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Realistic Representation, Generation Logic, and Fluidity of Digital Gender in Media Space

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Abstract:
To clarify the impact of digital technology on gender concepts and to contribute to the construction of a gender-friendly society, this study employs participatory observation and in-depth interviews to explore three aspects: the representation of digital gender in reality, the logic behind its formation, and gender temperaments. The research results indicate that with the intervention of digital technology, platforms like Douyin exemplify the transition from biological gender to digital gender. This transition is specifically manifested in three areas: the subversion of traditional gender order, inclusivity of gender orientation, and the performance of gender representation. The formation of digital gender is inseparable from the affordances of technology, the open media space, and the social support generated by layer aggregation. Digital gender is not static; rather, it promotes the diverse development of gender temperaments through its confrontation with the traditional gender order. However, while discussing the liberation of individuals through digital gender, it is crucial to remain vigilant about the "utopian" aspect of digital gender, ensuring that gender labels do not become shackles for self-identity and comprehensive personal development.

Keywords:
Media Space, Digital Gender, Gender Expression, Fluidity of Gender Expression

1 Introduction

As a phenomenon-level short video social platform, Douyin reflects a microcosm of contemporary digital society. With the rise of content creators with diverse gender traits on Douyin, often garnering millions of followers and hundreds of thousands of likes, it indicates that the traditionally "solid" gender order in the media space is moving towards a "liquid" state, giving rise to new gender discourses. The mainstream discourse on gender is closely linked with social structures, economic development, and cultural openness. Along with the new wave of digital "revolution," the digital reconstruction of all elements of social production challenges the existing social order, and gender order is no exception. "Liquid" digital gender is gradually forming as a cultural phenomenon. Physiological gender, as a biological component, is an inherent attribute of human beings [1]. Digital gender represents a rewriting of traditional gender traits through digital technology, presenting gender traits that may either align with or starkly contrast with physiological gender, showcasing a fluid state and diversified gender traits. This tension challenges traditional gender order. The video creators on Douyin

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who break away from conventional gender traits and transform from amateurs to internet celebrities under user attention are clear evidence of this phenomenon of digital gender creation.

2 Literature Review

Since Gaye Tuchman's in-depth discussion of women's images and media relationships in Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media (1978) marked the beginning of the “Gender and Communication” discourse [2]. The research paradigm on gender has matured significantly over the past 40 years, integrating with various emerging disciplines and exhibiting vigorous development [3]. Gender research topics are generally explored from two dimensions: on one hand, there is a micro-level vertical extension focusing on specific gender issues, including women's political participation [4], gender traits [5], media representation of gender imagination [6], and individual gender experiences [7]. On the other hand, there is a macro-level horizontal expansion addressing abstract gender issues, including body and gender [8], gender and history [9], gender and law [10], and the Sinicization of gender research [11]. However, considering the overall context of gender research and the volume of publications on gender topics, gender marginal groups (including homosexuals, transgender individuals, queers, etc.) also remain on the periphery of research. The presentation of diverse gender traits on Douyin reveals that a considerable number of groups belong to the gender marginal groups. Therefore, examining digital gender from the perspective of contemporary digital technology's reproduction of gender has practical significance for advancing the “comprehensive and free development of individuals.”

In fact, the fusion of gender traits has been mentioned in the theory of androgynous personality. A.S. Rossi introduced the concept of androgyny, defining it as individuals possessing both masculine and feminine traits simultaneously [12]. Sandra Bem was the first to use the Gender Role Inventory (BSRI) and Personality Attribution Questionnaire (PAQ) to measure male and female personalities, and she indicated that people could be androgynous [13]. Androgynous personalities are better adapted to the complex environment of modern society. Research on the theory of androgynous personality in China focuses on the enhancement of individual personalities and the positive societal implications. However, the complex manifestations of gender traits in online spaces cannot be simply categorized as masculine, feminine, or a blend of both. In fact, for digital gender individuals with a male physiological sex, their ultimate gender traits may present a “non-masculine” pattern, which cannot be described merely as a mix of male and female traits. Therefore, introducing digital gender classification from a technical perspective helps describe the diverse gender traits of today, supplement theoretical development with a technical perspective, and promote the theoretical significance in the digital age. The shift from “androgynous personality” to “digital gender” contributes to the comprehensive development of individuals.

3 Methods

This study employs participatory observation and in-depth interviews as its research methods, focusing on the following three research questions: What are the specific representations and generative logic of digital gender in media spaces? How does digital gender construct its unique gender temperament within the

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frameworks of masculinity and femininity? The subjects of observation include, but are not limited to, dozens of Douyin content creators such as Lian Longqing Kudos, Nie Xiaoqian Ta Laoban, Yin Keyi, Neixiang Zhangzhang, An Maoyuan, Manxue, and Windy Wendy. The participatory methods encompass live-stream interaction, commenting, and interacting with fans in the comment sections. Additionally, in-depth interviews are conducted with eight young users who extensively use Douyin, including two individuals who identify as digital gender, with a biological gender distribution of four males and four females. The decision to interview extensively engaged Douyin users rather than exclusively digital gender individuals stems from the recognition that the presentation of diverse gender temperaments on Douyin is a cultural phenomenon. As digital natives, young users are positioned at the intersection of traditional gender order and digital gender order, making them sensitive to the shifts in gender dynamics within media spaces. Therefore, the perspectives of traditional gender individuals can provide insight into the broader cultural phenomenon and its multiple dimensions. Moreover, China's Medium and Long-Term Youth Development Plan (2016-2025) defines youth as those aged 14-35, thereby excluding groups with relatively underdeveloped or rigid gender consciousness. Consequently, the selected interviewees are concentrated within the age range of 23-29. By the time the sixth interview was conducted, a significant amount of repetition in responses was observed, and confirmation from the seventh and eighth interviewees revealed few new perspectives or angles. Thus, the final sample size is determined to be eight interviewees.

Table 1 Interviewee Basic Information

Interviewee	Gender	Occupation	Age	Interview Channel
A1	Male	Student	24	In-person
A2	Male	Construction Industry	29	WeChat Voice
A3	Male	Doctor	25	WeChat Voice
A4	Male	Student	24	WeChat Voice
A5	Female	Civil Servant	23	WeChat Voice
A6	Female	Finance Industry	26	WeChat Text
A7	Female	Student	23	WeChat Voice
A8	Female	Music Teacher	25	WeChat Text

4 Digital Gender Representation in Media Spaces

Digital gender attributes have disrupted traditional gender symbol systems, causing gender signifiers to no longer fully align with the gender culture under patriarchy. The internal collapse of traditional gender symbols and the fragmentation of gender signifiers have resulted in a state of fluidity—"liquid" gender attributes. This fluidity is specifically manifested in three dimensions: gender order, gender orientation, and gender representation.

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4.1 Subversion of Gender Order: Media Resistance under Social Gender Norms

Traditional gender order is an ideological operation system under patriarchy, which divides gender into male and female, and regulates behavior through the framework of masculine and feminine traits. While people's behavior in physical spaces may occasionally deviate from these norms, societal discipline, internalized through self-regulation [14], typically reins such challenges back to the established order. However, Douyin's diverse modes of self-disclosure have loosened the disciplinary grip of the physical space. Even if certain deviations occur, they still remain within the bounds of acceptance in the digital society. “I've always been referred to as a tomboy by others because my parents let me run wild when I was a child, and I would go out and play right after school, so my family always said I didn't act like a girl. So, I personally follow many of these digital gender influencers you mentioned, and I feel like they're living the kind of life I want” (A6). Digital gender individuals utilize the Douyin platform to challenge traditional gender order through video-based media resistance, and as the algorithm aggregates similar groups, it forms the social force behind this oppositional discourse. In this process, Douyin also provides a compensatory space for latent digital gender individuals to engage in resistance, transforming latent participation into explicit media resistance through support, likes, and the traffic logic that drives video dissemination.

4.2 Inclusion of Gender Orientations: Social Recognition through Media Cultivation

Digital gender, characterized by diverse gender traits, inherently exhibits an openness to gender orientation. Douyin, as a large-scale short video platform with over 700 million daily active users, serves as a powerful mass communication medium in contemporary society. George Gerbner's cultivation theory suggests that mass media subtly influence audiences through the symbolic reality they provide. Although Gerbner originally proposed this theory in the context of television, it remains highly explanatory in today's digital communication era [15]. The inclusive attitudes toward gender orientation by Douyin video creators with diverse gender traits subtly influence their audience, gradually fostering a cultural identification with gender diversity centered around these creators. “At first, I didn't understand some unconventional behaviors because I'm generally a conservative and traditional person. But after seeing more of these videos, like those from the influencer An Maoyuan, I gradually started to overlook his gender traits and began to understand his humor. Sometimes, when I see gender-unfriendly comments, I even respond to them. So yes, because of Douyin, I'm no longer sensitive to the topic of gender orientation” (A4). The media's intervention causes biological gender to become somewhat invisible, with actors connected through content and subconsciously engaging with and sharing an open gender culture.

4.3 The Performance of Gender Representation: The Traffic Code in the Media Spectacle

In the digital age, video expression has altered the way people live, linking reality with the virtual world. People have transitioned from a text-based, image-based existence to a video-based one, and Douyin's entertainment and social attributes give short videos a dramatic quality. American scholar Douglas Kellner, building on the concept of the society of the spectacle, proposed the idea of the media spectacle, arguing that spectacles reflect the cultural values of society and address social conflicts in a dramatic way [16]. Douyin has become a new digital space in which traffic acts as the currency of exchange, driving the competition between diverse cultures. Users can gain visibility on the platform through the dramatic elements inherent in the

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media spectacle, with traffic serving as the key to cultural relevance. The body, as a primary gender representation, becomes involved in this pursuit of traffic, emerging as a popular cultural symptom [17]. “I probably use Douyin more to watch beautiful women; I think those girls are really cool” (A8). “Nowadays, I can't even tell guys from girls. I often come across really attractive girls on Douyin, but when I check the comments, I find out they’re men. It feels weird, and I get a bit disoriented” (A4). The diverse presentation of gender traits on Douyin temporarily allows individuals in the media space to overlook the discipline imposed by physical space. The performance of the body as a gender representation in the media space blurs the boundaries between digital and biological gender, providing a safe haven for video creators with diverse gender traits to shed the constraints of their biological gender. Through the “traffic code” associated with the body, these creators gain traffic support in Douyin’s cultural domain, fostering a culture that transcends biological gender.

5 The Logic Behind the Formation of Digital Gender in Media Spaces

Digital gender, as a form of implicit societal expectation regarding gender, has long existed like the proverbial elephant in the room. Due to the structural gender order and the societal discipline against deviant behaviors, this implicit expectation has remained hidden. However, advancements in technology, progress in media, and the development of networked communities have opened up new possibilities for individual expression, leading to the emergence of digital gender.

5.1 Technological Affordances: The Digital Foundation of Gender Formation

Cognitive psychologist James J. Gibson introduced the concept of affordances, defining them as the compatibility between an organism and its environment. This compatibility can be perceived by the organism, enabling it to take actions that realize its values [18]. With technological advancements, artificial media, such as new media, form the foundational elements of the artificial world, and their interaction with humans can be seen as an extension of affordance theory, i.e., media affordances. Rice posits that media affordances refer to the characteristics of the media that users can perceive and utilize to achieve their goals according to their needs [19]. Media affordances, as a technological foundation, include built-in possibilities such as pseudo-anonymity, self-presentation, editability, and visibility. They also provide “social accessibility” “trigger ability of identity reflection” and “sustainability of emotional communities” for those with “liquid” gender temperaments [20]. These affordances allow digital gender to exist independently of physical spaces, suspending the dominance of gender hegemony in physical spaces and creating personal gender orders in cyberspace, thereby distinguishing between physical and digital gender temperaments.

5.2 Media Spaces: The Open Zone for the Formation of Gender Temperaments

The development of media is a process of continually opening up production spaces, from the browsability of portals to the interactivity of social platforms, and now to the creativity offered by short-video social platforms like Douyin. Media continuously open up production spaces, making users' actions in media spaces freer, and diverse gender temperaments continue to evolve in these open media spaces. Particularly in the current media landscape, pseudo-anonymity offers digital gender users a space for adjustable disclosure, placing them in a comfortable cultural zone during cultural formation. The openness of production and the diversity of culture turn media spaces into arenas for the dissemination of heterogeneous cultures, reducing the sup-

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pression of mainstream culture from physical spaces to some extent. Deviant cultures from physical spaces find their operational tracks in media spaces. On one hand, there is the continuous enrichment of mainstream and popular cultures, while on the other, subcultures and niche cultures grow and break boundaries, continually expanding and deepening the connotations and extensions of participatory culture, as mentioned by Henry Jenkins.

5.3 Aggregation of Circles: The Social Power Behind the Formation of Digital Gender

In the context of traditional Chinese culture, cultural discipline is implicit, representing the cultural choices of the majority. The consensus formed by the majority culture creates a cultural composite that includes both the excellence of traditional culture and the biases of prejudice. In the era of mass media, the culture held by the majority becomes the mainstream culture, while the minority remains in the unseen corners of the cultural spiral of silence, with the biases inherent in mainstream culture significantly eroding the living space of subcultures. In the current self-media era, the visibility brought by technological intervention allows cultural expressions to break through the boundaries defined by mainstream culture, enabling the "minority" to gather into circles. Various interests are nurtured by new media technology platforms, fostering a social structure where circles proliferate [21]. Circles are not just aggregative structures that connect minority groups but also emotional support systems, providing emotional backing to minority groups against mainstream cultural systems. Under the discourse of traditional patriarchy, gender order is strict, and behaviors that violate this order are corrected through cultural norms, for instance, labeling groups that do not conform to traditional gender temperaments as "sissies" or "tomboys," and stigmatizing deviant behaviors through patriarchal ideology. On one hand, the emotional support from circles connects individuals into groups, magnifying the minority into the majority, resisting patriarchal discipline with collective power. On the other hand, through active cultural production and emotional comforting measures, circles realize a sense of belonging for the group. In essence, digital gender is the result of empowerment by technology. The media affordances brought by technology make "connectivity" a cultural adhesive, leading to the aggregation of those with "liquid" gender temperaments and digitally reshaping traditional physical gender, making digital gender possible.

6 The Oscillation of Digital Gender Temperaments in Media Spaces

6.1 The Phantom of Patriarchy: Discipline of Traditional Order

Digital gender relies on digital platforms for its existence, and once removed from these platforms, it reverts to the gender order dominated by physical gender. Observing the comments on these accounts often reveals fans sharing their encounters with digital gender users in real life, where they describe these individuals as conforming to traditional gender symbols in their social interactions, referring to them as "normal people" in reality. Even within digital platforms, digital gender does not completely dominate but rather exists in a state of oscillation and tug-of-war with the order of physical gender. As A4 and A8 indicated, while they can momentarily disregard the gender discipline from physical spaces on Douyin, the traditional gender order continues to produce discipline once they leave the media space, allowing users to only briefly experience the thrill of ideological deviation. Digital culture develops on the foundation of real culture and influences it in return. However, as a cultural order rooted in physical space, real culture is more stable than the culture

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formed on digital platforms, leading to digital gender still being influenced by traditional gender order in digital spaces. The traditional gender order constructed by patriarchy acts like an invisible ghost, constantly affecting people's choices regarding gender temperaments.

6.2 Oscillation as a Response: Gender Strategies in a Fluid Space

Cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams proposed the concept of “Mobile Privatization,” suggesting that with the rise of electronic media, social mobility increases, while people's lives become more confined by media, becoming privatized. With the development of new media technologies, “Mobile Privatization” has gradually evolved into “Privatized Mobility,” where people consume media content in fluid time and space [22]. Douyin, relying on mobile devices, has realized “Privatized Mobility,” forming a unique cultural space. The digitization of cultural space and the realization of action space make individual gender cognition, as a battlefield of cultural struggle, become oscillatory. However, oscillation also serves as a balancing strategy, appearing to be a passive response but, in reality, is an active media practice. Interviewees generally stated that the gender culture they encountered on Douyin enhanced their tolerance and openness toward individuals with diverse gender temperaments. Although they may not fully accept it, they are less likely to disparage it. Therefore, the oscillation allows digital and traditional to interpenetrate, creating a forward-moving tension in gender cognition through the feedback effect of gender culture in digital spaces.

7 Discussion

The development of digital technology undeniably represents a rewriting of gender. However, behind the empowerment, media also obscures the real issues in an imperceptible manner. While the Douyin platform ostensibly creates a gender utopia, its algorithmic logic subtly constructs isolated circles, with these phenomena existing in contradiction yet simultaneously present. Therefore, a reflective perspective is required to address the gender imaginations brought about by media affordances. On one hand, digital empowerment has crafted a gender utopia where gender diversity begins to resist gender hegemony. The empowerment provided by digital media allows individuals with diverse gender traits to digitally exist on the Douyin platform according to their own disclosure standards, gradually forming their own narratives of digital gender in the process. The algorithm's targeted audience recommendations offer a gender-safe space for those wishing to make their voices heard. In the comment sections, users become part of an “us” and resist the intrusion of heterogeneous groups. Simultaneously, the content production by digital gender individuals has also led to an increase in self-media participation. Examination of the comment sections of observational accounts reveals that a considerable number of users also use Douyin to express themselves, with some of their posts reflecting gender diversity. The aggregation and voice of gender diversity activists constitute a resistance to traditional gender hegemony and create a gender-diverse utopia for “us.”

On the other hand, digital disempowerment constructs isolated circles, with algorithmic circles creating gender echo chambers. The imagination of diverse gender traits is largely built by algorithms, which capture the digital gender traits exposed by users during their use of Douyin and further push related content, so the final presentation of digital gender culture and the imagination of diverse gender traits occur only within these circles. Additionally, analysis of observational samples can easily fall into a false optimism regarding

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gender traits. Given that gender-related issues in reality often provoke gender disputes and traffic preferences, the "simulated environment" within these circles isolates participants from the media environment, with the echo chambers only becoming "visible" when gender public issues emerge.

8 Conclusion

This paper, from the perspective of gender studies and using the digital platform Douyin as an example, observes and distills changes in digital gender in terms of gender order, orientation, and representation within media spaces, and further summarizes the generation logic of digital gender in media spaces, namely, the media space built by the affordances of technology and the accompanying circle aggregation. Since digital gender is generated by platforms, individuals experience a gap in gender cognition when returning to reality, shaping a fluid gender order and fluctuating gender traits in the tension between reality and media space. Algorithms, as a form of embedded power within the platform, inherently write a patriarchal narrative, reflecting the will of platform decision-makers and owners. Content production through the translation and labeling of content is mediated content production, with the reproduction of its inherent meaning and the sense of detachment after returning to reality subtly disciplining participants into traditional gender orders. Therefore, attention to the gender-diverse culture brought about by technology must also maintain cautious optimism and reflection.

Not all content presented by digital gender individuals is high-quality; in actual investigations, there are also vulgar media presentations. Therefore, while discussing the gender culture triggered by excellent content, it is also necessary to rectify vulgar and traffic-driven content. Douyin, as a living space in the digital age and a field for informal education, involves many minors who may become curious about deviations from traditional gender orders and model them. Thus, attention should be paid to the informal educational functions beyond Douyin's entertainment features, further refining the algorithmic recommendation weights and standards to provide a more inclusive media environment for gender-diverse individuals, a purer user experience for minors, and to form a broadly gender-friendly culture in society.

The impact of media on gender traits and the shaping of digital gender is an implicit and enduring process. Although the foundation of digital gender is technology and media, its core lies in respect and care for individuals. Digital platforms represented by Douyin make digital gender possible, liberate human nature, and bring more imaginations about gender to individuals, representing a return to the human essence. Attention and discussion on digital gender will subtly bridge virtual and real worlds with respect for gender, making gender no longer a constraint to individual comprehensive development.

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