Cross-Gender Performances and Audience Engagement on Douyin

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Abstract. This study explores the cultural and commercial impacts of cross-gender performances on Douyin, one of China's leading short video platforms. These performances not only entertain but also challenge traditional gender norms, engaging predominantly young, urban female audiences. Using a mixed-methods approach, this research combines quantitative data from proprietary analytics tools with qualitative content analyses to delve into how such performances resonate with viewers and influence societal views on gender. Findings indicate that these narratives significantly cater to the emotional and cultural needs of the audience. It fosters a deep connection that transcends mere entertainment. Moreover, the huge number of followers of cross-gender performers in Douyin advances more paths toward commercial success. This is increasingly significant in entertainment today, as strategic marketing often combines with artistic performance. This study underscores the role of innovative digital platforms like Douyin in shaping modern social narratives and highlights their potential in driving both cultural discourse and commercial success in the digital age.

Keywords: cross-gender performance, digital media, gender diversity, audience engagement

1. Introduction

In today's digital age, the rise of short-video social media platforms has significantly transformed the global dynamics of media consumption and creation. Douyin, known internationally as TikTok, stands as the largest platform, with 746.5 million active users as of 2023 [1], profoundly shaping cultural and social narratives. This platform employs sophisticated algorithms and innovative tools that democratize media production. Through algorithmic personalization, each user receives a uniquely tailored video feed, aligning with their individual personality traits, content preferences, and environmental factors [2].

Within the realm of non-traditional storytelling, there has been a notable increase in the popularity of cross-gender performances on Douyin, particularly among younger audiences. Initially, male performers impersonating females dominated the trend, but the visibility of female performers impersonating males has steadily risen [3]. Top performers have garnered over 10 million followers on the Douyin platform. These performers captivate audiences with compelling narratives and striking portrayals that challenge traditional gender norms, fostering vibrant discussions and attracting significant public interest. Their large follower base and visibility also open doors for commercialized advertisements and sales opportunities.

This research paper aims to analyze the content and narratives of these cross-gender performances and their impact on fans. It seeks to understand how these narratives resonate with the cultural and emotional needs of their audience, thereby generating significant traffic and social influence. By employing a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative data from third-party monitoring tools with qualitative online observations, this study will provide an in-depth analysis of how these performances captivate and engage viewers. Ultimately, the paper seeks to uncover the cultural and economic implications of such content on short-video platforms, emphasizing the transformative power of digital media in shaping modern social narratives surrounding gender.

2. Literature Review

In contrast to mainstream media, which disseminates information in a top-down manner, Douyin has pioneered a decentralized approach to content creation and distribution [4]. Due to its inclusivity and creative potential, Douyin provides a space where various minority groups and subcultures can thrive [5]. According to the China internet audio-visual industry development report [6], there are six main categories of entertainment themes: talent, lifestyle, academic studies, workplace, parenting, and science, with talent performances comprising 43.1% [6]. Notably, cross-gender performances are particularly prominent [3].

Cross-gender performance typically involves assuming the identity of a different gender through attire, speech, and mannerisms characteristic of that gender [7]. Historically, in Chinese theater, such as Beijing opera, male actors would often impersonate female characters, demonstrating their ability to embody feminine roles [8]. However, cross-gender performances on Douyin differ significantly. Douyin performers push beyond traditional gender boundaries, often exploring more fluid, contemporary interpretations of gender roles. They frequently blend humor with social commentary, making their content accessible to a wide audience. These performances offer viewers a glimpse into "other people's lives" or what is often called the "other me," touching on important life themes such as dating, meetings, games, travel, meals, and other moments of joy and sorrow [3], [5].

It is evident that "content is king"[9]. Scholars have dedicated considerable effort to analyzing the storytelling and narrative techniques used in these performances. A common finding is that cross-gender content frequently focuses on female-related themes. According to Wang, cross-gender performance themes can be divided into two categories: one revolves around a continuous plot forming a thematic series, while the other explores undefined, evolving themes, primarily centered on daily life. Tang et al. [10] and Xing [5] categorized the content of popular bloggers, identifying themes such as romantic relationships, mother-child dynamics, friendships, and work life. These performances capture public attention and spark extensive discussions, with users resonating deeply with the content, often sharing personal stories in response. Cross-gender videos provide viewers with insight into "other people's lives" or what can be termed "another me," exploring significant life themes through these portrayals [5].

The visibility that cross-gender performers achieve on Douyin opens significant commercial opportunities. The China internet audio-visual industry development report highlights that female users are more likely to engage with and support marginalized content, a form of engagement crucial for increasing a performer's visibility and monetization potential [11]. Douyin's ranking system evaluates account performance based on five criteria: the number of followers, follower growth, shares, comments, and likes. While the number of followers indicates a performer's popularity, the other metrics assess engagement and content impact [9]. This system reveals how media visibility intersects with e-commerce opportunities. Performers can leverage their online presence to secure brand endorsements and engage in direct sales through live-streaming events. These commercial activities are essential as they not only provide financial support for creators but also amplify their voices, allowing them to reach a wider audience.

3. Data Collection Methodology

Sampling selection: The paper adopted a purposive sample of 20 prominent Douyin cross-gender content creators in Table 1. These participants were selected based on their visibility and influence, which are crucial for understanding the dynamics of audience engagement and the effectiveness of such content.

Table 1. Sample List [12]

Name	Followers	Name	Followers
V1. Maomao Jie	33.89 million	V11. Ye Haiyang	8.77 million
V2. Yegongzi	27.63 million	V12. Dayao Tongxue	7.09 million
V3. Qingdao Dayi Zhangdaxia	22.83 million	V13. Xiao Mao 190cm	4.96 million
V4. Zheng Lifen	16.58 million	V14. DalaoR	4.81 million
V5. Zhou Xiaonao	15.51 million	V15. Yin Keyi	4.23 million
V6. Guo Gaiwer	15.06 million	V16. Wushilan	3.59 million
V7. Mao Guangguang	13.04 million	V17. Mala Xiaoxianrou	3.48 million
V8. Xiao Lichaoye	10.23 million	V18. Nie Xiaoqian	3.13 million
V9. Zhibo	10.16 million	V19. An Maoyuan	2.90 million
V10. Han Meijuan	9.26 million	V.20 Fangdongde Feisi	6.96 million

Quantitative methodology: Quantitatively, data regarding audience engagement and demographic details over the last 90 days were extracted from ByteDance's proprietary analytics tools—Oceanengine and Xingtu. This analysis aimed to outline the main demographic characteristics of the audience, considering factors such as age, gender, and geographic distribution. By correlating these quantitative findings with qualitative insights, the study seeks to understand why certain demographics are more inclined to engage with cross-gender content.

Qualitative methodology: The qualitative component involved a detailed content analysis of the selected influencers' videos. This was carried out using a hybrid approach, combining Xing's narrative analysis framework with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) theory [5]. This method enabled a comprehensive examination of the themes and narratives within the content, categorizing them into distinct themes that resonate with viewers.

4. Quantitative Analysis

This study used quantitative analysis to measure audience engagement with objective data. Statistical methods were applied to quantify patterns such as gender and age distribution, offering a clear understanding of who is engaging with cross-gender content on Douyin and to what extent.

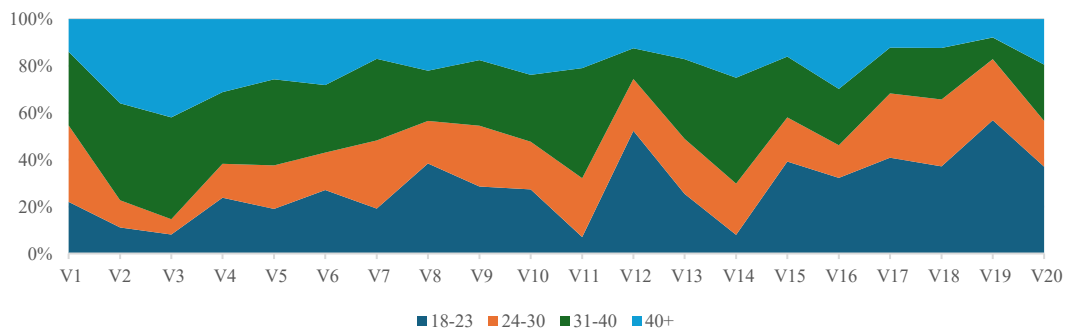## 4.1. Gender and Age Distribution

The audience analysis for cross-gender performances on Douyin reveals a predominant female viewership. All sampled influencers show that more than 50% of their followers are female, with 14 out of 20 influencers having over 70% female followers (as shown in Figure 1 & Figure 2). The influencer with the highest female viewership is Ye Haiyang, where females make up 94% of his audience, while the lowest, though still a majority, is Qingdao Danyi Zhang Daxia at 54% (as shown in Figure 2). This gender imbalance is particularly evident in the 18-40 age group, where females consistently outnumber males across 18 of the 20 profiles analyzed, often exceeding 70% ((as shown in Figure 1). This suggests a strong preference for cross-gender content among young women.
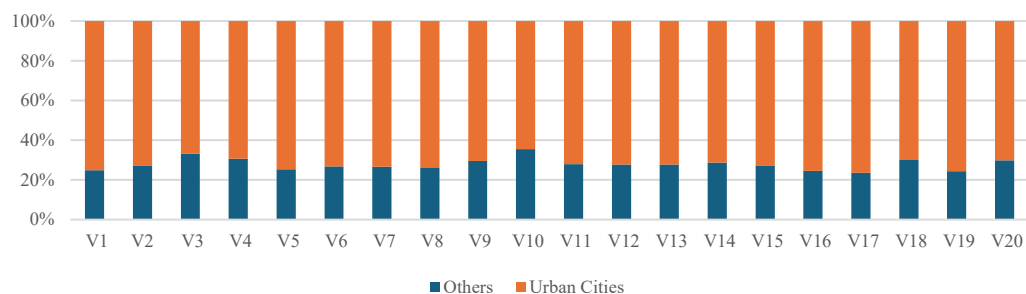
4.2. Urban Distribution

The data on urban distribution for the sampled cross-gender influencers on Douyin indicates that the primary audience consists mainly of young females living in urban areas. The analysis shows that a large portion of the audience comes from first-tier cities, demonstrating a strong preference for this content among residents of China's most developed urban environments (as shown in Figure 3 & Figure 4). This is particularly significant, as these areas are often centers of progressive social norms and have greater access to digital technology, which may influence content consumption patterns.
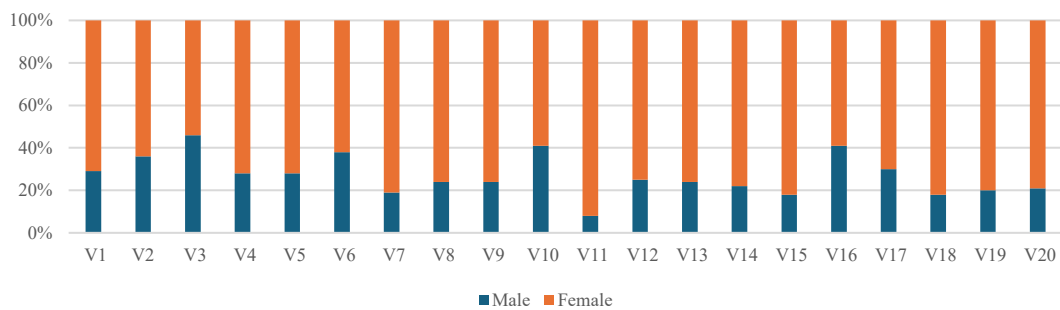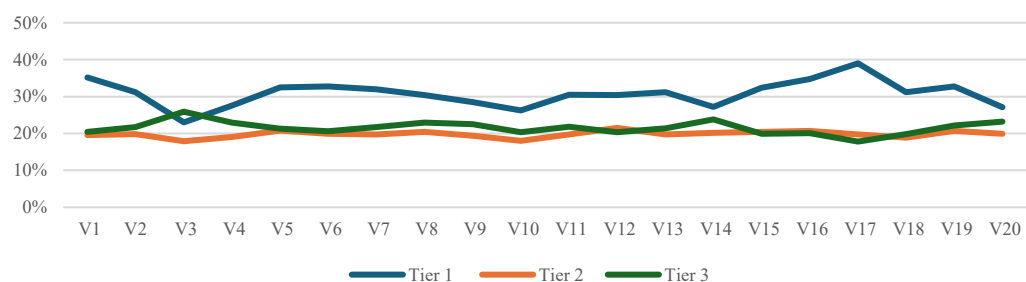

Figure 1. Gender Distribution [12]
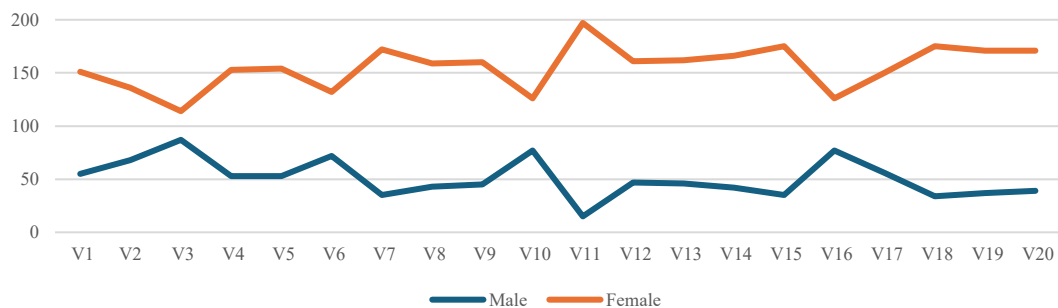

Figure 2. Age Distribution [12]

Figure 3. Urban Distribution-1 [12]

Figure 4. Urban Distribution-2 [12]

4.3. TGI Gender Analysis

The Target Group Index (TGI) measures the likelihood of specific demographic segments engaging with targeted content compared to the average viewer. In the context of cross-gender performances on Douyin, TGI values suggest that female viewers are significantly more engaged than their representation in the general population would suggest. For example, TGI scores for women can reach as high as 175, showing substantial over-indexing and a strong preference for these performances among female audiences (as shown in Figure 5). This strong affinity is reflected across multiple videos and aligns with the skewed gender distribution, where female viewership predominates.

Figure 5. TGI Distribution [12]
Source: Oceanengine & Xingtu，2024 [8]

4.4. Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis explores the content's deeper impact, focusing on narrative techniques, themes, and audience interactions. This involves assessing how influencers communicate with their audience and how effectively they resonate with viewers, revealing subtleties that quantitative data cannot capture. This approach enriches understanding by detailing the emotional and cultural nuances of audience responses.

4.5. Workplace Scenarios in Cross-Gender Performances on Douyin

One prevalent theme among cross-gender bloggers on Douyin revolves around workplace dynamics, particularly reflecting women's professional experiences. These sketches often portray roles such as salespersons, teachers, and copywriters, dramatizing typical workplace challenges like office politics and client negotiations. For example, Zhi Bo's series about first-time job experiences—such as being a teacher or nurse—vividly reenacts the dilemmas of entering the workforce, including overcoming initial job struggles, breaking social barriers, and adjusting to office culture. Meanwhile, Mao Guangguang, through his character Wu Guifang, a cosmetics salesperson, illustrates engaging sales interactions with clients, managing relationships with major clients, and adapting sales strategies to meet diverse customer needs. He also highlights the competitive office environment, portraying the challenges of securing promotions and gaining management approval.

These dramatized performances not only entertain but also provide catharsis, allowing viewers to find humor in the absurdities of professional life. The performers skillfully leverage their unique characteristics and the contemporary preferences of their audience, maintaining a distinctive personal style in their videos. These targeted performances resonate deeply with female viewers, prompting extensive interactions, comments, and shares, amplifying the promotional impact of the content. As viewers often remark in the comments, "This is just like another me."

4.6. Exploring Family Dynamics: Single and Married Women's Perspectives

Cross-gender performances on Douyin frequently delve into intimate familial conflicts and societal expectations faced by single and married women. They dramatize generational and marital tensions that characterize contemporary Chinese family life.

For single women, a common theme is the societal pressure to marry, often portrayed through tense interactions with parents, particularly mothers. These performances vividly depict the conflict between traditional expectations and modern women's aspirations. Mothers are often shown pressuring their daughters to be in a relationship or married, criticizing their social engagement and dismissing their professional achievements. In contrast, the daughters emphasize the pressures of work and their disinterest in conforming to societal marital expectations. Fathers are typically depicted as silent, passive supporters of the mother's viewpoint, reinforcing traditional norms.

For married women, the sketches reflect the strains of marriage, often portraying women grappling with their roles in the family, particularly in child-rearing. These portrayals mirror earlier generational attitudes but add a layer of self-reflection, where characters lament the loss of youthful happiness and question the personal cost of marriage. In contrast, some performances offer an idealized vision of family life, with obedient children, actively engaged husbands, and flourishing romance, catering to an idealized family scenario.

These performances serve as a critical commentary on the evolving, yet conflicting expectations faced by women in modern Chinese society. They not only highlight the struggles and negotiations within family settings but also underscore the generational divide in perceptions of gender roles and marital responsibilities. Through humor and dramatization, these performances engage viewers and provoke reflection on the changing dynamics of family life.

4.7. Female Friendships

In this segment, Douyin bloggers skillfully portray the complexities of female friendships across different life stages, revealing the melodramatic and often contentious nature of these relationships. The performances often depict scenarios from school days, where "plastic friendships" emerge over shared crushes on a boy, leading to competition and betrayal. The bloggers do not shy away from showcasing how misunderstandings and conflicts can dissolve friendships, turning allies into adversaries. These dramatized storylines highlight the fragile nature of relationships, easily disrupted by jealousy or rivalry, reflecting the precarious balance women maintain between camaraderie and competition.

Through exaggerated and humor-filled depictions, these videos entertain audiences while prompting them to reflect on the real-life dynamics of female friendships. The performances spark discussions on the authenticity and resilience of friendships amidst societal pressures and personal ambitions, making them both relatable and thought-provoking.

4.8. Immense Commercial Success Derived from Substantial Traffic

While interactions between users and influencers on Douyin occur through digital media, the connections they build are profoundly impactful [9]. These strong connections often attract marketers, who see potential in leveraging influencers for product promotions.

Female influencers, in particular, are highly sought after due to their extensive reach and influence. Brands frequently engage them to promote products or host live sales events, capitalizing on their ability to effectively communicate with and persuade their followers. Data from Xingtu shows that the average cost for a video advertisement lasting between 20 to 60 seconds is 267,000 RMB [7]. This figure highlights the commercial viability of investing in influencer marketing on Douyin and underscores the substantial economic opportunities available to brands that can harness the power of these influencer relationships.

The effectiveness of these marketing strategies largely stems from the trust and rapport influencers build with their audience, making them powerful allies for brands seeking to expand their reach in the digital marketplace. By seamlessly integrating product placements into their content, these influencers provide authentic endorsements that resonate with their viewers, driving consumer interest and sales.

5. Conclusion

The exploration of cross-gender performances on Douyin highlights the platform's significant cultural and commercial impact. These performances resonate deeply with a predominantly young, female audience, facilitating vibrant discussions and fostering a broad understanding of gender fluidity. The substantial commercial success derived from these performances underscores the effectiveness of Douyin's model in integrating entertainment with strategic marketing, thus showcasing the potent combination of cultural relevance and commercial viability in the digital age.

Furthermore, the commercial success that many of these performer's experience is a testament to the platform's ability to seamlessly integrate creative content with business objectives. This symbiosis between cultural relevance and commercial appeal is not incidental but a strategic alignment that Douyin has mastered, which is evident in the substantial revenue generated through advertising and collaborations. This commercial aspect ensures sustainability and growth for content creators, enabling them to continue pushing the boundaries of traditional media and content creation.

In sum, Douyin's fostering of cross-gender performances reflect the evolving dynamics of digital media, where entertainment, commerce, and cultural discourse intersect and flourish. This study underscores the importance of such platforms in the digital age, highlighting their potential to influence public opinion and cultural trends significantly. The insights derived from this research could serve as a blueprint for future studies exploring the intersections of media, culture, and technology in shaping societal views and behaviors.

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