A qualitative analysis of gender stereotypes of men-pretending-women short videos on Douyin

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Abstract

This paper examines the portrayal of women in Douyin's men-pretending-women short videos and analyses the characteristics of the female image in these videos and the embodiment of women's stereotypes.

This paper employs the method of thematic analysis, focusing on the bloggers of men-pretending-women on Douyin, who have a large fan base, as the research object. 50 video samples are selected for coding and analysis. The study demonstrates that these videos utilize the appropriation and exaggeration of female features to present female image. Most of the videos feature women wearing women's clothes, wigs, and make-up and other items, yet the presentation is not aesthetically pleasing. Rather, it is a scandalous portrayal of women. Besides, the video focuses on three roles – women in the home, women in the workplace and women in heterosexual relationships – and illustrates four female stereotypes: appearance-conscious, controlling, “good wife and mom” and hypocritical.

KEYWORDS: men pretending women; short videos; stereotype; Douyin; Chinese tiktok; female image; gender performance

Type of project: Research dissertation

Table of Content

Introduction

Douyin, one of China's most popular short video platforms, has a daily active user base comprising over half of the country's internet users (Zhao 2021; Li and Zhang 2024). The popularity of Douyin has provided men who cross-dress as women with a broader space to express their personality, and has opened up new forms of such videos. While traditional forms of cross-dressing performances are typically confined to the domain of theatre and the stage (Hu 2016), men pretending women short videos on Douyin are predominantly of the scenario recreation variety. In this format, male content creators modify one or more images of women through cross-dressing, and are characterized by a combination of hilarity and sarcasm. Their distinctive nature captures the attention of audiences and challenges existing gender norms.

As this kind of short video is essentially an interpretation of the social image of women from a male perspective, there is the phenomenon of content creators constructing the female images based on a male oriented thinking, objectifying and degrading women, and reinforcing the social stereotype of women. As the main audience of the video, it is difficult for women to avoid being subconsciously influenced by the negative messages conveyed by the video (Cai 2021). It is therefore necessary to analyze how these short videos present female images and how these images deepen the stereotypes of women in society. Douyin is undoubtedly a representative platform on which to conduct this research. This study will use qualitative research methods. The criterion sampling strategy will be used to select 50 men pretending women short videos on Douyin, after which the thematic content analysis will be applied to develop the research. Subsequently, an examination will be conducted of the manner in which these videos portray female images, with a subsequent analysis of the gender stereotypes of women. This will be based on the gender performativity theory.

Literature review

·Gender performativity

Judith Butler is a prominent figure in post-structuralist gender studies. Her theory of gender performativity stands for a new cognitive perspective on gender and its performers that challenges the prior self-existence of traditional gender. Butler introduced the concept of gender performativity, which she stated in her book *Gender Trouble* was a view that centered on an understanding of gender as a discursive practice and a cultural construct rather than a fact of nature. (Butler 1990, 24; Charlotte and Anne Scott 2006, 18) According to Butler (1990, 24), gender identities were constructed and constituted by discourse and were temporary representations acquired through the constant repetition of performance. In other words, individuals construct a subject with this kind of gender identity through repeated acts of acting or imitation. The standards of acting and imitation are often socially and culturally regulated and formulated. The gender mechanism is perpetuated through the reiteration of this imitative conduct. (Charlotte and Anne Scott, 2006)

Both male and female gender performances are carried out in accordance with gender norms, which are in turn based on socially produced gender norms. These gender norms are then practised in imitation, resulting in a gender image that conforms to gender norms. Gender parody is different from general gender performativity - that is, men dressed as men, women dressed as women, but there is a mismatch - that is, it has become a man dressed as a woman, a woman dressed as a man, but both are the repetition of gender norms. Parody performances such as drag reflect the disconnect between the performer's physical body and the gender they are representing, revealing “the imitative nature of all gender identities”. (Butler 1986; Saleh 2006) The gender performances of male and female bloggers on short-video platforms are in fact an attempt to break the social gender order.

However, the temporal, spatial, historical, cultural and social contexts of contemporary gender performances in China are distinct from those of the early 1990s,

when Western queer theories were at their zenith (Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro 2010). The images of men who present themselves as women in the media are typically de-politicised and are primarily intended to be entertaining and aesthetically pleasing. They are not perceived as subverting or challenging heteronormative gender norms. (Wang, Zhu, and Chang 2018) Performers may even deliberately emphasize their own masculinity and work to demarcate the boundaries between themselves and the counter-images they play in reality. Consequently, it is not possible to apply the theory in a straightforward way. Consequently, in this study, the theoretical frameworks of "parody" and "cross-dressing" are employed to provide theoretical support for the study of gender performances in which men assume the role of women.

·Gender stereotypes

Stereotypes are universal expectations of individuals belonging to specific social groups (Ellemers 2018). Gender stereotypes are one such manifestation. One of the current studies on gender stereotype focuses on the performance of gender stereotypes. A number of scholars have analyzed gender stereotypes in detail from a variety of aspects, including role behavior, appearance, and occupation. (Eagly and Steffen 1984; Ellemers 2018; Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Heilman 2012) For example, people are more likely to associate women with all aspects of family life, while men are more likely to come to mind in considering careers (Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Eagly and Mladinic 1994). In terms of personality, men are considered more competent, while women are perceived as warmer (Ellemers 2018). Furthermore, gender stereotypes exist in the educational area, with girls being seen as less talented than boys in the field of science (Leslie et al. 2015).

A summary of gender stereotypes is presented in the table, based on the literature above. These include Eagly and Mladinic (1994), Eagly and Steffen (1984), Ellemers (2018), Greenwald and Banaji (1995), Heilman (2012) and Leslie et al. (2015).

Table 1. Stereotypes of femininity and masculinity

Femininity	Masculinity
Rich in language	Aggressiveness
Loves to chat	Emotional stability
Tactful and smooth	Active, dominant
Sensitive	Competitive
Gentle and quiet	Straightforward, objective
Understanding	Never cries
Strong need for security	Ambitious, confident
Tidy	Good at business
Enjoys arts and culture	Trustworthy
Good at visualization	High IQ
Have poor reasoning skills	Likes to impose his opinion on others
Pay attention to appearance	Independent
More tolerant of life than men	Logical, decisive
Lack of joy	Adventurous
Imaginative	Loves math and science
Jealous	Able to distinguish between reason and
Fidelity to marriage	emotion
Attaches importance to morality	Unafraid of repercussions

Given that the research platform for this study is a Chinese short video platform, it is essential to investigate the social gender stereotypes that exist within the context of Chinese society. Following the collection and organization of the literature, it can be seen that the gender stereotypes in Chinese society are similar to those described in the overview in terms of men's and women's social roles, personalities, physical appearance, and so forth. For instance, men are perceived to excel in cognitive abilities, work performance, and assertiveness, while women are regarded as more empathetic and submissive. (Song 2020; Ma 2000; Qian et al. 1999) However, the reasons and social contexts in which stereotypes about men and women are formed are different.

A multitude of studies have demonstrated that gender stereotypes in Chinese society are intricately intertwined with the ideology of male domination and female subordination, which originated in the ancient feudal society of China. (Ma 2000; Qian et al. 1999) During the feudal period, women were largely dependent on men and occupied a passive and submissive position, while men held a dominant and authoritative role. Consequently, one of the most pervasive stereotypes of women in China is the concept of the "good wife and good mother," which represents the core tenets of Confucianism's view of women. This moral code can be summarized as follows: a good wife is one who honors her husband's parents, is chaste for him, and is diligent and thrifty. A good mother, on the other hand, can be defined as a mother who assumes the primary responsibility for her children's education and sets a positive example. (Ma 2000; Lin 2001) Furthermore, the image of women presented by the Chinese media varies according to age. In contrast, young women are typically depicted as youthful and attractive, reflecting the prevailing social ideology that women's social value is contingent upon their physical appearance and the roles of wife and mother. (Song 2020) This portrayal of women as objects of beauty and domesticity perpetuates the sexist notion of male superiority and female inferiority.

The pervasiveness of gender stereotypes in popular culture and their dissemination through various media have become significant obstacles to achieving gender equality in society. These stereotypes, which portray women as inferior to men and as solely responsible for the upbringing of children, have contributed to the growing phenomenon of the commodification and objectification of women. (Zhang, 2009)

Therefore, through a review of the literature on gender stereotypes, it can be found that the literature in this field is mainly divided into the manifestations of gender stereotypes in society, influencing factors, and some countermeasures, which provides some theoretical support for the study of the men pretending women short videos on the media platform Douyin.

· “Men-pretending-women” phenomenon in China

The genesis of Chinese drag performance can be traced back to opera, a tradition that has always embraced the practice of "men playing women." (Lin 2002b) This tradition necessitates the complete concealment of the male image to achieve the portrayal of the female image in artistic creations. However, in ancient China, the practice of "men dressed as women" was attributed to the low status of women (Zhou 2000), while the plot could not be promoted without the female characters, thus necessitating the use of male performers to play the female roles. (Hu 2016; Zhou 1997) With the development of the times and the evolution of history, the phenomenon of “men pretending women” is constantly changing its own performance content and form. This phenomenon is intricately linked to a multitude of factors, including cultural, economic, technological, and other social influences, which collectively shape its evolving semantics and characteristics. (Lin 2002a)

In recent years, with the rise of the mobile Internet and the entertainmentisation of media content, a series of drag performance celebrities have emerged in Chinese film and television dramas, variety shows, and social media, presenting a phenomenon of gender performance re-popularity and this kind of gender performance and entertaining short videos on Internet platforms are popular presentation methods. (Wang 2020)

And both the ancient and modern Chinese public exhibited a conservative and disapproving attitude towards performances in which men impersonate women and those men who played women are often ridiculed and mocked, as these performances contravened traditional gender norms and male dominance. (Zhou 1997; Hu 2016)

Some Chinese scholars have conducted research on this phenomenon and the cultural implications of "male-to-female" behavior from a cultural and communication perspective. In his 1997 study, Li found that men dressed as women typically conveyed negative and ironic meanings, such as jokes and quirks. Conversely, women dressed as men typically conveyed positive images, such as wisdom and masculinity,

as exemplified by figures like Hua Mulan. (Li 1997) The contrast in the depiction of these images demonstrates the notion of male superiority and female inferiority that underlies gender performances. Zhang (2003) posits that gender performances reflect the public's attempts to challenge the gender binary. However, they do not fundamentally alter social gender norms and the pursuit of gender equality. Instead, they represent a form of 'body consumption' within the context of consumerism. Furthermore, the majority of videos on short-video platforms in China depicting men dressed as women employ a deliberately provocative performance style, portraying a biased view of real women in the role-playing and narrative process. These videos are primarily aimed at online entertainment and rapid commercial realization. (Wang, Zhu, and Chang, 2018)

However, the majority of existing studies focus on all short-video platforms, with fewer studies examining the presentation of stereotypes in especially Douyin’s men pretending women videos. This study will therefore focus on the platform Douyin to explore the portrayal of women in men pretending women videos and how female stereotypes are expressed.

Thus, this study will mainly utilize gender performativity theory and other feminist theory to develop the research. According to Butler's theory of gender performativity, in repetitive practices, discourse and performance produce the meanings they express, and within the established binary gender structure, conventional social norms and morals and discourses of popular culture and mass media combine with each other to make society unconsciously believe in gender norms, and cross-dressing performances on short-video platforms also subconsciously deepen female stereotypes. (Salih 2006) Therefore, this paper will develop this research based on the theory of gender performativity and the part of gender stereotypes in feminist research.

3 Purpose statement and Research questions

The rapid growth of Douyin, China's most popular short video platform (Zhao 2021), has provided an opportunity for the popularity of men pretending women short videos. Concurrently, the comedic and satirical content of short video bloggers provides entertainment for the general public, yet simultaneously perpetuates deeply entrenched social stereotypes of women. If women, as a significant proportion of the audience for short videos (Zhao 2021), are exposed to the stereotypes perpetuated by these videos over an extended period, it will reinforce the gender binary and have a negative social impact (Ellemers 2018). Consequently, it is of the utmost importance to gain an understanding of the manner in which and the content of the stereotypes of women presented in these videos. However, there has been a paucity of research in this area. The objective of this study is to analyze the images of women presented in 50 videos on Douyin in which men impersonate women. Furthermore, the study will examine the gender stereotypes conveyed in these performances and their impact on society.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How do men pretending women short videos content creators on Douyin construct female images and what are the main characteristics?
2. What female stereotypes are presented in men pretending women videos on Douyin?

The research will enable the audience to gain a more profound comprehension of how men pretending women videos portray women and perpetuate gender norms. Consequently, the research will also facilitate an increased awareness of the adverse effects that these types of videos have on the reinforcement of traditional gender binaries.

4 Methodology

4.1 Overall approach and rationale

This research is dedicated to investigating the presentation of female images and female stereotypes in men pretending women short videos in Chinese platform Douyin. This study will use thematic analysis to examine recurring themes that appear in the collected data. Thematic analysis is "a qualitative methodology for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data" (Braun and Clarke 2006, 6) and this study is guided by the six steps that Braun and Clarke (2006, 16-23) proposed for thematic analysis: "1. familiarizing yourself with your data, 2. generating initial codes, 3. searching for themes, 4. reviewing themes, 5. defining and naming themes, 6. producing the report." As thematic analysis can "usefully summarise key features of a large body of data, offer a thick description of the data set and highlight similarities and differences across the data set" (Braun and Clarke 2006, 37), so the use of this method contributes to the study to find out the common ways of portraying females in men pretending women short videos and which female stereotypes are widely embodied.

4.2 Sample collection and data analysis

Due to the fact that the videos that appeared after searching for the keywords "men pretending women", "reverse performance" and "gender performance" on Douyin are mainly make-up videos, anime cosplay videos and theatre art performances, which are not in line with the theme of the study. As a result, this study decides to select the most representative men pretending women short videos as the research samples because a short video with a higher number of fans of the creator, a higher number of broadcasts, and a wider range of dissemination implies a wider acceptance by the general public, involves a larger audience, and the video content is more representative, possessing a higher value for social research. 50 men pretending women short videos are selected as the research samples.

The specific sample selection method is as follows: (1) In order to locate short videos that are of high quality and more popular with viewers, according to Feigua data (Feigua Data is a big data analysis tool for short video platforms such as Douyin. It helps users gain insights into the performance and influence of individual creators.), select 10 male Douyin bloggers from the top 200 male bloggers with the largest number of followers who mainly create “men pretending women” video content.

Table2. List of sample bloggers

Blogger's name	**Amount of followers**
Duoyu and Sister Maomao	3.35 million
Qingdao Aunt Zhang Daxia	2.26 million
Zheng Lifener	1.63 million
Zhou Xiaonao	1.47 million
Mao guangguang	1.29 million
Xiao Lizhaoye	1.04 million
Ma xiaotiao	0.93 million
Mange and Zhouzhou	0.48 million
Zhong Meimei	0.47 million

(2) Douyin platform has a function that sorts all of a blogger's short videos by the number of likes. Then, based on the number of likes, 5 most-liked videos are selected from each blogger according to the selection criteria, and a total of 50 samples are selected as research targets. The screening criteria were as follows: (1) the video content should be a “men pretending women” sitcom, the main form of performance is men dressed as women, and the content of the work should have a plot; (2) the video content should not contain advertising information.

Once the sample has been selected, the process of data analysis commences with an initial phase of familiarization with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Each of the

selected video samples is viewed in detail, with particular attention paid to elements that are relevant to the research objectives. As this study is concerned with the portrayal of women and female stereotypes in men pretending women short videos, the analysis focused on the visual elements, the discursive elements and the plot presentation of the videos.

A coding sheet is generated by combining repeated viewings of the videos with key concepts from the literature review. (APPENDIX 1) The analysis focuses on the make-up, hairstyles, costumes, language and body language of each performer as a starting point for studying the representation of female images and female stereotypes in the videos. In addition, the aspects of the roles played by women and the themes and narratives of the videos are also considered.

4.3 Limitations

Firstly, the research is based on a relatively small sample size of 50 videos selected from Douyin. Given the large number of men pretending women videos on this platform, this limited sample size may not adequately represent the full range of content. This may lead to the potential for selection bias, as the chosen videos may not fully capture the diversity of the men pretending women short videos. Consequently, it is challenging to avoid the inaccuracy in the research results and the research results are not applicable to all the men pretending women short videos on Douyin.

What's more, qualitative methodology acknowledges that the subjectivity of the researcher is closely related to scientific research. In addition, the researcher is "encouraged to reflect on the values and objectives they bring to the research project and how these affect the research process." (Ratner 2002; Moser and Korstjens 2017) This study is conducted from a feminist perspective, which may introduce the researcher's own values and objectives into the understanding and analysis of the data. Even though the intention of this study is to have a positive societal impact, this subjective lens may affect the neutrality and generalizability of the findings.

4.4 Anticipated ethical issues

Since this study deals with some gender issues, such as the stigmatization, caricature and objectification of women in men pretending women short videos of Douyin, it is necessary to add a reminder in the study.

In addition, as this study involves a critical analysis of the content of the blogger's short videos, it is of the utmost importance to ensure that there are no personal biases or conflicts of interest with the content creators whose videos are analyzed. The focus of the research should be on the content of the videos, with no intrusion into the personal lives or privacy of the bloggers. It is of the utmost importance to maintain this boundary in order to ensure that the analysis remains academic and does not negatively impact the bloggers' personal reputations or lives. Any critiques or findings should be used solely for scholarly purposes, maintaining the ethical integrity of the research and respecting the privacy and dignity of the content creators involved.

5 Analysis and Results

Table 3. Summarize of the research results

Portrayal of women images		**Female stereotypes**
hairstyle	• wearing wigs and hairpiece • use of light and dark hair colors to differentiate women's ages • use of messy hairstyles to uglify women	• concern for beauty • "good wife and mom" • controlling • hypocritical
make-up	• heavy make-up and bold colors	
clothing	• the selection of clothing is based on the character's identity ,personality and themes • young women: bright, bold, and revealing; older women: darker, conservative to highlight their roles as mothers and wives.	
language	• use of soft and gentle voice to show female vulnerability • use of shouting and screaming hysterically to show emotion side of women	
body language	• young women: flirtatious movements • mothers and older women: putting the hands on the hips	
role-playing	• women in the family • women in romantic relationship • women in the workplace	

5.1 Portrayal of women images in men pretending women short videos

In men pretending women short videos, in order for viewers to recognize the gender of the characters in the shortest possible time, the actors have to appropriate female features. In the following, it will be analyzed how men pretending women videos portray women from six aspects: hairstyle, make-up, clothing, language, body language and role-playing.

5.1.a Hairstyle

The manner in which one's hair is styled can serve as a significant indicator of one's gender identity. Historically, the growth of long hair has been regarded as a defining characteristic of women. (Ma, 2000) With the diversification of society and culture, hairstyles have gradually become a common means of self-presentation and expression of individuality. Nevertheless, in Douyin's brief videos of men impersonating women, the selection of hairstyles for the characters has returned to the domain of gender meanings. The performers who impersonate women in these videos have short hair or bald heads in real life, with more overt masculine characteristics. A review of the video samples reveals that the performers commonly wear medium-length wigs in their performances. This is done firstly to make their characters more closely match the traditional image of women in reality and secondly to dilute their own unchangeable biological gender features through the appropriation of female gender features that are in greater contrast to those of men.

Image 1. Contrasts between the real and video images of the blogger *Duoyu and Sister Maomao* (Duoyu and Maomao sister 2018)

In addition to the use of wigs to identify the gender of the character, some characters also wear headgear to accentuate their personality and characterization. This may include exaggerated bow hairpins, pearl headdresses and brightly colored hair bands. These socially constructed 'feminine' accessories serve as a metaphor for the character's identity. The wearing of women's hair accessories adheres to the established social norms of women's appearance, and the wearing of different accessories also contributes to the construction of the character. For instance, the blogger *Mao Guangguang* employs a pearl hair decoration when assuming the role of a noblewoman, whereas she utilizes a thin black hairpin when portraying the character of *Wu Guifang*, a cosmetics saleswoman. The contrasting hair decorations serve to symbolize the social class distinction between the two characters.

Image 2. Comparison of different women's images through hair accessories in the video of blogger *Mao (Mao Guangguang 2020; Mao Guangguang 2024)*

Furthermore, hairstyles for female characters also vary according to age and character. In order to convey the impression of youth and fashion, performers often wear wigs with exaggerated hair colors, such as red and blonde. Conversely, when playing older characters, such as mothers and grandmothers, they tend to wear wigs with ordinary hair colors. Finally, when playing roles in the workplace, such as cosmetics saleswomen and teachers, performers usually choose wigs with ordinary hair colors.

Image 3. Comparison of hair colors between young and middle-aged women in the ‘men pretending women’ video (Duoyu and Maomao sister 2018; Qingdao Aunt Zhang Daxia 2020; Xiao Fanfan 2020a; Xiao Lizhaoye 2020; Zheng Lifener 2020; Zhou Xiaonao 2023a; Zhou Xiaonao 2023c)

However, the video also depicts numerous female characters with unkempt hairstyles. For instance, in the scenes set in a school, the use of unkempt hairstyles is employed to convey a sense of disorganization and lack of attention to detail among female students. The performers deliberately utilize such unkempt wigs in order to further denigrate the image of women.

Image 4. Presentation of women's messy hairstyles in men pretending women short videos (Mange and Zhouzhou 2019; Xiao Lizhaoye 2019)

5.1.b Make-up

This type of male blogger also typically supports the construction of the female gender image through the use of facial make-up, such as the application of lipstick, the drawing of eyebrows, and the application of eye shadow. This results in more natural behavioral movements during the performance, which provides a smoother viewing experience for the audience. Furthermore, performers alter their make-up according to the different female characters they portray. For example, when playing a teacher or a workplace role, the performers will apply an elegant and decent make-up. Conversely, when portraying a mother, particularly one of a middle-aged or elderly age, the performers will adopt a makeup style that evokes a more aging appearance or no makeup at all.

Apart from this, the author observed that some of the female characters were portrayed by the performers with heavy make-up and bold colors, such as green eye shadow and exaggerated eyeliner. This led the author to conclude that the female characters were no longer concerned with realism and beauty, but with making fun of and uglifying women. For the performers, the objective of creating realistic characters is secondary to the need to entertain the audience and attract attention.

Furthermore, it is observed that the female characters who wear exaggerated makeup are mostly young women in romantic relationships. From an aesthetic point of view, makeup can enhance the visual appeal of female characters and make their appearance conform to male standards of beauty and attractiveness. (Liu 2022) However, the use of overly exaggerated makeup emphasizes that women tend to overemphasize their appearance when interacting with the opposite sex. The emphasis on appearance by women indicates that women's appearance is perceived as a key competitive advantage in heterosexual relationships. This suggests that women's main value in romantic relationships lies in their physical attractiveness, and that their main role is to meet men's visual and aesthetic expectations. This subconsciously reinforces the idea that women must constantly improve their appearance in order to gain and retain

men's attention and recognition.

Image 5. Exaggerated female make-up presented by male bloggers in men pretending women videos (Mao Guangguang 2024; Zhou Xiaonao 2022)

5.1.c Clothing

One of the fundamental methods of gender performance is the use of clothing to disguise one's biological sex. This is achieved by wearing clothes typically associated with the opposite sex. Clothing is an important tool for showing gender identity to more closely resemble the image of the person playing the opposite sex. Most of the men pretending women video bloggers wear women's clothes to show that they are playing a female character. The majority of performers wear casual, everyday women's clothing. However, the performers select the appropriate female clothing according to the character's identity and personality as well as the specific story scenes to portray a female image. For example, women in the workplace (e.g., cosmetic sales, flight attendants, etc.) mainly wear work uniforms; when playing young women, especially those in heterosexual relationships, some of the performers in the videos wear sexy and revealing clothes and emphasize female characteristics. This results in the female body becoming an object of entertainment and consumption, and youth and beauty becoming the capital of young women. This highlights the needs and perspectives of men.

It is also evident that there is a clear distinction in the clothing chosen by bloggers when portraying young and middle-aged women. Young women tend to wear bright colors, bold designs and more skirts, creating an image of 'youthful beauty'. On the other hand, when middle-aged and older women are portrayed, most of them wear light or dark colored tops and trousers, and 'aprons' are one of the most common items of clothing, in order to conform to the stereotypical image of middle-aged and older women as mothers and wives.

Image 6. Comparison of clothing between young and middle-aged women in the ‘men pretending women’ video (Ma Xiaotiao 2020a; Qingdao Aunt Zhang Daxia 2020; Xiao Fanfan 2020b; Zheng Lifener 2020; Zhong Meimei 2024; Zhou Xiaonao 2022; Zhou Xiaonao 2023b; Zhou Xiaonao 2023c)

Image 7. Image of a middle-aged woman wearing an apron (Xiao Fanfan 2020a; Xiao Fanfan 2020d; Zhou Xiaonao 2023c)

5.1.d language

The content of Douyin's short videos of men pretending women is generally situational short dramas that favor everyday narratives. The linguistic expression employed by the actors serves to assist them in the creation of their characters. A soft and gentle voice is often employed to describe the voice of women. In addition to adopting physical characteristics typically associated with women, such as long hair and make-up, male impersonators of women on Douyin deliberately lower their voices to disguise their male voices and imitate women's soft voices. This allows them to perform as women in a more authentic and convincing manner.

In their portrayal of women in heterosexual relationships, some performers utilise soft sounds to convey a sense of vulnerability and dependence on their romantic partners. For instance, in a brief video of a woman watching a horror film with her partner, the blogger *Duoyu and Sister Maomao* spoke in a female voice, uttering the words "Oh! I'm so scared, it's so scary, hold me tight, please!". The blogger *Ma Xiaotiao* employed a flattering tone when addressing the male protagonist, requesting assistance with bedmaking. At the same time, it has been also found that these short videos of men pretending to be women often show the performers shouting and screaming hysterically. For example, the blogger *Qingdao Aunt Zhang Daxia* is

shown punishing her son *Tutu* for his poor academic grades or lack of manners. The bloggers *Mange and Zhouzhou* and *Duoyu and Sister Maomao* all use high decibel screaming when performing scenes of heterosexual men and women arguing or girls being irrationally aggressive. However, some of the performers, although dressed as women and wearing wigs, still speak in rough male voices. This contrast between male and female voices has become a common technique used by these bloggers to create an atmosphere.

5.1.e body language

Body language is a common mode of conveying information, with human facial expressions and bodily movements exerting a profound influence on the transmission and construction of information. In order to portray female characters in a more three-dimensional and richer way, Douyin's men pretending women performers actually carry gender meanings and characteristics in their facial expressions and body movements during their performances, for example, pursing the lips, ruffling the hair and other movements are often used to show women's tenderness and shyness.

One of the most frequently observed body movements in short video interactions is what can be described as "flirtatious." The blogger *Ma Xiaotiao* often uses actions such as winking at men, stroking thighs and playing with hair, etc. The scenes used are mostly ambiguous and sexy, with the intention of emphasizing the erotic and mature aspects of the female characters. The characters portrayed by such actions have more obvious "seducing men" meaning, they look at the female body from a male perspective, and find the stimulation points in the female body that are of interest to men, which are appropriated and processed to portray a more sexy female character. This objectification of the female body and the prioritization of appearance and beauty as consumer goods contribute to the construction of a narrow and limiting definition of femininity.

Image 8. Flirtatious gestures presented in men pretending women short videos(Ma Xiaotiao 2020a; Ma Xiaotiao 2020b; Mao Guangguang 2020)

Another common body movement is the placing of the hands on the hips. In the context of body language, this posture is a symbol of strength, suggesting that the person is in a dominant position and potentially indicating anger, provocation or questioning. (Yu and Zhang 2024) The majority of characters who use this action are mothers, elders, and similar figures. They use this movement to express their character's personality and show their mood (Yu and Zhang 2024), which is mainly anger and hysteria. For example, the blogger *Qingdao Aunt Zhang Daxia* always puts her hands on her hips every time she teaches or scolds her son *Tutu*. When mothers or elder women characters put their hands on their hips, it conveys a sense of authority and control and as well as the emotional volatility that is often associated with women. There are also other performers who use the action when expressing the character's anger or seriousness to show the emotional and hysterical side of the female character. The consistent use of such gestures serves to shape and reinforce the audience's perception of women as inherently more prone to emotional outbursts.

5.1.f role

The roles of women in Douyin short videos can be broadly classified into three

categories: women in the family, women in romantic relationships, and women in the workplace.

The short videos of women in the family predominantly feature middle-aged women as protagonists, with the intention of illustrating mother-child and mother-daughter relationships, as well as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships. The majority of the video themes are characterized by a sense of humour, sarcasm and playfulness, with a particular focus on the themes of mothers educating their children and mother-in-law/daughter-in-law conflicts. The short videos of women in couple relationships mainly display two types of roles. One is that of a weak and dependent woman, whereby the woman displays a weak or seductive side in order to gain assistance and care from men. The other type of woman is an emotional and controlling one. For instance, the blogger *Mange and Zhouzhou* shows a woman looking through her boyfriend's mobile phone messages and treating one of her boyfriend's ordinary female friends as her imaginary enemy, assuming that her boyfriend is cheating on her, and lashing out at him furiously. To the viewer, this female figure is very dramatic and emotional. When it comes to the short videos of women in the workplace, the occupations of the women in the workplace depicted in the short videos are usually cosmetics saleswomen or teachers, which also demonstrates the general occupational stereotypes of women in society. Scenes in the videos focus on women in cosmetics sales services buying cosmetics and imitating a teacher in a classroom setting, the latter including the appearance of some female students. It is also noteworthy that the role of the students in the videos is not equally distributed. In most cases, the students are male and serve as class leaders, while the female students are merely regular members of the class.

5.2 Demonstration of female stereotypes

5.2.a Concern for beauty

The preceding section has demonstrated that the images of women presented in short videos by "men pretending women" bloggers are typically constructed through the use

of make-up, clothing, hairstyles and other factors of women's appearance. This is done with the intention of highlighting women's unique features, or even exaggerating or uglifying these women's features. For instance, the use of black eyeliner or unconventional attire serves to challenge the conventional aesthetic standards of the general public through the application of unconventional and exaggerated techniques. In stark contrast, male participants in these videos often appear with normal hair and no make-up, which serves to illustrate the societal expectation that women should be more concerned with their appearance than men. By drawing attention to this discrepancy, the videos contribute to a culture that both celebrates and mocks women's preoccupation with beauty, thereby contributing to the pervasive culture of aesthetic ugliness.

Furthermore, the majority of the brief videos also feature women inquiring about the potential consequences of staying up late on their skin and hair and frequently show women purchasing large quantities of cosmetics, seeking manicures, and changing hairstyles. Such behaviors emphasize the stereotype that women are obsessed with beauty products and services. Besides, the portrayal of female teachers wearing different attire to work each day further reinforces the notion that women are constantly striving to enhance their appearance, even in professional settings. Collectively, these elements reinforce the stereotype of women who are preoccupied with their appearance and prone to appearance-related anxiety. By portraying women as preoccupied with maintaining their looks, the videos perpetuate the idea that women's self-worth is closely tied to their physical appearance.

It can be seen through the videos that the reasons for women's focus on appearance are generally associated with heterosexual relationships. In the majority of the videos, young women are depicted in a vulnerable position in gender relationships, fixated on their appearance and their partner's opinion of them, where women are seen as needing to maintain their looks to secure and retain their partner's affection. The idea that women's primary value lies in their ability to attract and please men is conveyed.

Such representations serve to normalize traditional gender roles and portray women in romantic relationships as overly emotional.

5.2.b “g*ood wife and mom”*

One of the most prevalent stereotypes in video content is that of the g*ood wife and mom*. The term *good wife and mom* is understood in its broadest sense to refer to women's most important roles as wives and mothers, who are expected to be submissive to their husbands and bring up their children. A multitude of studies have demonstrated that middle-aged women are typically the primary caregivers for children and the elderly within their families, whereas older women are the primary caregivers for their grandchildren. (Lin, 2001)

For instance, in Douyin, the blogger *Mao Guangguang*'s role as a cosmetic saleswoman illustrates the challenges faced by modern women in balancing their professional and familial responsibilities. Despite her efforts, she remains constrained by familial obligations, including the necessity of tolerating her mother-in-law's criticism and fulfilling her maternal duty of picking up her children from kindergarten, which may result in a reduction of her wages. This character exemplifies the ideal of the "good mom" who sacrifices her career for her family's needs, showcasing her as a selfless and nurturing figure. Another character, also portrayed by *Mao Guangguang*, is a wealthy woman who enjoys shopping and has transitioned from a housewife to a career woman. Despite her professional success, she is still perceived as a failed wife because her husband is indifferent towards her. This situation reflects a social expectation that a woman's value depends on her ability to maintain family harmony and fulfil traditional roles, regardless of her accomplishments outside the home.

The content of videos also demonstrates that a woman's value within the family increases with age, while her social value diminishes. Female characters of a younger age are frequently depicted as working women or unmarried individuals in

relationships, with the emphasis placed on their social and professional roles. In contrast, middle-aged and older female characters are typically portrayed as mothers or wives, including a full-time housewife taking care of the household, a mother in charge of her children's studies, and so on. The portrayal of middle-aged women as *good wife and mom* would further deepen the idea that women should pay more attention to their families, diminish or even erase the value of women in society, and thus reduce the space for women's development in reality. (Song 2020)

The patriarchal structure of the family and Chinese traditional culture has contributed to the subordinate position and social division of labour for women, whereby the men are in charge of things outside the home and the women are responsible for things inside the home. (Song 2020; Lin 2001) The patriarchal and discursive hegemony of the media has resulted in the portrayal of women as objects of male gaze or as subordinate to men in auxiliary roles. The contemporary media's stereotypical portrayal of women as "*good wife and mom*" is a profound reflection of this social power hierarchy.

In sum, the portrayal of women as good wives and moms in these videos highlights a universal stereotype that prioritizes women's family responsibilities over their professional or personal ambitions. This stereotype is deeply rooted in historical and cultural contexts and reflects long-standing patriarchal values and societal expectations, which continue to influence the female images in the media (Ward and Harrison 2005) today.

5.2.c Controlling

In addition, the video demonstrates the stereotype of women as controlling by acting out their roles at home, in the workplace and in romantic relationships. This kind of portrayal not only describes women as overbearing and bossy, but also reinforces the stereotype that women are overly emotional and irrational when they attempt to control others. In the family theme, women are portrayed as mothers who control their

children. For example, the blogger *Qingdao Aunt Zhang Daxia* paints a picture of a mother who forces her child to finish the food he doesn't want to eat, and keeps asking her child where he is going when he wants to go out to play. This behavior reflects the controlling nature of a mother who imposes her will on her child, interferes with his behavior and decisions, and completely disregards his preferences and sense of autonomy. Similarly, another mother, played by blogger *Xiao Fanfan*, forces her child to attend family gatherings. When the child resists, he is labelled as unreasonable. This exemplifies the mother exerting her authority by forcing her child, which results in the child being forced to obey his mother's demands instead of being able to decide for himself what he wants.

In the "workplace" theme, the teacher, played by the blogger *Zhong Meimei*, subjectively believes that having extra classes in physical education is for the benefit of the students. However, this decision was made without consulting the students, which demonstrates that the teacher disregarded the students' opinions and autonomy, reflecting a controlling attitude. Further examples include the cases of teachers played by bloggers *Xiao Li Chaoye* and *Zheng Lifener. T*hese teachers frequently employed the use of comments such as "I'll see who dares not listen carefully" in their classrooms, which can be interpreted as an indication of a controlling teaching style.

In romantic relationships, the female characters portrayed by bloggers *Mange and Zhouzhou*, *Duoyu and Sister Maomao* exhibit controlling behaviors towards their boyfriends. The girlfriend, played by the blogger *Mange and Zhouzhou*, often monitors her boyfriend's social medias and regulate his interactions with other women. A girlfriend, played by the blogger *Duoyu and Sister Maomao*, stated that if her boyfriend did not come to comfort her after an argument, she would lose her mind and delete all of her boyfriend's social media accounts. Besides, she crazily called him to inquire about his location when he was out dining with friends. In addition, the portrayal of women in these scenes frequently features dramatic emotional reactions, such as shouting and crying, so as to put pressure on others. Such descriptions solidify

the stereotype of women as being irrational and overly emotional, and their moods are used as a tool to manipulate and control those around them.

5.2.d Hypocritical

In addition, the videos portray the stereotypes of women as hypocritical and insincere. In one scene, a teacher, acted by the blogger *Zhong Meimei*, inadvertently reveals the grades of her class in front of her colleagues. On the surface, this is an unintentional action. However, this teacher is actually subtly boasting about her grades and mocking other classes for not doing well by comparing them with her colleagues. This behaviour exemplifies the hypocrisy of the character, whereby the character presents himself as humble and unintentional, while in fact seeking affirmation and recognition.

Another scene features a woman in the workplace, also played by the blogger *Zhong Meimei*, who assists a colleague with a task. Prior to offering assistance, she asserts that it is her obligation to assist her colleague and that she does not seek any form of compensation. Nevertheless, after completing the task, she begins to subtly suggest to her colleague that she would like to receive some form of benefit or reward. And when her colleague did not pick up on her hints, she internally developed negative feelings. This scenario exemplifies an attitude of hypocrisy and insincerity, as the character's words and actions do not match.

Further, the blogger *Zheng Lifener* depicts a number of characters in a girls' dormitory setting. The characters express a lack of motivation to study and feign indifference to an impending examination. Despite their assertions to the contrary, they all engage in private study and then deride each other privately for purportedly not studying. This scene exemplifies a false camaraderie and insincerity among friends. The portrayal of individuals who are unable to trust each other sufficiently to be honest about their efforts creates an environment conducive to deceit and competition.

The collective portrayal of female colleagues and friends engaging in false friendships contributes to the perpetuation of the stereotype that women are insincere in their interactions. The repeated presentation of female characters exhibiting duplicitous behavior in these videos serves to reinforce negative stereotypes and to diminish the authenticity of real-life women's relationships and undermine their trustworthiness and sincerity in professional and personal contexts. This further complicates the viewer's perception of women, embedding harmful biases that impact how women are viewed and treated in society.

6 Conclusion

The article examines the character images of short videos of men pretending women on Douyin, a prominent video sharing platform in China. The article analyses the presentation of women's images and stereotypes in such short videos and draws the following conclusions:

1. The phenomenon of "men pretending women" bloggers presents images of women by appropriating and exaggerating female characteristics. Although Douyin's men pretending women gender performance content presents a more diverse image of women, the concept of male-oriented has not been entirely eradicated. Rather, it has been concealed by entertainment parodies. In fact, the shocking costumes and vulgar actions still place women in a demeaning position. The short video bloggers in question appropriated women's features in their role-playing, such as wearing wigs, skirts and make-up, in order to realize women's image of themselves. This brought them closer together and increased the persuasive power of their content. Nevertheless, these bloggers do not pursue the conventional notion of beauty in their portrayal of their counterparts. In contrast, they adopt an uglifying approach, which, on the one hand, enhances the drama of the narrative and, on the other, reinforces the norms of masculine ideology on gender imagery.

2. The analysis identifies four main female stereotypes: those who are appearance-conscious, controlling, ‘good wives and mothers’, and hypocritical. These female stereotypes reflect the deep-rooted gender discrimination in Chinese society. In China society, female group is considered inferior than male group and is expected to conform to gender roles dictated by conventional social norms, implicitly expressing a patriarchal mindset. Under the cover of entertainment and humor, men pretending women gender performances present an image of women that meets the stereotypical labels given to women in the context of the consumer era. Additionally, these videos are designed to be entertaining and funny, which lowers the audience's psychological defense, allowing them to gradually accept this new way of expressing their views and be persuaded and regulated by this image in an implicit way. The image of women presented in short videos of men pretending women can be considered a cultural production process, a form of repression of women with a certain didactic and ironic meaning.

In the contemporary era, the phenomenon of "men pretending women" gender performance has experienced a resurgence, coinciding with the evolution of social culture and the film and television industry. This performance is situated between gender culture and subculture, and it has begun to challenge the traditional gender order of society. The performers themselves transgress the boundaries of the binary gender system when they perform in the opposite gender role. Butler (1986) posits that the mass media has created a space for the public to perform their alternative selves, thereby affording individuals the opportunity to experience or practice their alternative selves. In these brief videos of men impersonating women, the performers prioritize gender performance over technical proficiency, utilizing gender images to convey their personal views to the audience. The performances appear to depict women's daily lives, but are in essence highly subjective, presenting stereotypical images of women under male patriarchal standards, and failing to challenge existing gender roles in a comprehensive way. Given that these videos are predominantly viewed by young women, it is probable that they will increase the spread of gender

stereotypes and deepen the phenomenon of gender inequality in China.

This study offers an in-depth analysis of the portrayal of female images by male performers on the Douyin platform and examines the stereotypes of women that these performers display. The study reveals the deeply entrenched societal stereotypes of women. Due to the limited number of samples selected for the study (10 bloggers and 50 short videos), it is not possible to guarantee the generality and comprehensiveness of the findings. Nevertheless, this does not affect the overall analysis. As the number men-pretending-women short videos continues to grow, it is likely that future studies can include additional cases of this type of short videos. Besides, future research may wish to build on these findings by exploring the impact of these depictions on audiences' perceptions of gender roles and identities. This can be achieved by analyzing audience reactions to these videos and their attitudes. One potential approach to this issue is to examine the number of likes and comments on the videos, as well as conducting questionnaires or interviews with the audience.

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APPENDIX

1. Coding sheet

A——Clothing

A1: type of clothing: female clothing/ male clothing/ neutral clothing

A2: style of clothing: daily casual/ work clothes/ fancy clothes/ sexy clothes

A3: color of clothing: cool color/ warm color

A4: whether to wear hair accessories: yes/ no

B——Makeup

B1: whether to wear makeup: yes/ no

B2: type of make up: heavy make-up/ light make-up

C——Hairstyle

C1: hair color: normal/ exaggerate

C2: hair length: short hair/ medium hair/ long hair

C3: whether to wear wig: yes/ no

D——Language

D1: tone: soft/ normal/ rough

D2: language style: humorous/ ridiculous/ rude/ flattering/ normal

E——Gesture and expression

F——Video theme

F1: romantic relationship

F2: family life *(relations between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law; Mother-son/mother-daughter relationship)*

F3: school life

F4: workplace life

G——Female role

G1: mother

G2: girlfriend

G3: wife

G4: student

H——Female image

H1: profession: housewife/ teacher/ other job

H2: personality: emotionally-oriented/ hypocritical/ material/ weak/ indecisive and hesitant/ fierce/ jealous/

H3: behaviour: like gossip/ like shopping/ like crying/ speak aloud/ concern for appearance/ rely on men

H4: display of female image: normal portrayal/ deliberate misrepresentation