for speaking out on social media. Besides, reports from Douyin (2022) and Chinese Women News (2020) demonstrated several kinds of female representations on Douyin that are different from the traditional women's identity.

However, very little was found in the literature on the question regarding female representations published by women on Douyin and their reception. How do Chinese women construct their representations on Douyin? Will most of them create images of women that are not limited to one-dimension representation? Furthermore, do their audiences presenting as female agree with these images?

Since Douyin already became a popular medium in China – its daily active users is equal to 60.6% of internet users in China in 2020 (CNNIC, 2021), these questions are essential in terms of understanding the social construction of gender identities in the Chinese digital environment. Furthermore, the answer to these questions can help to improve the quality and quantity of female representations on the social media, which may help create a society more gender-equality. This study is beneficial in the commercial arena as it may facilitate the comprehension of the preferred representations based on the women's perspective, thereby, contributing to the advance of cultural products aimed to women on Douyin.

This study provided a possible answer to these questions by analyzing female representations regarding two key concepts of gender identity – "a good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career" and "women belong to domestic responsibilities", and the audiences presenting as female's comments related to them on Douyin.

There were three main findings emerging from the result of this study.

First, the result of this study supports evidence from the observations provided by Douyin (2022) and Chinese Women News (2020) regarding the female content creators on Douyin who have provided a wide range of female representations. We noticed that 30% of these representations contradicted the traditional female identity, and 30% of them only partially aligned with the traditional female identity. In addition to the previous study, we noticed that most of the audiences presenting as female agreed with these two kinds of representations, showing a negative attitude towards the traditional identity of women.

Second, the most interesting finding in our study was that even though there were diverse female representations on Douyin, a considerable proportion of them still adhered to traditional norms "women belong to domestic responsibility". This finding has not been described in previous studies.

In the first part of this study, we described three sorts of female images generated from the representations in the samples. Inside, the most frequent image is the image of

Sacrificed Mothers, an image that adhered to the traditional norms of being a woman, occupying 40% of the samples.

The representations of Sacrificed Mothers constructed women who strived to adjust the traditional gender identity. These women silently dedicated themselves to their families, refraining from seeking assistance from their husbands and children. They willingly took on all domestic work, while their husbands solely provided financial support. Following the responsibility concerning raising excellent children, some of them greatly focused on their children's education. Addressing women's beauty requirements, some focused on maintaining their body shape and appearance before giving birth. They also presented an appreciation of the traditional gender identity of women through the subtitles, background music and introduction of their video, without any intention to resist it or even change it. In their videos, it was considered that all difficulties they met caused by the traditional gendered labor division were inevitable challenges in their life. Once they overcame these challenges, they were "*rewarded for much more happiness*" (subtitle of video sample D4).

Another sort of representation that still retained some of the traditional gender identity of women was the image of Humorous Mothers. This sort of image occupied 30% of samples. They constructed a woman who expressed to the public difficulties she met in raising children or undertaking housework according to the gendered labor division. To some extent, it was a rebellion against the traditional gender identity that required women to hide their suffering and present their willingness to this suffering. However, the method they used to express the difficulties was to provoke laughter through their incompetence to be a qualified mother according to the gender identity. They showed how they solved problems in a ridiculous way. For example, in video sample D3, the heroine strived to cheat out of her son's money to avoid the need to give him financial education. They also made jokes about themselves. For example, in video sample D1, the content creator used "The Noob's Song" as background music and introduced herself as "*Once pregnant, and then being stupid for three years*" in the introduction of the video. They neither questioned the gendered labor division nor required their husband to solve these difficulties together. In all samples of Humorous Mothers, there were no male adult characters. In general, the representations of Humorous Mothers were constructed on the basis of women belonging to domestic responsibility. That is why their incompetence and escape from duty could provoke the audience's laughter.

There are several possible explanations for this result.

One of the possible explanations may be the influence of consumerism. Guo (2019) argued that the prosperity of consumerism has resulted in a social phenomenon in that one of the ideal husbands was who solely provided financial support. To marry such a husband, women must undertake all the housework. In addition, several studies argued that social discourses have emerged in recent years in China that transformed women's pursuit from their rights to commodities and lifestyles. These discourses are potentially influenced by consumerism (Shen, 2014; Shen, 2016). For example, there has been a wave of discussion about "hot mothers" in China since 2010 (Shen, 2014). The term hot mothers has been initially used to encourage mothers to pursue their own lives and rights. However, the term was quickly appropriated and generalized by commercials. Commercials turned the hot mothers into a specific lifestyle centered around purchasing skincare products and fitness programs to maintain a charming physical appearance while taking care of the children. By promoting this lifestyle, commercials increased sales of related products (ibid.).

A similar situation can be observed in Douyin. Except for being a social media, Douyin is also a marketplace. Video creators can establish a mini store on their personal page of Douyin to sell some goods (Figure 9). A report from Douyin (2021) introduced the business model: Douyin distribute video content based on users' interests. Once users are attracted to some products indicated in a video, they can enter the video creator's store to purchase the items mentioned in the video. This business model is simliar to the case of the "hot mother" – selling products by promoting a certain lifestyle.
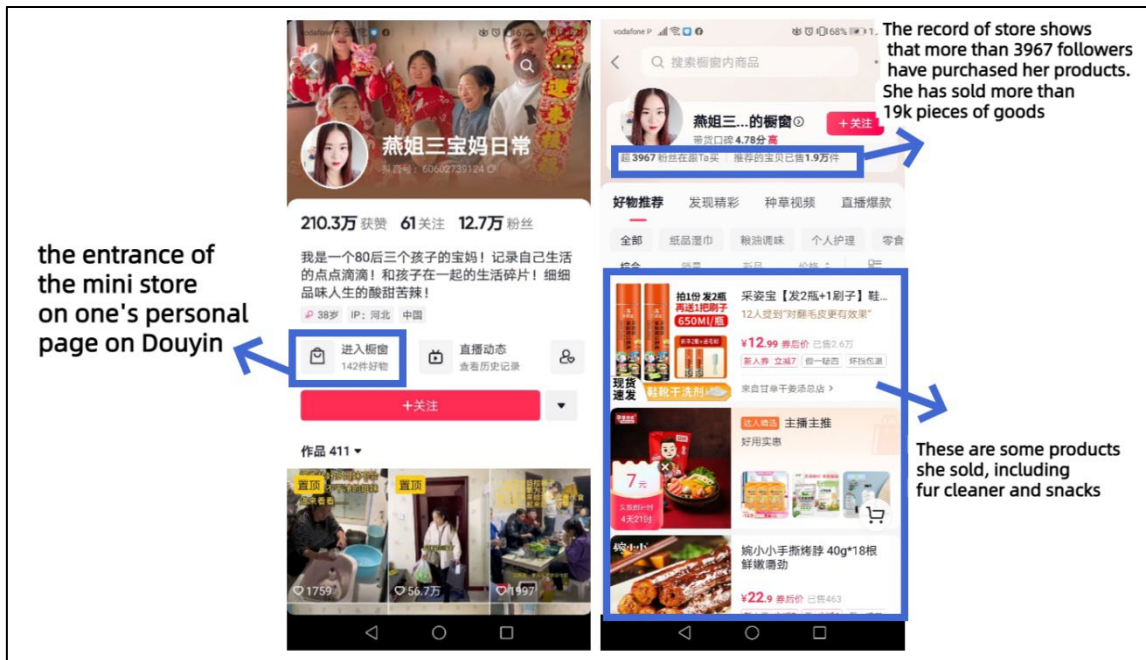
Figure 9. Print-screen of the personal page of *Sister Yan, a mother of three* and the homepage of her mini store in Douyin. Translated and noted by author. It can be view via https://v.douyin.com/ArXtLpu/, accessed at 27th, March 2023.

For this reason, the considerable amount of representations adhered to traditional gender identity is likely related to the need of video creators to sell products. In our sample, most of the accounts that presented the traditional gender identity have sold products related to housework and skincare in their mini stores. It seems possible that some of them construct a woman who is satisfied with the domestic responsibility and beauty requirement to encourage her audience to choose a similar lifestyle and to choose her goods furthermore. For example, in sample D2, the heroine constructed a luxurious lifestyle by demonstrating her fur coat and her lavish skincare product. She also strived to display her beautiful value as a wife. In her mini store (accessed on 26th, March 2023), half of the products are beauty supplies.

Another possible explanation for our result is that women have a lower threshold for introducing themselves to the public through Douyin than text-picture-based social media. In this situation, several women with traditional gender identities who could not express their opinion on previous social media can be heard on Douyin.

We found that most of our samples were recorded by mobile phone or a home monitor. Scenarios in these samples were either the regarding the heroine's daily life or her speech towards the camera. Most of them were edited by the official editor of Douyin. These phenomena indicated a significant decrease in the threshold for speaking out on Douyin – the content creator only needed to film her daily life on her mobile phone and upload it to Douyin. It is even unnecessary for them to have the ability to write several sentences or create a script.

The following figure is a print screen of several interfaces of the official editor of Douyin, *Jianying* (Figure.10). The left of the picture is the main interface of the software. This software provides functions including creating a video only in a clique, turning pictures (and words) into a video, beautifying the video, and creating a video similar to others' videos. The function of creating a video only in a clique allows people to easier convert their photos into a video. After uploading a photo, the software will automatically merge filters, effects, and subtitles to create and launch a video. The middle of the figure is a print screen of the function of automatic recognition of speech, which can automatically convert the voice in the video audio to subtitles of the video. The right side of the figure is a print screen of the function of turning pictures (and words) into a video which can match pictures of the inputted words by AI and turn them into a video. The software can also add certain filters, special effects and animation to the video in one clique without requiring its users to learn new skills.
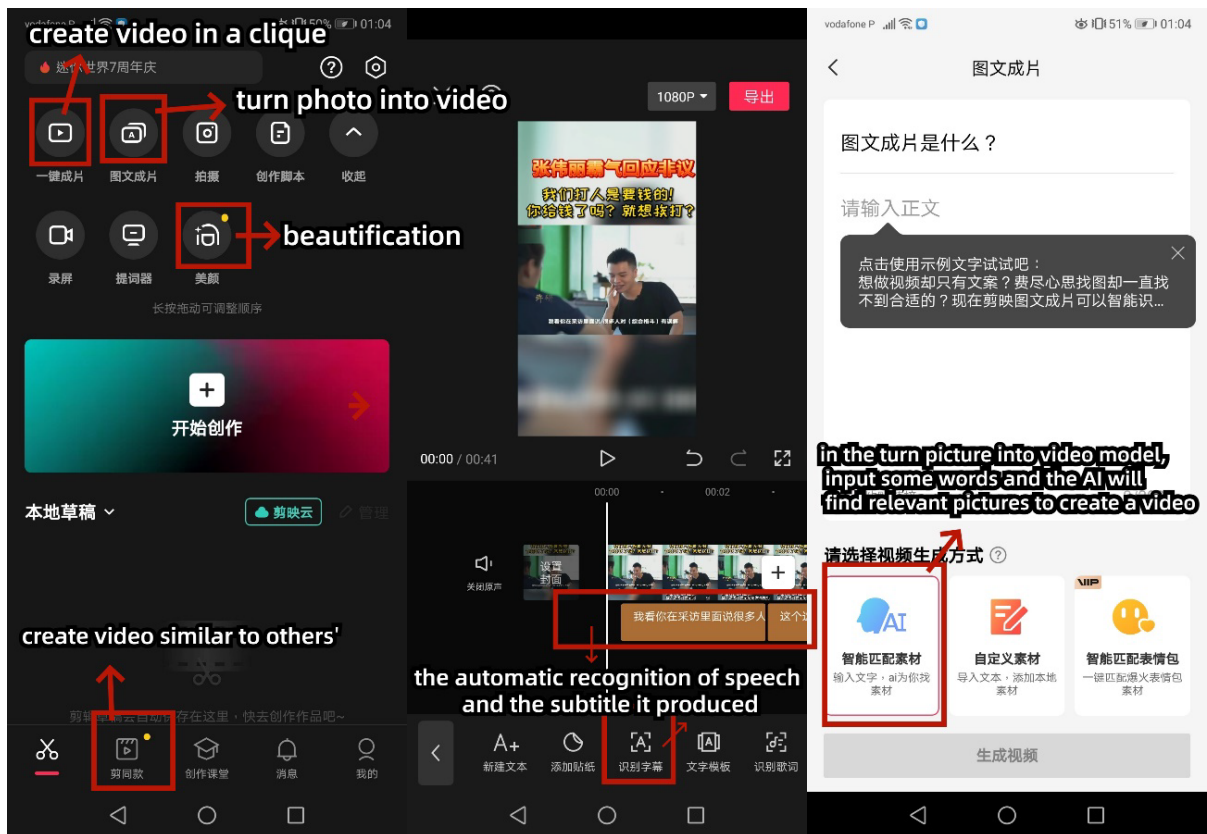
Figure 10. user interface of the official video editor Jianying, whose official website is https://www.capcut.cn/, accessed at 20th, March 2023.

In addition, the specific recommendation algorithm of Douyin provided a possibility for these women to be broadly heard. The video distribution recommendation algorithm is based on the data of individual videos, rather than the popularity of the video creator. This algorithm allows new video content creators to have equal opportunities for exposure compared to already famous creators (Zhao, 2011).

In general, these technical designs allowed women who lacked education, had a low socio-economic status, or lived in rural areas to have the equal ability to speak to the public and be heard compared with highly educated women from urban areas. However, results of a national comprehensive social survey proposed that Chinese citizens who live in rural areas, who have a low socio-economic position, or whose parents have less education are more likely to agree with the traditional gender identity (Wu, 2012). For this reason, those who benefit from the decrease of the threshold of Douyin are likely to overlap with the group with traditional gender perceptions. Therefore, their video production possibly contained representations coinciding with traditional gender identity.

In the samples of Sacrificed Mothers, a group that constructed female images adhered to the traditional gender identity, 50% of the content creators lived in less economically developed areas [3].

Another important finding was that audiences presenting as female had a strong intention to share their experiences and opinions in the commentary area of all sample groups. Their share actions are diverse. Some of them introduced their experiences similar to the representation to encourage the heroine in the representation, discussed traditional gender identity, and provided suggestions to the heroine. Some of them shared their recent situation in the commentary area regardless of the topic of the video, but they also received a considerable amount of likes from other audiences.

Hence, it is suggested that audiences presenting as female perceived the commentary area of the video samples as a public space to interact with other women who shared similar interests and living situations, and exchanged their experiences to provide or receive assistance from other women. This result has not previously been described.

The video creators also contributed to cultivating this friendly atmosphere. We noticed that the creators of our sample tended to foster an intimate interaction between themselves and their audiences. It is potentially related to Douyin's recommendation algorithm which distributes video in consideration of the interaction data of video. Thus, creating an intimate interaction can help their video to be distributed more broadly by Douyin. Besides, some content creators earned their living by selling products in their mini store on Douyin, which is considered to be another reason why they valued the interactions between them and their audiences.

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[3] Hebei province, where these video creators reside, has a lower per capita disposable income than the national average according to the data released by 20 provincial governments of China in 2022. Data available on http://news.cjn.cn/whpd/yw_19947/202301/t4438039.htm, accessed at March 27th, 2023.

There were several methods that the video creators used to foster intimate interaction. First, most content creators called their audiences "sisters" in their videos. Second, they provoked the viewers' interaction by leaving some open questions or asking suggestions for the heroine in their videos. Furthermore, they often presented a positive attitude towards the audiences' comments. Some of them have often replied to the top liked comments, answering questions in the comments and encouraging audiences who mentioned their struggles.

This result may be explained by the situation of the current feminism discussion on the Chinese internet. Since the MeToo activity in 2018, topics related to feminism have gained momentum (Sun, 2022), especially in terms of against traditional gender identity and resulting stereotypes (Ma, 2020; Wan, 2019). Affected by this wave of feminism discussion, women became more aware of their rights and the need for an equitable environment. Thus, they often expressed their voices in the mass media, including Douyin and other short video applications. Until October 2018, short-video platforms in China had already reached 648 million users, equal to 80% of Chinese internet users(China Internet Network Information Centre [CNNIC], 2019).

However, during this wave of feminism discussion on the internet, women faced a severe stigma for their resistance (Sun, 2022; Wan, 2019). Feminists were categorized as irrational women who desired a female hegemony and depressed males, which resulted in a significant proportion of women fearful of showing a positive attitude towards the movements related to feminism, including the representations that rebelled against traditional gender identity. It is supposed that this stigma caused women to worry about expressing their opinions in public places predominantly occupied by men. For example, in Xiaohongshu, a Chinese social media similar to Instagram[4], female users tended to add the hashtag #Baby's food when they published contents related to feminism (Figure.20). They considered that this hashtag was primarily targeted towards audiences presenting as female, thus, adding this hashtag could prevent their content from being automatically distributed to male users. It seems possible that audiences presenting as female chose to discuss their situations and experiences in the commentary area of our samples for the same motivation. Most of our samples belonged to hashtags predominantly targeted towards audiences presenting as female (e.g. #stay-at-home-mom) where audiences presenting as female would feel safe expressing their opinions. Based

on this perspective, audiences presenting as female encouraged the video creators and other audiences presenting as female, treating them as their real friends and a mirror of themselves. As comments from the video samples published by the *50-year-old aunt in self-driving tours* mentioned, *"(The 50-year-old aunt) is a pioneering figure in exposing and fighting against the unhappiness of women's marriage*" (comment from Video Sample A1), "*(she) lighten others that the life can be in another model*" (comment from Video Sample A9).

The following figure (Figure.11) presented several print-screens of the social media Xiaohongshu in which female users published content related to feminism with the hashtag #Baby's food. The left one related to the stereotype in a book introduction that calling respectable lady as "sir"; the middle one posted several discourses in a film related to the image of a mean man and an independent woman; the right one is a model who posing her photos to celebrate the women's day and claiming she is appreciated to be liked by women.
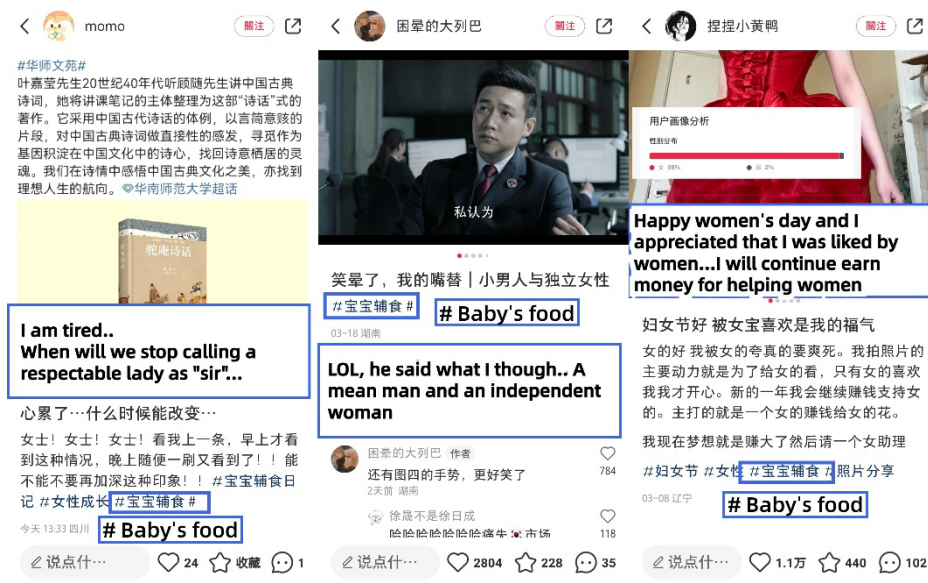

Figure 11. Contents on the medium Xiaohongshu regarding the feminism with the hashtag #Baby's food. Print-screened at 20th, March 2023.

[4]: South China Morning Post. 2021-10-18. *China's answer to Instagram is sorry for over-filtered images.* Available at https://www.scmp.com/tech/tech-trends/article/3152737/chinas-answer-instagram-apologises-upsetting-tourists-heavily, accessed at 20th, March 2023.

Our study suggests another possible interpretation of this finding: audiences presenting as female had a strong intention to share their opinion in the commentary area of Douyin, because they realized that their opinions had impacted other women's behavior, especially the video creator. Several samples in our study may provide shreds of evidence for this interpretation.

The creator of sample S5, Dahua living in Beijing as a stranger, demonstrated in the video sample how she finished the housework alone after all her family members were asleep. We noticed that 80% of the top 10 liked comments of this video posted by female viewers suggested that the video creator should involve her husband and children in the domestic work rather than finish it alone. Afterwards, the Dahua living in Beijing as a stranger released a series of videos in which her husband worked together with her on the domestic issue. In one of her subsequent videos[5], she named the process of finishing housework "*is the nightlife of we couples*" rather than "*is my nightlife*" in sample S5. It shows that she turned the domestic responsibility from her duty according to the traditional gendered labor division to the co-responsibility of her and her husband.

We suggest that this phenomenon is also related to the specific operation mechanism of Douyin. The brevity of the video format, coupled with the advanced editing software *Jianying*, and the use of daily life as the main subject matter, results in a significant reduction in the time cost for content production. This allows video creators on Douyin to quickly adjust their production based on audience's feedback.

[5] https://v.douyin.com/SExYbtW/, accessed at March 20th, 2023

In general, our findings respond to the study's question. According to the data, we infer that several female representations on Douyin have shown resistance to the traditional gender identity, including "women belong to domestic responsibility" and "a good marriage is more valuable that a good professional career". We observed that these representations were broadly received by audiences presenting as female. However, the representations which resisted traditional gender identity were still insufficient compared to the representations that adhered to traditional gender identity. In addition, one unanticipated finding was the strong intention of audiences presenting as female to share their experiences and opinions in the commentary area of all sample groups. It offers a possible direction for future research, namely, how comments counteract the gender perceptions of video creators.

Conclusion

"Representation is a political issue. Without the power to define our interests and to participate in the decisions that affect us, women – like any other group in society – will be subject to the definitions and decisions of others" (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004:139)

Representation has been a crucial theme in the female studies, as it is considered to be an important factor to affect women's gender identity (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). In China, prior studies have indicated several problems of female representations in media, which had an impact on females' identity (Wu, 2009; Bao, 2003; Feng & Xie, 2015; Yang & Du, 2017; Feng, 1998;). Recently, short-video-applications a new kind of media, have been popular in China – until 2018, they had already reached 648 million users, equal to 80% of Chinese internet users in that year (CNNIC, 2019). Inside, Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, is one of the most popular. Until December 2020, Douyin has recorded more than 600 million daily active users (Byte Dance, 2020). Prior literatures also observed a phenomenon that the female representations on Douyin were more diverse (China Women's News, 2020), compared to previous conventional media and text-picture-based social media Weibo (Chen, 2013; Liu, 2014). However, very little was found in the literature on the question regarding female representations published by women on Douyin and their reception.

The aim of this study was to understand the construction of female representations and its perception in the Chinese digital environment, especially, in the short video applications. Due to the popularity of Douyin as a short-video application, we chose it as our case of the study.

Addressed on two crucial concepts of the traditional identity of women that have been widely accepted by Chinese citizens (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1990, 2000, 2010), our research questions were:

Do the female representations on Douyin show a resistance of the traditional gender concept that "women belong to domestic responsibility" and be broadly received by audiences presenting as female?

Do the female representations on Douyin show a resistance of the traditional gender concept that "a good marriage is more valuable than a good professional career" and be broadly received by audiences presenting as female?

This study has shown that the female content creators on Douyin have provided a wide range of female representations, including those showed a resistance of these two traditional gender concepts. In the first part of our study, we noticed that 30% of representations were contradicted the traditional female identity and 30% of them only partially aligned with the traditional female identity. In the second part of our study, we found that most of representations were contradicted the traditional female identity, or the content creator had shown her opposition to the traditional female identity. It is found that most of audiences presenting as female supported these representations.

The second major finding was the insufficiency of the representations that show a resistance of the traditional gender concept "women belong to domestic responsibility" on Douyin. Only 30% of the representations in the samples of the first part of our study were rebelled against the traditional female identity.

Our final finding was the strongly intention of audiences presenting as female to share their experiences and opinions in the commentary area, regardless of the topic of the short video.

The preliminary results of this study throw light on the understanding of the construction of female representations in the Chinese digital environment. Furthermore, the outcomes of this research have contributed to understanding the preferable representations of female users of Douyin, potentially improving cultural products designed for women.

However, there is a methodological limitation which constrained current this study in several ways. First, due to the time limitation, the sample size is still small, which may limit its generalization. Secondly, the analysis in this study is processed by content analysis and semiotic. Although these methods are able to provide quantifiable and valid data from the context by a series of standardized measurements and discovered the hidden meaning and myths in relevant representations, they were inevitably affected by certain

subjectivity. Thus, it is still needed to conduct relevant interviews of the audiences presenting as female to provide a deeply insight behind their comments regarding the reason why they supported or not supported these female representations.

In further studies, considerably more work will be done in the addition of relevant interviews and the enlargement of the sample size, to provide a more generalizable and insightful answer to the study questions. In addition, the finding of this study provided a direction to the further studies, which is the action of audiences presenting as female. This study found that several audiences presenting as female reported their admiration of the female representations constructed by the content creators on Douyin, and some of the audiences even claimed that they have an intention to follow up these representations. Will these audiences presenting as female truly performance as these representations showed? Do these intentions existed commonly in the audiences presenting as female who exposed to the female representations on Douyin? Do these exposures influenced their gender identity, not only limited in the aspect showed in the representations? These are questions waiting to be answered in the further studies. In addition, based on the finding regarding the strong sharing intention of audiences presenting as female to communicate in the commentary area and affect the video creator, a possible direction for future research can be how comments counteract the gender perceptions of video creators.

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