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Engaging With Chinese Rural Women Influencers on Douyin: Female Viewers' Perspectives on Gender Norms

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Abstract

In recent years, the popularity of short videos has provided rural women in China with an unprecedented opportunity for self-presentation and engagement with the outside world, enabling them to articulate their own narratives with authenticity. On Douyin, a leading short video platform, content produced by rural women has gained significant attention, resonating particularly with female audiences. This study, based on 21 semi-structured interviews conducted with Chinese women viewers, investigates the factors driving the popularity of rural female influencers' content, the gratifications that female viewers obtain, and their perceptions of these rural influencers' authenticity. The findings reveal that female audiences gain insights into the structural challenges and vulnerabilities faced by rural women in China, as well as how these influencers challenge traditional gender norms. Ultimately, this study underscores the transformative potential of short videos to provide female audiences with a window into the lives of rural women, stimulating critical reflection on deeply embedded cultural constructs and advancing social inclusion. Promoting gender equality and social development may provide various opportunities for the autonomy of rural women in the future.

Keywords

audience reception; Douyin; gender norms; rural women; short videos; social networks

1. Introduction

According to the *54th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* (CNNIC, 2024), by June 2024 the number of internet users in the country had reached 1.099 million, with women constituting 48.8% of this

demographic, which aligns with the overall population ratio. Among these users, 304 million are from rural areas, accounting for 27.7% of the total. Within this context, the consumption of short videos has achieved a penetration rate of 95.5% (CNNIC, 2024). This data underscores China's position as a global leader in short video consumption, with significant platforms such as Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), Kwai, and Xigua Video playing dominant roles. Douyin, in particular, has emerged as the largest and most active short video platform in China, with 755 million monthly active users nationwide (Statista, 2024). Since its launch in 2016, Douyin has offered a wide array of editing tools and interactive features that allow users to easily produce and share content. These features have democratized media production and enabled previously marginalized voices, including rural women, to share their narratives and realities with a national and even a global audience (Kaye et al., 2021; Napoli, 2011).

Currently, an estimated 268 million women reside in rural China. These women have traditionally been portrayed in the media through limited and stereotypical lenses—often as passive, uneducated, and dependent caregivers (Wang & Li, 2023; Ye et al., 2016), reinforcing traditional gender roles, trivializing their experiences and exacerbating their vulnerability. Such portrayals have contributed to their symbolic and social invisibility (Cao, 2025; Ye et al., 2016). This results in scarce visibility in the male-dominated social order, leading to the phenomenon of the "invisible woman" (Perez, 2019). However, short video platforms are beginning to counteract these patterns by facilitating new representational possibilities. As these platforms gain popularity in rural China, women have transitioned from being marginal figures to active narrators of their own experiences (Luan & Zhang, 2021). For rural women, this platform may provide a new space for visibility, community-building, and identity articulation that challenges their historical erasure from mainstream media.

Despite the growing popularity of rural women influencers, a significant research gap remains concerning how audiences, particularly female, perceive and engage with this content. Most studies to date have centered on content creators and their economic or aesthetic strategies (Huang et al., 2024; Sui, 2020; Zeng & Shi, 2020). Far fewer have analyzed audience reception and its implications for shifting gender norms, especially from the perspective of rural-urban female spectatorship. Therefore, this study adopts a female audience perspective to explore the motivations, gratifications, and perceptions of viewers who engage with rural women influencers on Douyin. By analyzing their reactions and narratives, this research sheds light on how rural women's voices not only gain visibility but also inspire identification, empathy, and reflection across different demographics. The goal is to better understand how parasocial interactions in digital spaces contribute to the reshaping of gender ideologies and social inclusion in contemporary China.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Douyin and the Social Impact of Rural Female Influencers

The rise of short videos has opened new avenues for rural China to express itself. Collectively framed by the state under the rubric of *san nong* ("three rural issues")—referring to agriculture, the countryside, and rural populations—these themes have become prominent in both policy and media narratives (Hairong & Yiyuan, 2016; He, 2023). Platforms like Douyin have contributed to the production and circulation of rural imagery that is emotionally resonant and often idealized (Shao et al., 2024). Moreover, Zhu (2019) posits that rural life scenarios evoke nostalgia among audiences, mainly because they reflect simpler times and traditional values,

contrasting with the complexities of modern urban life. This nostalgic longing is often triggered by a desire for authenticity (Abidin, 2022) and connection to community (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021).

In alignment with national discourses on the *san nong*, the content created by rural women on Douyin tends to fall into several recurring thematic categories that reflect both their everyday realities and their aspirational self-representations (Chen et al., 2022). These categories include:

- Domestic labor and traditional food preparation;
- Farming, gardening, and agricultural life;
- Family and motherhood narratives (highlighting women's caregiving and emotional labor);
- Cultural performances and folk traditions (often evoking nostalgia and regional pride);
- Entrepreneurial endeavors (such as online sales of homemade products or livestream marketing).

In recent years, rural female influencers have emerged as prominent figures on these platforms. Scholars have noted how they use content to negotiate their identity as both modern and traditional subjects (Cao, 2025; Z. Li & Zhu, 2022). Influencers like Li Ziqi, Dongbei Yujie, and Xiaoying Yijia have achieved national fame by representing rural femininity in ways that oscillate between nostalgia and empowerment (Xiu, 2023; Zeng & Shi, 2020). However, the aesthetics and narratives they deploy are often complex, evoking both personal empowerment and commercialized spectacle (H. Li, 2020).

Existing research largely focuses on the production side: content strategies, visual narratives, and the political economy of influencer fame (Abidin, 2022; Xia et al., 2022). The few studies that examine audiences tend to emphasize consumption patterns or economic outcomes, such as e-commerce conversions (Yang & Ha, 2021; Yu & Cui, 2019). There is a lack of focused analysis on how female audiences interpret this content in gendered terms. This study contributes to filling that gap by foregrounding audience narratives and perceptions in relation to shifting gender roles.

2.2. Gender Representation and the Empowerment of Rural Women in Digital Media

While rural women have historically been marginalized in both media and policy discourses, the advent of user-generated content platforms has offered new representational affordances (Cao, 2025; Huang et al., 2024). Short videos allow for self-presentation and identity construction, but they also expose women to new vulnerabilities, such as performative constraints, platform regulation, and digital beauty standards (Abidin, 2021; Wei & Huang, 2023).

Drawing on Goffman's (1949) dramaturgical model of self-presentation, scholars have explored how rural women perform curated identities that respond to platform dynamics and audience expectations (Lu, 2022). These performances often entail the idealization of femininity that reinforces rather than disrupts traditional roles (Zhang & Xu, 2022). For example, while some content may showcase entrepreneurial independence, others emphasize caregiving roles and domesticity, thus reinforcing the notion of "kitchen as discipline" (Zhang & Xu, 2022).

From the perspective of media dependency, rural women's usage of short video platforms is often motivated by the desire for entertainment, social belonging, identity affirmation, and income generation (Cai, 2023;

Feng & Liu, 2021). Yet, scholars have also cautioned against assuming that visibility equates to empowerment. As Wei and Huang (2023) argue, digital visibility may lead to a micro-society of video governed by moral imperatives and social performance, rather than genuine agency.

2.3. Female Audiences and the Uses and Gratifications of Douyin Content

The uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973) offers a valuable framework for understanding why female viewers are drawn to the content posted by rural women influencers. According to this perspective, media consumers are active agents who seek out content to fulfill specific psychological and social needs. In this case, female viewers may use Douyin content for emotional gratification, social comparison, cultural learning, or to reflect on their own gendered experiences.

Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) note that digital platforms foster both personal expression and mediated community formation. This dual function is especially pertinent for urban women engaging with rural influencers, as it enables them to identify with different yet relatable narratives. Thus, the digital encounter between urban viewers and rural influencers becomes a space for cross-class dialogue, identity negotiation, and the reimagination of gender norms.

By analyzing viewers' reactions, this study sheds light on how women make sense of gender, class, and rurality in contemporary China. It contributes to the literature by shifting the analytical focus from media production to audience interpretation, revealing the affective and ideological task performed by rural women's content on Douyin.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews to examine female Chinese audiences' use of the Douyin platform, as well as their perception of and engagement with rural women influencers on this platform. The research was conducted following the ethical guidelines established by the Institutional Review Board of the University of International Business and Economics, to ensure the protection of participants' rights and welfare. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participant data and securely storing all recordings and transcripts.

3.1. Participant Recruitment and Characteristics

A total of 21 participants were recruited to conduct semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected through a multi-stage process utilizing purposive sampling to specifically identify individuals who met the study's criteria and could provide rich, relevant data. Eligibility criteria required participants to be active Douyin users who regularly consume content by rural female influencers, self-identified Chinese women who have engaged with at least three posts through likes or comments in the past month. The focus on female respondents is particularly relevant given existing scholarship showing women's heightened parasocial engagement with female content creators (Harff, 2022; Jin & Ryu, 2020) and aligns with the research objective of analyzing gender-specific audience dynamics in a context where rural women's digital self-representation may challenge traditional patriarchal norms.

Initial recruitment took place through fan groups on Douyin and WeChat dedicated to rural influencers, ensuring access to committed viewers. This approach attracted mainly younger users. To ensure demographic diversity, we supplemented this approach with a snowball sampling strategy, which effectively helped us reach older participants and overcome the challenges associated with accessing this demographic. Demographic diversity was monitored through a pre-interview survey capturing age (20–53 years), urban or rural residence (35% from tier-1 cities, 45% from tier-2 or 3 cities, and 20% from rural areas), and education (60% with bachelor's degrees, 30% from vocational training, and 10% with high school diplomas). This stratification ensured representation across key demographic variables affecting media consumption patterns.

3.2. Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as a method that allows probing into social life beyond superficial appearances and meanings (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). This approach facilitates a more dynamic interaction between the researcher and the participants, promoting an environment conducive to the revelation of experiences and feelings. Interviews were conducted via Tencent Meeting until data saturation occurred at 21 participants. Data saturation refers to the point at which the collection of data no longer yields significant new information (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). Saturation was rigorously assessed through three mechanisms: (a) real-time NVivo coding during data collection, (b) weekly peer debriefing sessions to identify concept replication, and (c) a final negative case analysis that confirmed the absence of new themes in the last three interviews. The semi-structured protocols included platform-specific questions regarding content discovery on Douyin as well as cultural contextualization questions to explore participants' personal impressions and perceptions about influencer videos. The sessions lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and were audio recorded only to preserve participants' identities. The interviews were manually transcribed to ensure accuracy in representing participants' responses.

3.3. Data Analysis Processes

The data obtained from the 21 interviews was coded using NVivo software, facilitating the organization and analysis of emerging concepts. Two independent coders were involved in the coding process to enhance reliability, with regular discussions to resolve discrepancies and refine codes. The coding process employed thematic analysis, resulting in 893 tags. An open coding process was applied to identify thematic categories within the total corpus, followed by axial coding to merge or divide these categories, culminating in a thematic tree that is presented in the results section. Quotations from participants are introduced by citing their age and place of residence, maintaining anonymity while providing context for each statement.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Initial Encounters With Rural Influencers on Douyin

The initial engagement of female viewers with rural influencers on Douyin reveals significant insights into how these women discovered content that ultimately shaped their perceptions of rural life and gender roles. The findings indicate that the majority of participants encountered these videos serendipitously while navigating the platform, primarily through algorithmic recommendations. This suggests that Douyin's algorithm plays a pivotal role in promoting rural influencers, facilitating exposure to their content by a broader audience.

Most participants reported that their first experiences of rural influencers were characterized by an element of surprise, as they stumbled upon videos that resonated with their interests and curiosities. One participant remarked: "At first, it was all recommended by Douyin's algorithm" (23, urban). This underscores the algorithm's function (Siles, 2023) as a gatekeeper, directing viewers toward specific content that aligns with their viewing habits. The algorithm not only curates content but also shapes user engagement, creating a feedback loop that encourages further exploration of rural narratives.

The influencers that initially captured the attention of these women were often the most popular figures in the rural influencer space who have amassed significant numbers of followers, showcasing their daily lives and culinary skills and serving as a source of fascination for urban viewers. Participants noted that the authenticity and relatability of these influencers contributed to their appeal, as they often depict a lifestyle that contrasts sharply with the fast-paced urban environment. One participant stated: "Their videos make me feel like I can escape my busy life and connect with something real" (33, rural). This contrast resonates particularly with those who have transitioned from rural to urban living, as they often seek to reconnect with their roots.

The communal aspect of content sharing significantly influences the visibility of rural influencers. While algorithmic recommendations play a crucial role in content discovery, participants highlighted that personal recommendations and direct searches are vital pathways to discovering these influencers. For instance, one participant noted: "My friend introduced me to some influencers she thought were good" (36, urban), illustrating how social dynamics and personal networks enhance the credibility and appeal of rural influencers. This word-of-mouth element not only fosters community engagement but also reinforces the authenticity of the content shared by these influencers.

This initial encounter with rural influencers not only piqued the curiosity of urban viewers but also set the stage for a deeper engagement with themes of rural life, gender roles, and cultural identity. As participants continued to explore this content, they began to form distinct preferences regarding the themes and narratives presented in these videos. The participants expressed a longing for a connection to rural life, often reflecting on their own backgrounds or aspirations. One participant noted: "When I watch these videos, I often think of when I was a child, and how the streams that flowed so happily when I was a child no longer exist, and how I would love to go back to my hometown and see it again" (50, urban). This sentiment is particularly poignant for those who have moved to urban areas, as they grapple with nostalgia for their rural upbringing.

Furthermore, the initial encounters with these influencers facilitated a re-examination of the participants' own lives, prompting them to reflect on their identities and the societal expectations they navigate. This engagement with rural content served not only as entertainment but also as a catalyst for personal introspection and growth.

4.2. Gratifications Sought by Female Viewers From Rural Influencer Content

The results of the interviews conducted with women reveal that the videos produced by rural influencers on Douyin fulfill a diverse array of gratifications, including satisfying curiosity, fulfilling informational and learning needs, offering emotional support, and enabling personal identification. These gratifications play a crucial role in shaping the viewing experience and the overall impact of rural influencer content on female audiences.

One of the most prominent gratifications identified is the satisfaction of curiosity. Many participants expressed a strong desire to explore the lives of rural women and the dynamics of rural communities. This curiosity often stems from a longing to understand a lifestyle that is frequently romanticized yet remains distant for urban viewers. As one participant noted: "I watch rural-themed videos mainly to change my taste and have a sense of freshness" (35, urban). This statement reflects a broader desire to escape the monotony of urban life and delve into new experiences that offer a different perspective. In contrast, rural viewers often have a more profound connection to these lifestyles, as they may still engage with or have memories of similar environments. Additionally, participants reported a deep yearning to connect with their own roots, influenced by their personal histories. For example, one participant shared: "I want to see if women in the new rural areas have new lifestyles; I am curious about their lives because I was very happy when I lived in the countryside" (24, urban). This longing is not a mere fleeting interest; it signifies a deeper quest for understanding the complexities of rural life and the cultural heritage that shapes it, often marked by the participants' own backgrounds and experiences.

Another significant gratification derived from rural influencer content is the fulfillment of informational and learning needs. The diverse range of topics covered in these videos—including traditional practices, cooking techniques, and agricultural skills—provides viewers with practical knowledge that they can apply in their own lives. Participants often turn to these videos for insights and skills that may have been lost or overlooked in urban settings. One participant remarked: "After watching these videos, I have a comprehensive understanding of some traditional intangible cultural heritage production techniques" (43, urban). This educational aspect enhances viewers' appreciation for cultural traditions and practical skills, allowing them to reconnect with their heritage. Urban viewers, particularly those unfamiliar with rural practices, find these insights particularly enlightening, while rural viewers may see them as a reaffirmation of their existing knowledge. Another participant noted: "Many of the traditional crafts shown in the rural bloggers' videos I had never seen before; watching the videos gave me a special visual understanding of these traditions" (22, urban). This highlights the crucial role rural influencers play in preserving and disseminating cultural knowledge, effectively bridging the gap between urban and rural experiences.

Emotional fulfillment is another critical dimension of the viewing experience. Participants reported feeling inspired and uplifted by the positive energy and resilience displayed by rural women in the videos. As one participant commented: "Every time I hear the background music in Dongbei Yujie's videos, I feel energized and inspired" (41, urban). This emotional connection enriches the viewing experience, enabling viewers to resonate with the influencers' journeys and challenges. Moreover, the representation of rural life often evokes nostalgia among viewers, reminding them of their own past experiences or aspirations. One participant reflected: "I also lived in a rural area when I was a child. By watching videos, I can recall many memories of my childhood" (53, urban). This emotional resonance is particularly strong among those who have transitioned to urban life, as they seek to reconnect with their cultural identity. This fosters a sense of belonging and connection to one's roots, reinforcing the importance of cultural identity.

Finally, the content produced by rural influencers offers viewers an opportunity for personal identification and expression. Many participants, particularly those who share similar rural backgrounds, indicated that they resonate deeply with the experiences depicted in the videos. One participant shared: "I also grew up in a rural area, and I particularly resonate with the content, which is why I am interested and continue to watch" (26, rural). This connection is often amplified for urban viewers who have rural origins, creating a bridge

between their past and present. This identification reinforces the notion that rural influencers serve as representatives of a shared cultural and social experience. For viewers who may feel disconnected from their roots, these videos provide a means of reconnecting with their identity. One participant, who works abroad, expressed: "While working overseas, watching these videos helped alleviate my homesickness. It reminds me that I am Chinese" (24, urban). This highlights the role of rural influencer content in fostering a sense of belonging and cultural pride among viewers, particularly those who may feel marginalized in urban settings.

In summary, the gratifications derived from rural influencer content are multifaceted and encompass curiosity, information, learning, emotional fulfillment, and personal identification. These elements collectively enhance the viewing experience, allowing female viewers to engage with and appreciate the richness of rural life and its cultural significance, while also highlighting the contrasting experiences and perspectives of urban and rural audiences.

4.3. Thematic Preferences and Motivations for Viewing

The thematic preferences expressed by participants reflect a coherent set of interests centered on daily life, food preparation, and agricultural work. These themes resonate strongly with the viewers, offering a glimpse into the realities of rural living that many urban viewers find both intriguing and educational. The consistent engagement with these themes suggests that the content fulfills a deeper need for connection to authenticity and simplicity in an increasingly complex urban environment.

Participants consistently reported a preference for content that showcases the culinary practices of rural women. One participant stated, "The videos I like to watch are mostly about cooking. Regardless of the video style, they always feature the three daily meals" (20, urban). This emphasis on food preparation highlights not only the cultural significance of culinary practices but also the viewers' desire to learn and replicate these skills in their own lives. The depiction of traditional cooking methods serves as a bridge between urban viewers and rural lifestyles, fostering a sense of connection and appreciation for the simplicity and authenticity of rural life. In contrast, rural viewers see these practices as a way to reaffirm their cultural identity and traditional skills, providing them with a sense of pride.

In addition to culinary content, participants expressed a keen interest in videos that portray the daily lives and work of rural women. These narratives often include scenes of agricultural labor, which participants found engaging and informative. One participant remarked: "I find it boring to see them too much in daily life; I prefer to see them engaging in some kind of labor, like gardening or tending to fruit trees" (53, urban). This desire for more dynamic representations of rural life indicates a yearning for authenticity and a deeper understanding of the challenges and joys faced by women in these communities. On the other hand, rural viewers also feel more connected to these representations, as they reflect their daily lives and experiences.

The motivations for consuming this content extend beyond mere entertainment; they encompass a range of emotional and informational needs. Many participants revealed a desire for stress relief and escapism from the pressures of urban life. One participant noted: "Watching these videos has become a way for me to alleviate stress" (24, urban). This sentiment was echoed by others who found comfort in the serene depictions of rural life, contrasting sharply with their hectic urban experiences. Another participant expressed: "After a long day at work, watching these videos feels like a breath of fresh air" (22, rural).

Besides serving as a source of information and learning, rural influencer content plays a crucial role in transmitting both practical skills and cultural knowledge. Participants expressed a clear interest in learning new cooking techniques and understanding traditional practices, demonstrating the educational value of these videos beyond mere entertainment. As one participant noted: "I really like food; I always want to learn how to cook. I often search on Douyin for a specific dish" (23, urban). This engagement reflects how influencer content facilitates informal learning, fulfilling viewers' desires to improve themselves and develop skills. Beyond practical skills, these videos function as a space for the reinterpretation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage. Traditions and rural customs are presented in engaging, accessible formats, allowing audiences to connect with and appreciate cultural practices that might otherwise be overlooked. In this context, learning occurs not only explicitly (through demonstrations and explanations) but also implicitly, through the normalization and appreciation of rural ways of life. Rural viewers, already familiar with these practices, find emotional resonance in the content as it reflects their own experiences and traditions. This connection allows them to feel validated and proud of their heritage, fostering a sense of community as they see their way of life being represented and appreciated by a wider audience.

From a gender perspective, this content also shapes perceptions of rural women. As participants engage with these videos, they develop a more nuanced understanding of rural life and its embedded gender roles. The visibility of female influencers on platforms like Douyin may challenge traditional stereotypes, encouraging audiences to rethink how labor, knowledge, and gender identity intersect in digitalized rural spaces. By showcasing women as cultural mediators and content creators, these videos highlight their agency and influence in shaping narratives about rural life. Thus, the content not only entertains but also serves as an educational tool, enriching audiences' understanding of the complexities of rural existence and gender representation in digital environments.

4.4. The Transformative Impact on Gender Roles and Social Inclusion

An essential aspect of the thematic preferences is the portrayal of gender roles within rural influencer content. The influencers often challenge traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, presenting women as multifaceted individuals who balance domestic responsibilities with entrepreneurial endeavors. This shift not only empowers rural women but also prompts urban viewers to reconsider their own perceptions of gender roles. This shift in representation has significant implications for the understanding of gender roles and the promotion of social inclusion and empowerment among vulnerable women in China, offering new perspectives on the roles that women can play within their families and communities.

Historically, Chinese society has imposed strict gender roles, with men often seen as primary breadwinners and decision-makers, while women were relegated to domestic responsibilities (Yao, 2021). However, the emergence of rural influencers is disrupting these long-standing norms. Participants from both urban and rural backgrounds noted that many rural women depicted in the videos are not only caretakers but also entrepreneurs, actively engaging in income-generating activities through their content creation. One urban participant observed: "Women who earn money making videos improve their family's conditions and their status rises" (26, urban). This highlights how short videos created by rural women have the power to transform, illustrate the possibility of economic agency and inspire other women to redefine their roles within their families and communities.

The influencers often embody a blend of traditional and modern values, showcasing their culinary skills while also asserting their independence and agency. This duality resonates with urban viewers who appreciate the balance between tradition and modernity. This enables them to navigate societal expectations while redefining their roles. Both rural and urban participants often express their admiration for influencers who challenge conventional gender expectations, such as Dongbei Yujie, who presents a strong and assertive image that contrasts with traditional portrayals of rural women. One participant remarked: "Yujie is a subversion in the sense that she not only keeps the house clean but also commands respect from her husband" (30, urban). This admiration underscores the potential for rural influencers to inspire change across both demographics.

Moreover, the narratives presented by rural influencers foster a sense of community among women, bridging gaps between rural and urban experiences. Participants from both groups indicated that these videos not only entertain but also arouse discussions about gender equality and empowerment. Urban viewers find value in the shared experiences of rural women, which encourages them to reflect on their own lives and societal expectations. These narratives serve as a catalyst for dialogue concerning the roles of women in both rural and urban settings, promoting a broader understanding of gender dynamics in contemporary Chinese society.

As viewers engage with these narratives, they begin to recognize the complexities of rural women's lives and the challenges they face, such as early marriage and gender preference for sons. Participants expressed empathy and concern for the struggles faced by these women, acknowledging the need for greater social support and resources. This shared understanding allows viewers to recognize both the differences and similarities in their experiences related to gender roles and social inclusion.

5. Conclusion

Situating our findings within the Uses and Gratifications framework (Katz et al., 1973), this research reveals how audiences—particularly female viewers—actively engage with influencer content to fulfill emotional, informational, and social needs. Rural viewers tend to connect through shared lived experiences, while urban audiences engage with these narratives to learn about unfamiliar rural realities, thereby fostering empathy and reflective identification. This dual mode of reception underscores the platform's potential to bridge geographical and socio-economic divides through emotional and cognitive engagement.

The role of parasocial interaction is especially critical. Female audiences build one-sided yet meaningful relationships with these influencers, facilitating not only entertainment but also education and empowerment. As shown in previous studies (Abidin, 2021; Kaye et al., 2021), such interactions contribute to a sense of intimacy and solidarity that strengthens the impact of influencer narratives on public discourse. In this study, these dynamics foster cross-regional understanding and a re-evaluation of women's roles within both rural and urban contexts. By offering authentic and multidimensional portrayals of rural life, these influencers counteract the oversimplified images often perpetuated in mainstream media (Gómez-Puertas et al., 2015; Roca-Cuberes et al., 2018; Zeng & Shi, 2020; Zhu, 2019). Their content highlights a reality that is at once grounded in tradition and open to modern reinterpretation. However, the blending of labor, domesticity, and self-expression within their videos also aligns with recent scholarship on affective labor and gendered self-branding in digital economies (e.g., Feng & Liu, 2021; Xia et al., 2022). Importantly, the study underscores the intersection of empowerment and platform capitalism. While these influencers harness Douyin's affordances to claim visibility and agency, their success also depends on

algorithmic visibility and audience engagement metrics, highlighting a tension between empowerment and exploitation within digital labor regimes (Abidin, 2022; Kaye et al., 2021).

The content produced by these women also serves an educational function. Through demonstrations of culinary practices, farming techniques, and cultural rituals, influencers transmit to viewers traditional knowledge, creating a bridge between generations and geographies. In a society where rural-urban divides and gendered labor hierarchies remain pronounced (Hairong & Yiyuan, 2016), this pedagogical function contributes to a form of grassroots cultural preservation that simultaneously promotes inclusion. Moreover, the emotional gratification experienced by female viewers should be understood not merely as entertainment but as a form of mediated solidarity. This affective engagement fosters a virtual community wherein viewers, regardless of social background, are encouraged to reimagine gender roles and develop a sense of collective empowerment (Shao et al., 2024; Sui, 2020). These themes emerged repeatedly in interviews with female viewers, who referenced both the authenticity and aspirational aspects of the content. They perceived rural female influencers as simultaneously rooted in traditional practices and capable of navigating modern digital economies. In this sense, influencers become hybrid figures negotiating old and new gender norms.

In sum, this study highlights how Douyin operates as a dynamic platform where gender, class, and geography intersect in the production and reception of digital narratives. Rural influencers are not merely entertainers but function as symbolic agents of social inclusion, whose performances invite audiences to reconsider conventional norms around womanhood, labor, and place. They embody a digital counterpublic that challenges both marginalization and idealization of rural women, offering instead a nuanced, lived, and affective representation. The findings thus contribute to ongoing discussions on gendered media representation, digital rurality, and audience engagement in contemporary China. They invite further inquiry into how platforms can support diverse forms of visibility without replicating exploitative structures. Crucially, this study raises questions about sustainability and equity: What kind of support—economic, infrastructural, institutional—are necessary to ensure that rural women can continue to benefit from and contribute to the digital public sphere? And who is responsible for providing this support in an increasingly platformized society?

By foregrounding the experiences and reception of rural women influencers, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how digital media can both reflect and reshape social realities. It calls for a continued commitment to studying how marginalized voices are articulated, received, and sustained in the ever-evolving media landscape.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing does not apply to this article.

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