

Short Video Platforms and Local Community Building in China

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Along with other short video applications, Douyin represents one of the most popular ways to obtain information, socialize with friends, and entertain oneself in China. On Douyin, short videos showcasing local areas at the county level, such as local food, events, and scenery, are very popular. These videos have attracted wide audiences, particularly local residents in the same county or village and migrants who come from the same area. Short video applications have become important sites of local community building. We argue that the platformization of cultural production converges with local connections, local governance practices, and local market demands. This convergence restructures the local society by concentrating the power of representing local areas into indigenous media. This concentration process dovetails with the spectacle-ization of local areas on Douyin, which reinforces the sense of belonging and local pride of residents and migrants.

Keywords: short video platforms, community building, indigenous media spectacle-ization, platformized cultural production

Short video applications debuted in China in 2011 and reached their first wave of popularity in 2015 (X. Wang, Bao, & Lv, 2015). The second wave of short videos rose in 2017 and now claims a dominant position on China's social media landscape (e.g., S. Zhang, 2019). As of June 2020, the number of short video users had reached 818 million, constituting 87.0% of the whole netizen population (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2020). Douyin, Kuaishou, Haokan, Weishi, Xiaohongshu, and other short video applications soon became popular. Douyin, for example, was launched in September 2016 by ByteDance. Its number of daily active users reached 600 million in August 2020 (ByteDance, 2021).

There is no specific definition of short videos. The length of short videos ranges from several seconds to 20 minutes. *Short* is a general rubric, informally contrasted with long videos. Mobile devices are common spaces on which such videos play. Researchers who study short videos have observed many features: the innovative qualities of these videos (e.g., X. Wang & W. Wang, 2019); the political economy of short video platforms (e.g., Kaye, Chen, & Zeng, 2020); and content creation (e.g., Y. Li et al., 2019), among others.

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Existing studies have not paid attention to community-level rubrics on short video platforms. However, on short video platforms, users actively interact with each other and form communities. Furthermore, how traditional social connections translate into online communities on short video platforms remains unknown. Local content production and consumption, an important dimension of Douyin, has been neglected. On these platforms, short videos that showcase local areas at the county level and feature local food, events, and scenery, for example, are very popular. These videos have attracted wide audiences, particularly local residents and migrants from the same place. Offline local connections thus translate into short video-mediated online connections.

As the urban technologically driven economy reaches a competitive stage, smaller cities and the countryside are poised to accommodate new growth, particularly the county-level economy (Cui & Cai, 2020), with the potential in the areas of local tourism, e-commerce, organic food, and more. The counties are thus reimagined as profit-generating engines, coinciding with the national policy of "rural revitalization" (X. Yang & Ning, 2019). The local government and industries in smaller cities, counties, and the countryside ride the wave and appropriate such reimagination. It is against this background that this study shifts to county-level local communities on short video platforms.

Discussion about local communities has taken place in the bulletin board system (BBS) era and on subsequent media platforms, such as WeChat (e.g., Harwit, 2017). In contrast, much less is known about local online communities on short video platforms. Douyin and similar applications are designed to attract as many users as possible, at the national and even global level. However, within a broadly defined Douyin platform are different scales of content production and consumption. Echoing Wanning Sun's (2012) call for "a geographic turn" of Chinese media studies, this study delves into the locality of short video platforms. This article focuses on the following questions: How do local connections translate into online interaction and online communities? How do short video platforms infrastructurally restructure the local society? How do short video platforms participate in local community building?

Short Videos in China

Technological advancements have enabled the development of unprecedented media forms, such as livestreaming and short videos. Platforms pattern and rule virtual worlds (Jin, 2015; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). In China, the rise of platform tycoons dazzles, and there is much discussion of how these platforms spur information production and circulation (e.g., Cunningham, Craig, & Lv, 2019; Kaye et al., 2020; O'Regan & L. Li, 2019).

Since 2017, short video applications have dominated China's social media participation (e.g., S. Zhang, 2019). In June 2020, short video users constituted 87.0% of the whole netizen population (CNNIC, 2020). Studies on short videos proliferate, addressing the innovative characteristics of short videos (e.g., X. Wang & W. Wang, 2019); the political economy of platforms (e.g., Kaye et al., 2020); the demographics of short video users (e.g., T. Zhang & Luo, 2019); and motives that drive individuals to watch short videos (e.g., X. Wang et al., 2015), among others.

Scarce attention has been given to the community-level rubrics on short video platforms because previous studies primarily focus on individual-level media use behavior. Furthermore, how traditional social communities translate into online communities on short videos remains unknown. Studies have been conducted about local online communities in the BBS era and subsequent media platforms, such as Weibo and WeChat (e.g., Harwit, 2017). However, much less is known about how local connections grow on short video platforms.

On Douyin, short videos that showcase local areas at the county level, such as local food, events, and scenery, are very popular. These videos have attracted wide audiences, particularly local residents in the same county or village and migrants who come from the same area. The following screenshots (Figures 1 and 2) are two examples.



Figure 1. The local lychee breeds of a county in Sichuan province.

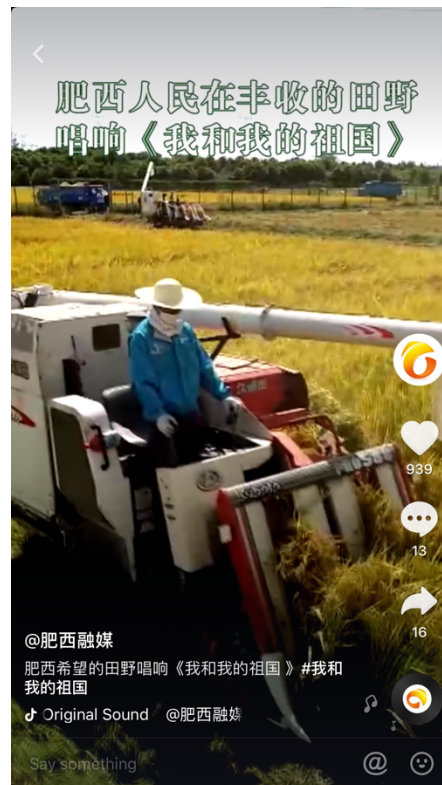


Figure 2. The harvest scene with the song of a county, "My People, My Country," in Anhui province.

These two figures are from two short videos posted by two county-level Douyin accounts. These accounts constitute an important site of investigation for studying digital technologies and local community building. On Douyin's home page, next to the recommendation button at the top, is the name of the user's location city. By clicking the location, users can view videos tagged with the same location, including videos produced by regular users and those accounts that specialize in producing local content. These accounts claim an important position in local content production and distribution in the community.

Cultural production is experiencing platformization (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). As a prominent application type, short video applications have participated in and shaped the platformization of cultural production (Kaye et al., 2020). This article locates the platformization process at the local level by exploring how market-driven platformization intersects with Chinese local society. The next subsection delves into studies on the local society in Chinese media research.

Media and Local Community in China

Xiaotong Fei's (1992) seminal work *From the Soil* (Xiangtu Zhongguo 乡土中国) points to the fundamental characteristic that defined rural China in his era. Fei (1992) portrays the organizational

structure of the Chinese society as “the differential mode of association” (p. 60), in which concentric relations develop around an individual. The organizational principle has persisted during social change and has manifested itself in many aspects during the last several decades in China (e.g., Xiang, 2000).

In line with Fei’s emphasis on traditional social relations, this article looks at how “laoxiang” relations are manifested on Douyin at the county level. In China, *laoxiang* (老乡, translated literally as “old village”) is a much-used term, and its meaning varies in different contexts. One meaning is to describe people from the same place. In another county, *laoxiang* refers to people from the same county. In another province, it includes people from the same province, different from where people live and work. In another country, it refers to people from the same country. In this article, we look at community building and laoxiang relations at the county level. Compared with city- or provincial-level communities, county-level communities are more rooted in traditional social relations. Existing communication research approaches geographic variation in China with a “urban–rural” conceptual framework. The county level has not been given sufficient attention. We focus on the county-level community because it has characteristics of both the urban and the rural, composing an important site to study the locality of digital technologies.

Traditional social relations translate onto media platforms, including BBS, WeChat, and the more recent Douyin. Although these media platforms can accumulate a national or international group of users, locality is still an important facet. This is highlighted in the edited volume *Mapping Media in China* by Wanning Sun and Jenni Chio (2010). Sun (2012) advocates “a geographic turn” of Chinese media studies, which corresponds to the multiple scales and localities of media production and consumption in contemporary China. This volume exemplifies how such “a geographic turn” could inform relevant studies. For instance, Jenny Chio (2012) studies the representation of a minority ethnicity in Guizhou province in locally produced “village videos.” In particular, the penetration of digital technologies in rural China has enriched the local layers of technological articulations. For example, rural residents are embracing short video applications, adding layers to rurality and complicating urban–rural relations (H. Li, 2020; Lin & de Kloet, 2019).

Sun’s (2012) advocacy accompanies the proliferation of local media entities across different platforms. For instance, Weibo provides space for local identity negotiations and place-making. Wilfred Wang (2015) observes a Weibo group of local Guangzhou residents and examines how local identity negotiations were framed in relation to social structural change in post-reform China. On WeChat, local spheres have formed around local WeChat official accounts and small-group discussions (Harwit, 2017; W. Wang, 2021).

In addition to shared meanings in the representational aspect, local communities have also experienced structural changes that are due to infrastructural changes in digital technologies. In online forums, users register to send out posts and make comments. On Weibo, the public opinion leader has risen as a new role on the Internet. On WeChat, local public official accounts elicit comments in the comment area. At the local level, county-level media convergence centers, operated by the local county government, are anchored with the hope of bridging state policy and the local people (Hu, 2020). As with these official accounts, the rise of digital mediating agents between the state and society at the local level merits attention (W. Wang, 2021). This is situated in the cultural shift of “Internet celebrity” in the digital age (Abidin, 2018; Lv & Craig, 2021).

The communication possibilities that Douyin affords are similar to those offered by Weibo and WeChat. On Douyin, an individual or corporate user can register an account and post short videos. Under each short video, users can make comments and interact with others. People can also add hashtags to their short videos, which facilitates information sharing. On Weibo, opinion leaders are often those who exert influence at the national level within a broader societal context. In contrast, WeChat has given rise to smaller, local online communities (Harwit, 2017). On Douyin, two kinds of communication modes coexist. Thus, the question of how short video platforms provide technological affordances and set technological constraints regarding local content production remains critical. It affects community building at the local level. In the next section, the role of digital technologies in community building is reviewed.

Digital Technologies, Community Building, and Local Connections

Ferdinand Tönnies' (1980) work *Community and Society* inspired an important field of study on modernity, community, and social change. The conceptual dichotomy of traditional rural community and modern industrial community has undergone criticism (Durkheim, 2014). Traditional community is found to include modern elements, and traditional social relations still thrive in modern society (Delanty, 2018; Jodhka, 2002). Media have been a constitutive force in community building. Benedict Anderson (2006) traces nationalism as a historical process, in which print capitalism spurred the emergence of dominating languages and the sharing of collective experiences. Traditional community also needs imagined articulation. As Gerard Delanty (2018) states, "No community, not even a traditional, occupationally-based one such as that of coalminers or a rural community, could exist as a community without a capacity to symbolically imagine themselves as a community" (p. 205). At the neighborhood level, meso- and micro-level organizations and media contribute to local-level storytelling and community building (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006).

The rise of the Internet and the formation of virtual community have challenged the boundaries of offline community. Manuel Castells (2001) stands at the celebratory side of the Internet and argues for a new form of virtual reality. Taking a more cautious viewpoint, Craig Calhoun (1991, 1998) holds that the Internet strengthens existing social relations more than creating strong and effective new connections. He abandons the clear break between virtual and offline community and directs us to the resilience of existing cultural identity and social connections. In the digital age, community unfolds across boundaries between the virtual and the offline. In a study of social media usage in an English village, Daniel Miller (2016) argues that these residents appropriate social media to manage their distance with others, negotiating a community characterized by a culturally specific sense of intimacy. Therefore, in this article, we study local community as a hybrid form of community as it is constantly constructed in online and offline spaces.

We approach community building as the process of fostering a sense of belonging and local pride. As Delanty (2018) states, despite different conceptualizations of community, the core idea that underpins these conceptualizations is "belonging and sharing." We explore the relationship between digital technologies and community building in the current stage, when cultural production is platformized (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). When local content production is hinged on digital platforms such as Douyin, the affordances and constraints set by platforms will exert unprecedented influence on the dynamics of the local community. A key question is who holds the power to represent the local community. The next question is how this entity represents local areas, which affects the sense of belonging and local pride of local residents. In this

study, we examine how short video platforms infrastructurally restructure local connections and what it means with regard to the representation of local areas.

Methods and Data

To observe online local communities on Douyin, we first used online ethnography to grasp how localism is mediated on Douyin. As mentioned earlier, the way in which communities grow on Douyin is different from the mode in the BBS era. An important venue of social interaction is the comment section for short videos. In this case, we identified local county-level communities through tracing key influential Douyin accounts in a county and documenting the interaction in their comment sections. For each account, we started with the first video posted and then chose every third video up to May 6, 2020.

To examine interaction among users in the same local community, we also studied the comment section. For each video, we kept the first three comments, excluding those by the creator. The first three comments appear on the top of the comment area, which indicates their representativeness of followers' perception of the short video. We documented the text of each comment and attempted to find the origin of the user who commented. We categorized them into three origins: locals, migrants, and nonlocal residents. We combined their location labels, video locations, and video contents to identify their origins. Users whose origins could not be identified were categorized as "unidentified."

We used content analysis techniques to analyze the themes of the short videos and comments. We used exploratory content analysis methods to develop the coding schemes. After exploratory coding, we developed 10 themes for short videos and 10 themes for comments, as shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. The 10 Themes of Short Videos.

Local food introduction
Local scenic spot introduction
Local civic news
Local cultural and tourist news
Combatting the COVID-19 virus
Positive energy of combatting the COVID-19 virus
Nostalgia
Personal information of the account owner
The life of local residents
Other

For short videos, the 10 themes are local food introduction, local scenic spot introduction, local civic news, local cultural and tourist news, combatting the COVID-19 virus, positive energy of combatting the COVID-19 virus, nostalgia, personal information of the account owner, the life of local residents, and other. Because the collection period covers the COVID-19 pandemic, we added the two themes, "combatting the COVID-19 virus" and "positive energy of combatting the COVID-19 virus." These 10 themes summarize the content of most short videos in our sample and manifest different aspects of locality. For the comments, the 10 themes are thumbs-up for the account creator, chatting with the account creator, suggestions for

the account creator, queries about hometown affairs for the account creator, thumbs-up for the hometown, comments on hometown affairs, claiming hometown identity, expressing hope for the hometown, nostalgia, and other. The 10 themes of comments in our sample capture how local Douyin account users perceive local content produced by locally influential accounts.

Table 2. The 10 Themes of Comments.

Thumbs-up for the account creator
Chatting with the account creator
Suggestions for the account creator
Queries about hometown affairs for the account creator
Thumbs-up for the hometown
Comments on hometown affairs
Claiming hometown identity
Expressing hope for the hometown
Nostalgia
Other

In addition to online ethnography, we recruited 20 Douyin users to understand their short video usage, motivations for following local accounts, attitudes toward these accounts, and so forth. We recruited interviewees from two venues. We used *Wenjuanxing* (whose literal translation is “questionnaire star”; Chinese name 问卷星) to distribute questionnaires where respondents could leave contact information. We also sought help from our personal networks to recruit Douyin users and four Douyin local account owners. By interviewing Douyin local account owners, we tried to understand local content production against such a background. The unique characteristics of short video local communities entail a different set of techniques for data collection and analysis.

This article is an attempt to combine online ethnography and interviews in fathoming local community building. In the following sections, we first discuss how our interviewees consume short video local accounts and how their offline relations translate into online connections. Then, we move on to examine the structured reconfiguration of the local community resulting from the convergence of platformized cultural production and Chinese local society. A critical phenomenon is the increasingly important role of indigenous media in local content production and local area representation. After that, we discuss how this structured reconfiguration affects the representation of local areas, which leads to the construction and negotiation of the sense of belonging and local pride.

My Hometown and My Online Connections

Daxia² moved to Guangzhou three years ago for a career in software development. He was born in Henan province, and most of his family members and relatives are still in Henan. Regarding his use of Douyin, he followed accounts on discovering restaurants in both Guangzhou and his hometown. He also followed local Douyin accounts in his hometown that posted about local news. Although he only visited his

² This is a pseudonym, and all the names of interviewees used in this article are pseudonyms.

hometown twice a year, he still kept himself updated on what was going on there. Regarding why he followed restaurant exploration accounts, he said, "On the one hand, (I) wanna see good food in hometown; on the other hand, I wanna recommend (these restaurants) to my friends in my hometown, as I have many friends in hometown." These accounts updated him on "what was going on in hometown, what was new, and the situation of hometown." He remained attached to his hometown; he said, "(I) miss my hometown," after living in a big city for a long time.

Daxia is not alone. The rapid industrialization and urbanization has driven a large population to migrate to coastal areas and big cities for job opportunities. Some travel seasonally between their hometown and destination cities, and some become new immigrants. Among the 20 Douyin users we interviewed, only two were born and raised in coastal big cities and stayed there for job opportunities. Eighteen lived and worked outside their hometown. The attachment to one's hometown is thus motivating the interviewees to seek connections in different ways. With digital technologies, social media platforms host their attachment to their hometown.

Haoyu moved to Dongguan, Guangdong province, from another county in the same province. She moved to Dongguan for college and stayed to get a job. Although her hometown is not far from Dongguan, she still missed it, and most of her family members and relatives still lived there. She said, "I would definitely attend to local Douyin accounts about my hometown." The hometown local accounts she followed were mainly about food. One of the accounts she followed was influential in her hometown, with about 400,000 followers. This account posted short videos about a kind of local food as well as short videos about local news. According to Haoyu, people in her hometown and migrants like her were interested in following this kind of account, and people would make comments. Followers would ask the account creator what was in the video, and some made comments such as, "Ah, this is the food we had in childhood."

For established indigenous media companies, attracting users on Douyin was not difficult. According to Jiahui, the head of a local media company, his Douyin account quickly accumulated a large following after its debut in the second half of 2019. His company established itself as a local media brand, but he also felt support from Douyin in local account development. As a new platform, Douyin has given much attention to local accounts in cities and counties since 2018. A few cities, such as Chongqing and Chengdu, successfully leveraged Douyin resources in city branding. With effective Douyin strategies, they have become famous cities on the Internet and hot tourist destinations (Jie, 2019). From the perspective of the platforms, the attention-driven business model invites the participation of local accounts.

Who Comments and On What?

In this study, we selected 149 videos from six accounts. We labeled the people who left comments as being in one of four categories: local residents; migrants whose hometown is the same as the video creator's; nonlocal residents; and unidentified. For people whose locations were not easily identified, we referred to their short videos as evidence for categorization. A total of 32 account owners' locations were unknown, so we categorized their locations as "unidentified." Of the 362 comments selected in our sample, 189 comments were made by local residents (see Figure 3); migrants who had the same origin made 58 comments; and nonlocal residents left 47 comments.

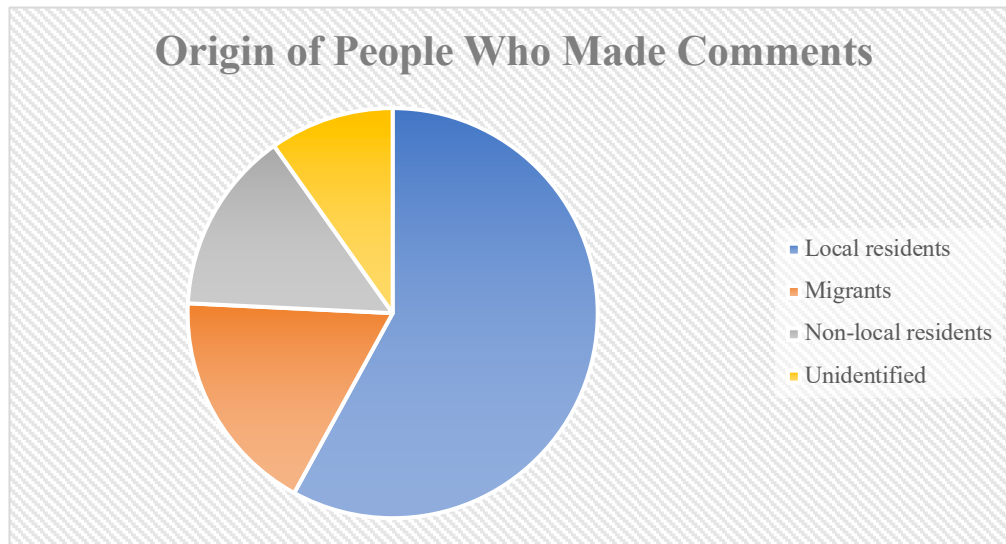


Figure 3. Origin of people who made comments.

Although the way in which we decided where the follower was from might not be completely accurate, the result did show that local residents and migrants with the same origin were active in commenting on these videos. The six accounts in our sample have attracted attention from the local residents and migrants. In addition to local attention, Lihe, the head of a company that specialized in local media operation, including one local Douyin account, said that the videos featuring local scenery also grabbed the interest of nonlocal people. He said his account had received many inquiries about local tourism from nonlocal residents. Similarly, Jiahui pointed to a major difference between Douyin and WeChat, as he said,

On WeChat, the number of views of each article is relatively stable. . . . On Douyin, the views of short videos might be dramatically different. . . . Some of the videos gained more than 1 million views, even reaching 10 thousand views, but the others might only have several thousand views.

The communication possibilities are thus mixed on Douyin for people both inside and outside the local community.

Local residents' and migrants' attachment to their hometown, as well as a keen interest in traveling among nonlocal residents, has translated into the rise of local communities on Douyin. The localism that defines traditional Chinese society thus affects how people use the Internet and appropriate new media platforms such as Douyin. A thriving local society has contributed to the expansion of short video platforms' territories. The local demands are appropriated by local content producers who grow on digital platforms such as Douyin. The convergence of platformized cultural production and Chinese local society has given rise to indigenous media and has restructured local connections. The next section describes the structural reconfiguration of the local community and the critical role of indigenous media.

Structural Reconfiguration of the Local Community

Indigenous Media

The structure of local communities on Douyin represents a different paradigm from that in the BBS era. Local forums in the BBS era presented a decentralized way of interaction. In a BBS forum, everyone could send out posts to elicit comments from fellow users. In contrast, on Douyin, local relations develop into a relatively hierarchical structure. Influential local accounts become the hubs, and social interaction revolves around them. Although there is also content produced by less influential local residents, indigenous media exert power in the local community.

Indigenous media include official accounts and grassroots accounts that play an influential role in online local communities. County-level media convergence centers, operated by the local county government, are anchored with the hope of bridging state policy and the local people. The digital transformation has urged the government to update social governance measures. The emphasis on digital local governance thus breeds the establishment of local media convergence centers and other accounts by official bureaus at the county level. These local media convergence centers consolidate resources and services. They aim to break the barriers among county newspapers, television, radio, WeChat, and Weibo by consolidating news production resources. The service provided by a consolidated team can thus use a range of media to bridge government policy, local news, and local residents. In 2018, Beijing and Fujian initiated the establishment of county-level media convergence centers. The following year, 2019, witnessed the rapid increase of these centers. It was anticipated that all the counties would have their own media convergence centers by the end of 2020 (Huang, 2019).

With Douyin's popularity, county-level media convergence centers also opened Douyin accounts. The three official Douyin accounts in our sample are owned by the media convergence centers of three counties in Anhui province and Sichuan province. The numbers of followers of these three accounts were 5,600, 6,100, and 227, respectively, and they received 43,200, 49,1499, and 1,600 hearts, respectively.³ These media convergence centers are important sources of local news. They have access to firsthand local news, and their short videos are sometimes forwarded by other influential accounts in the same county.

Local "Internet celebrities" are also an important part of indigenous media. They position themselves as "down to earth" representatives of the local area. They also develop mutual relationships with the local government, demonstrated by their collaboration with government bureaus and participation in local policy making (W. Wang, 2021). With the popularity of Douyin, the locally influential Internet celebrities have also expanded their media repertoire. The WeChat official accounts that were examined by one of the authors in a previous study were found to establish equivalents on Douyin—and their Douyin accounts have proved to be highly attractive. The three accounts selected for this study are from Anhui

³ As of early July 2020. A "heart" is shown when a user double-clicks on a short video, which will add a "heart" to the video. In this article, "thumbs-up" means that a user comments in the comment area of a short video with either the symbol of "thumbs-up" or the Chinese characters of "thumbs-up" (dianzan).

province and Henan province. The numbers of followers of these three accounts were 51,600, 21,600, and 21,400, respectively, and the hearts they received amounted to 982,700, 128,700, and 47,000, respectively.⁴ Compared with official accounts, they had more followers and received more hearts.

The attention-driven business model of platforms encourages the rise of this new type of digital mediating agent between the state and society. Lihe said that when WeChat enabled official accounts, he first sensed the chance for local accounts. He registered an account and positioned it as a local news outlet. He also predicted the popularity of short videos five years ago, before Douyin was even invented. After Douyin was released, Lihe's company also opened an account on Douyin, which had the same name as his major WeChat official account. On his company's Douyin account, his team posted short videos of local scenery, food, childhood memories, and critical news for the local area.

Local Internet celebrities' accounts are more inclined to follow a market logic in two senses. First, they post content that is much welcomed by local people and that official accounts might not include. In Lihe's words, "The accounts by media convergence centers represent the official voice, and our accounts are voices from the society." So, he said, their content is more flexible and might receive more views from followers. Second, they also collaborate with local business. They earn part of their livelihood from social media operation, including Douyin accounts and their accounts on Weibo and WeChat, so they also post short videos for sponsors.

Local Opinion Leaders and the Localized Douyin Sphere

Local Internet celebrities and local governments' official accounts on Douyin constitute the nodes of local networks. Following Crystal Abidin's (2018) review of different types of celebrities, these indigenous media are in between microcelebrities and what she defines as Internet celebrities. Abidin (2018) defines Internet celebrities as "all media formats (people, products, icons, figures, etc.) that attain prominence and popularity native to the internet" (p. 15). In our case, these indigenous media attain their influence due to their role in the local community, which fuels their online expansion. They are embedded in local networks with the potential to reach a much wider audience on Douyin. Local communities on Douyin form around these key accounts, which serve as local information disseminators and cohesion managers.

Our study contributes to the line of research on Internet celebrities. We focus on the grassroots opinion leaders at the county level, who have received relatively less attention in extant studies. The emergence of these celebrities is the local response to the celebrity-making Internet economy. It is the continuation and expansion of the "demotic turn" explicated by Graeme Turner (2006). It is also the local reverberance of neoliberal self-governing technology in the digital age. Douyin effectively approaches the local society as its territory. In the localized Douyin sphere, local opinion leaders produce localized content to make impact. Different from place-making on Weibo, as discussed by Wilfred Wang (2015), the localized Douyin sphere is celebrity-oriented with a hierarchical structure.

⁴ As of early July 2020.

The rise of local communities on short video platforms reveals a parallel trajectory of media consumption—broader social-level browsing and a local turn. Juxtaposed with the challenge of how to absorb as much attention as possible, county-level government bureaus and Internet celebrities jump into the local audience pool and solidify their local influence.

On the one hand, indigenous media depend on platform infrastructures for content production and circulation; as Nieborg and Poell (2018) states, "As cultural producers are transformed into platform complementors, they are incentivized to change a traditionally linear production process into an iterative, data-driven process in which content is constantly altered to optimize for platform distribution and monetization" (p. 4287). On the other hand, we argue that indigenous media are more than cultural producers or platform complementors, as described by Nieborg and Poell (2018); they are increasingly important social actors in constructing the local community and serving national discourse. So, their cultural production in an age of platformization bears more Chinese characteristics, corresponding to what Guobin Yang (2021) terms "state-sponsored platformization." They leverage local connections and practice local governance besides participating in platformized cultural production through Douyin.

The Concentration Process of the Local Media Landscape

Social interaction online has been changing as a result of social, cultural, economic, and media transformations. In the BBS era, users' demand for more specific and relevant information resulted in the emergence of local forums. Jiahui sensed the chance and founded a local county forum. At first, he didn't expect it to become a career. In this forum, the accumulated number of users increased to about a hundred thousand. There were more than 40 sections in this forum, each of which attracted people interested in a specific topic. The majority of the posts were made by regular users.

Around 2015, Jiahui announced the opening of his WeChat account, which immediately accumulated a large following. He said, "We had to do more work because we began to produce content." On WeChat accounts, Jiahui's employees mainly targeted local residents and migrants, although those not connected to the local place could also search for and view their posts. Douyin posed more challenges because Jiahui had to think about how to attract attention across the platform, not only from local residents. This also explains why short videos of local scenic spots rank high as a hot topic for these local accounts.

In BBS forums, conversations took place in a relatively horizontal way. Compared with BBS local forums, local communities on WeChat and Douyin evolved into a hierarchical structure. This concentration process reveals the forceful rise of indigenous media. This paradigm reflects the reorganization of the local sphere on social media platforms by indigenous media. Short video platforms thus shape the reconfiguration of social relations at the local level. Indigenous media take advantage of platforms such as WeChat and Douyin to produce local content and appeal to the local audience, consolidating the local discursive sphere. The rise of indigenous media reflects the convergence of platformized cultural production and Chinese local society. Indigenous media, holding an influential position in the local network, can steer the representation of the local community. We found that this concentration process parallels the spectacle-ization of local areas. The next section describes the representation of local areas on Douyin and its influence on local identity.

Representation of Local Areas as Short Video Spectacles

The short videos in our sample show the pattern of how local areas are represented by indigenous media. In the text descriptions of short videos, the names of local counties (municipal city, towns, and villages) appear frequently. For example, of the 149 videos, the names of the counties appeared 73 times.

Of the 10 categories of short videos, local civic news, positive energy of combatting the COVID-19 virus, and local scenic spot introduction are the top three (see Figure 4). Local civic news appears the most frequently on these Douyin accounts. A major function of indigenous media at the county level is to deliver news to the local population. Civic news, relevant to local people's everyday life, becomes the top selection. The following video descriptions provide a few examples:

Buses back to business in *** (name of the county).

All the schools in *** (name of the county) are open.

*** (name of the county) people, you can go out and find jobs after staying home for a long time.

The registration date for newly admitted students in primary and middle schools in *** (name of the county) is finalized... #*** (name of the county).

*** (name of the county) pushes for the construction of bullet trains.

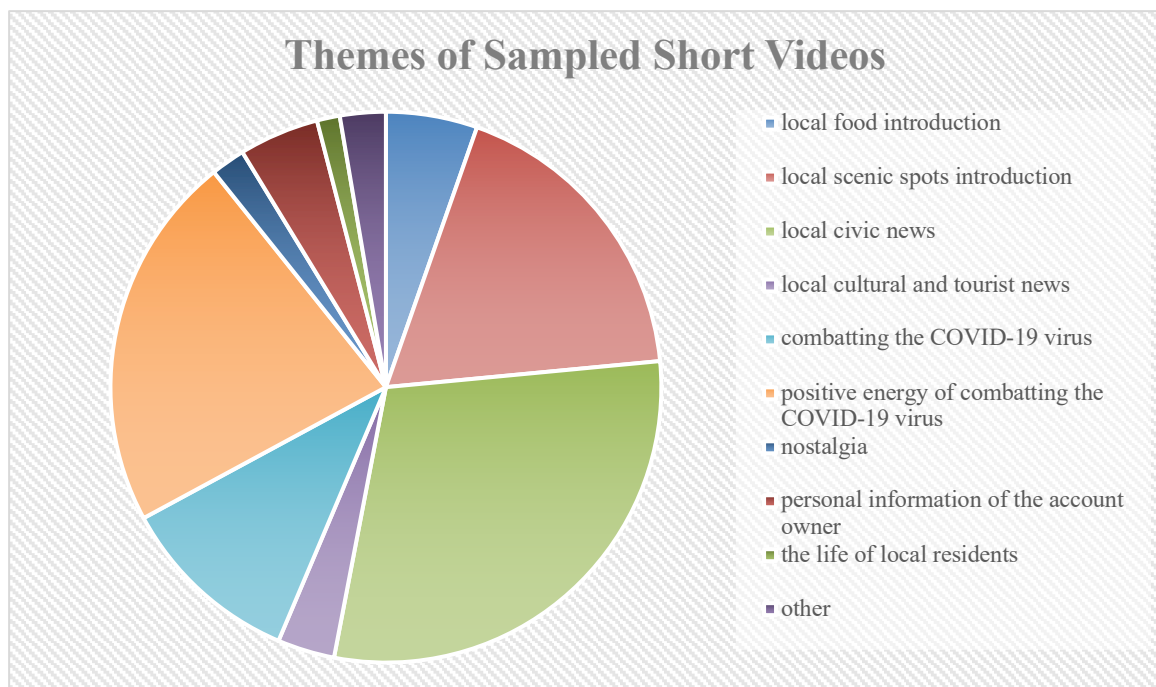


Figure 4. Themes of sampled short videos.

Some of the videos are updates about local transportation and education; routine life was disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic, so local people were eager to know about local affairs.

Videos of local tourist attractions and scenery are also among the top three. These videos are very popular among both local and nonlocal residents. As Tingyou comments, many people are increasingly fond of traveling. If a place is well presented on Douyin, tourists are more willing to choose that place as a destination. The representation of local areas on short videos is characteristic of attractive or positive elements. With regard to scenery, these accounts shoot videos that can best capture the beauty of the local area. Sometimes these videos are crafted products that eclipse the real state of the local area. Fenfan, one of the interviewees, confessed that some short videos about her hometown look better than the actual local scenery.

This representation results from the fact that Douyin draws on both local and nonlocal users. The possibility that Douyin videos can transcend local boundaries motivates the production of such videos to maximize the number of views. Indigenous media welcome Douyin as a platform to accumulate attention and develop business potential. This drives indigenous media owners, such as Lihe, to ride the Douyin wave immediately after sensing the economic opportunities. The rationale of presenting the local place for market attention explains why videos of local tourist attractions and scenery rank as the top three. It also affects how people perceive local content on Douyin, discussed further in the next section.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the short videos highlight the contribution of local areas to controlling the spreading of the virus and the solidarity of local areas. During the pandemic, doctors and nurses from across the country traveled to Wuhan to help with medical services. These Douyin accounts created videos to show the solidarity and themselves being proud of these heroes. For example, the following comments express a salute to health workers:

Salute to every health worker who goes to the front.
Salute to the 170 health worker team from *** (name of the county) our province.
Heroes are back, and everything is good.
Look forward to the heroes coming back with success! Come on!

These accounts also posted videos about how local people combatted the virus through a diverse range of measures. For example, they saluted the local officials and volunteers who took part in implementing social distancing measures and helped local residents. With positive energy, these videos elicited praise from followers; this was reflected in their comments, which will be discussed later.

Thumbs-up Thumbs-up Thumbs-up
*** (name of the county), come on! We *** (name of the county) local people are proud
of you
Thumbs-up for our village cadres

These videos construct the local areas as the hometown of heroic people. This representation is enabled by the convergence of platformized cultural production and the characteristics of Chinese local society. The next section analyzes how Douyin users, including local residents and migrants, perceive such presentation.

Constructing Local Community

Sense of Belonging

For both migrants and local residents, these local accounts' short videos of Douyin spotlight childhood memories. One of the interviewees, Shunli said that it is trendy to be nostalgic. The local short video accounts showcase elements from the past, including food, games, festivals, and architecture, in response to the nostalgic mentality of local residents and migrants. For example, a comment says, "Who has ever been to the old cinema for movies?"

Keyou is a student studying in a city, and his hometown is in village of a county. He was intrigued to see short videos of his hometown. He said the content of the short videos was very familiar, and he made comments such as, "My hometown is like this from this angle." Similarly, Luohe used "qinqie" (familiar and close) to describe the short videos of his hometown on Douyin, such as "street views" and "people" in the videos.

A theme analysis of the comments selected in our sample shows that 11% of the comments expressed the local identity of followers, as shown in the following examples:

I am from *** (name of the county).
(This tourist spot is) in front of my home.
I live in Chen Village (in this county), and I don't know this place (in the short video).
I am here (in ***, the name of the county).

By claiming the identity of the local area, followers, through their comments, revealed their attachment to their hometown. Commenting on these short videos, they expressed how they belonged to this place. For migrants, in contrast to the cities where they were living, their hometown extends unflinching support.

The local dialect also becomes a key element in local identity. Some videos use the local dialect to announce news, introduce the hometown, or make recommendations. For example, one of the media convergence center accounts used the local dialect to shoot videos that delivered educating messages on preventing the spreading of COVID-19. Some comments also pinpointed the local dialect, as shown in the following examples:

(I) want to listen to you singing in the local dialect.
The local dialect of *** sounds great thumbs-up.
*** Singing in the local dialect, hahahahaha, so funny.
Authentic dialect in the *** region of *** thumbs-up thumbs-up.
I am from ***. I can understand your dialect.

In these comments, users praised the local dialect, acclaimed the ability of the account owner to use the local dialect in singing, or associated the local dialect with his or her hometown. It can be seen that the local dialect played an important role in increasing group cohesion and strengthening local attachment.

Local Pride

A theme analysis of the comments selected in our sample shows that chatting with the account owner, asking about hometown affairs, giving a thumbs-up to the account creator, and giving a thumbs-up for the hometown are the top four categories (see Figure 5). Meanwhile, 11% of the comments expressed the local identity of followers. The themes of the comments show that the short videos resonated with followers, eliciting positive attitudes toward the hometown, as shown in the following examples:

The people of *** (name of the county) are the most beautiful.

*** (name of the county) fight on!

*** county fight on! Thumbs-up We *** county people are proud of you.

Proud of we *** county people. Wuhan fight on. We will triumph soon. Hope you can come back home safe.

Heroes in hometown have done so much!! Salute to you!

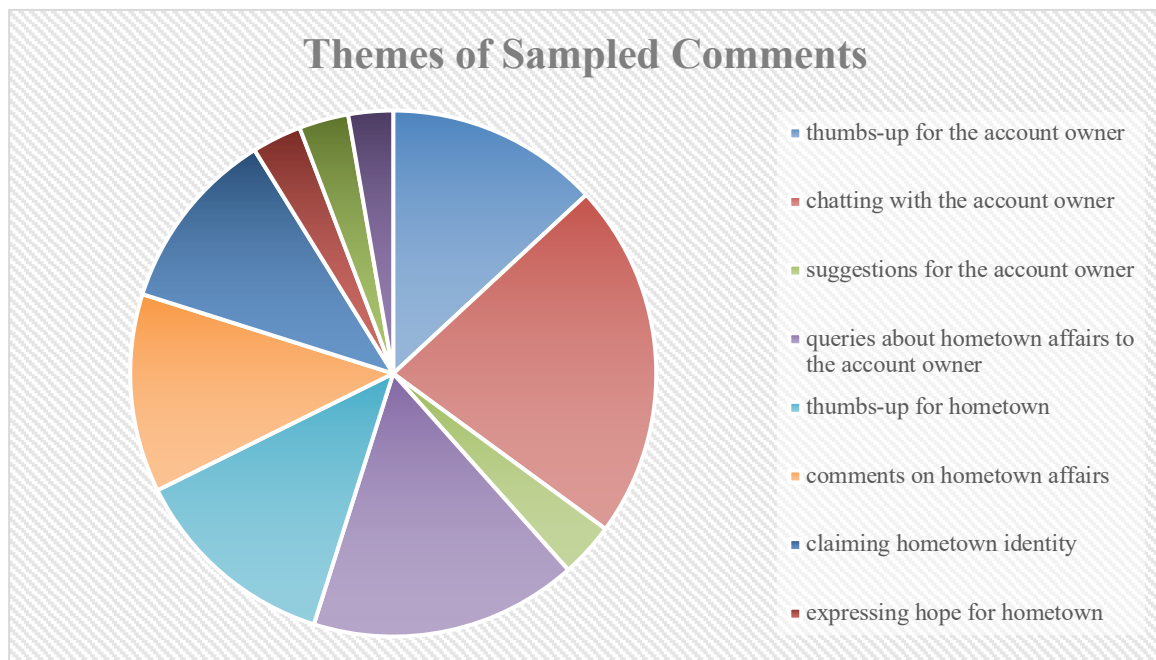


Figure 5. Themes of sampled comments.

Pengjie, a 20-year-old college student, said that sometimes he would search for people from the same hometown and then view the videos that person posted. Sometimes he would also leave comments

under short videos about his hometown. In his words, "(regarding) where that place is. (It is) my home, so I know it the best. So, sometimes, I leave comments, very proudly."

A 20-year-old college student, Xiaoyu deeply missed her hometown, in a small county, when she was away. She attended a college in her province's capital city. Using Douyin, she would search for content, using her hometown as the keyword. The videos she found were mainly about scenic spots and breaking news. Usually, she didn't leave comments under these videos, but she would visit the comment section and look at how other people commented. According to Xiaoyu, these comments were mainly made by local people or migrants. More important, these comments showed positive attitudes toward her hometown; she said, "I haven't found any single negative comment about my hometown."

The short videos about the local community highlighted the positive side, such as attractive scenery and positive energy in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic. These short videos thus elicited positive comments from followers. This local pride, to some degree, is the local scaffolding of a national discourse of patriotism, or "playful patriotism," conceptualized by Chen, Kaye, and Zeng (2021). In the videos that salute local health professionals who went to Wuhan to help, the pride in being Chinese and support to Wuhan manifest the connection of local and national identity formation.

Short video platforms thus become a space for local residents and migrants to express their attachment to their hometown and pride in their identity. Local solidarity translates to short video platforms, fueling community building that transcends online and offline boundaries. Short video platforms reify local attachment and local social relations into mediated online connections, affecting community building at the local level.

Conclusion

Short video applications have become profoundly important digital technologies in our society. Douyin, a major short video application, has accumulated more than 600 million daily active users (Tencent News, 2020). On short video platforms, users actively interact with each other and form communities. This article has looked at local content production and local community building in China. On short video platforms like Douyin, those videos showcasing local areas at the county level, such as local food, events, and scenery, are very popular. These videos have attracted wide audiences, particularly local residents in the same area and migrants from the same place. Within a broadly defined Douyin platform, there are different scales of content production and consumption. Echoing Wanning Sun's (2012) call for "a geographic turn" of Chinese media studies, this study delves into the locality of short video platforms.

The platformization of cultural production has been sweeping across the globe (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). The way in which social media are platformized has possessed Chinese characteristics (Kaye et al., 2020; G. Yang, 2021). We positioned platformized cultural production at the local level using Douyin, a short video application, as a case to study local content production and local community building. We looked at the construction of the sense of belonging and local pride of local community building at the county level. We argue that the platformization of cultural production on short video applications converges with local connections, local governance demands, and local market expansion. This convergence restructures the local society by concentrating the power of representing local areas into indigenous media. This

concentration process dovetails with the spectacle-ization of local areas on Douyin, which reinforces the sense of belonging and local pride of local residents and migrants. Digital technologies participate in the imagined articulation of traditional community in an ongoing process.

Through this article, we contribute to the following areas of study. First, we contextualize platformized cultural production in Chinese local society. It is an attempt to “develop in-depth case studies of how platformization unfolds in particular geographies, fields, and instances of cultural production” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4288). We highlight the convergence of platformized cultural production, local connections, and local governance needs. Second, this study adds to the field of Chinese media studies by looking at the locality of social media. It explores one layer of media production and circulation of an internally diverse Chinese Internet.

Third, it contributes to studies of community building in the digital age. The process of creating the sense of belonging and local pride is inseparable from representation of local areas on digital platforms. This representation is steered by local cultural producers who appropriate and depend on digital platforms. This process of community building is both local and translocal. Platforms such as Douyin are apparatuses that sprawl fluidly at different levels. Content production at the local level on Douyin is shaped by platform infrastructures and national discourse, which unfolds in the local context. Our exploration reveals the construction of locality by translocal forces. This study builds on Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) conceptualization of “translocality” and illustrates how digital technologies participate in the production of local community and “translocal subjectivities” (Conradson & McKay, 2007). Through dialogue with these areas of research, this study links platformized cultural production, local society, and local governance. Our analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of social, cultural, and political transformation in China. The local society is undergoing changes in tandem with the changing media landscape.

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