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'Inspire Creativity, Enrich Life' ?

A Critical Discourse Analysis on How Douyin Justifies Its Data
Extraction and Shapes Public Values in The Platform Society

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ABSTRACT

This study conducts critical discourse analysis of Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) CEO Zhang Nan's public speeches across 2018 to 2021 at its milestone events. It aims to uncover how the platform naturalizes data extraction of the social and camouflages its commercial interests under the claims for public values and collective interests. It evaluates both creators' and audiences' agency in a commercially-mediated platform environment and inspects its consequences on cultural production and appreciation. It also analyzes how the platform aligns its discourses with the Chinese government's goals in fostering a culture of 'positive energy'. Taking both together, this study makes explicit the implicit relation between the platform's discursive strategies and its impact on social change. It hopes to inspire critical reflections on data extraction and public values in the platform society.

INTRODUCTION

Douyin was first released in September 2016 by the Chinese tech giant ByteDance. Its core competitive ability is the AI-based algorithm that recommends real-time traffic distribution of personalized content by tracking and analyzing users' behaviors and preferences (Ma and Hu, 2021). It is currently one of the most popular short-video platforms in China. As of August 2020, Douyin's daily active users had reached over 600 million (Statista, 2021). Known as the Chinese version of TikTok, it includes more advanced features than TikTok, such as livestreaming and e-commerce. It is not merely a short video and social networking app, but has been gradually transformed into an online marketplace (Herrman, 2019; Huang, 2021).

This study adopts the definition of platforms as programmable digital architecture that bring users, corporate entities, and the public sectors into interaction (van Dijck, 2013). Like other platforms, Douyin follows the logic of configuring the social relations into profitable data relations, representing a transforming force of the private sector on the public space (Couldry and Mejias, 2019; van Dijck and Poell, 2015). At the same time, platforms usually adopt strategies that naturalize their data extraction mechanism of the social and cover their commercial interests under the claim of pursuing social values and collective interests (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018). These discursive strategies enable corporations to 'reconcile competing financial, cultural, and regulatory demands' (Gillespie, 2010: 348); while at the same time, they also compromise users' autonomy and direct their behaviors towards participation and sharing, the resources of data production (Bechmann and Lomborg, 2013), triggering broader changes in social relations and shifts of values.

Recent platform studies have increasingly adopted an integrated approach to examining platforms' technical, commercial, and discursive mechanisms (Nieborg and Helmond, 2019; Nieborg and Poell, 2018; van Dijck and Poell, 2013). They unravel the techno-commercial and cultural mechanisms of platforms and generate insights about the underlying power negotiations of platformization. However, most of the existing studies on platformization and its impact on public values are based on the context of western society; studies from a non-

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western society are relatively absent. Meanwhile, scholars observe that the non-western digital platforms, especially the Chinese ones, have gradually become an unignorable force. China is viewed as the other pole of digital power in the social quantification sector (Couldry and Mejias, 2019) in addition to the U.S.; Chinese apps, such as TikTok, have also broken into Western markets. Thus, understanding the mechanisms of Chinese digital platforms and how they reshape public values in their home markets can shed light on and complete the existing western-centric interpretations of the platform society.

Starting with examining power relations of platforms from a political economy lens, this paper extends its concerns to changes of social norms and public values, as well as individuals' autonomy in an increasingly platform-mediated environment. By analyzing Douyin CEO's public utterances around the theme of 'Inspire Creativity, Enrich Life,' this paper unravels Douyin's strategies of raising values of sharing and connection while lowering the values of privacy and autonomy. Notably, the paper responds to the calls from van Dijck *et al.* (2018) that platforms and public values should be examined within their specific contexts. It analyzes how the Chinese social and political context influences the platform's developmental and discursive strategies and how collectively they shape public values and direct users' behaviors towards exhibiting 'positive energy'.

This study adopts political economy studies as its main analytical framework and completes its analysis by drawing thoughts from sociology, which focuses on the impact of data extraction on social norms and social order. It also brings knowledge from the public administration field and solidifies its analysis on platform constructed public values, and the role of government in shaping platforms' operational strategies. By analyzing Douyin CEO's public utterances at its milestone events, this paper tries to expose how the platform constructs discourses to justify its business mechanism of data extraction of the social and reshaping public values. It aims to make the implicit relation between discursive and social change explicit (Fairclough, 1993) and contribute to the formation of alternative discourses of an inevitable platformization future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Economy of Platforms

Political economy studies are explicitly concerned with the power and politics of communication in social media platforms. In contrast to studies that extol the decentralization and empowerment ability of digital platforms, political economy emphasizes power relations in the production, distribution, and consumption of resources. It interrogates the values and moral principles that underpin a platform's strategies and business operations and its control over 'people, processes and things' (Mosco, 2009: 24), and examines the associated consequences on society and human autonomy (Mosco, 2009; van Dijck *et al.*, 2018).

Political economy studies are crucial to understanding the inherent accumulative tendency of capital and the exploitative nature of platforms (Srnicek, 2016; Fuchs, 2017; van Dijck, 2013; Cohen, 2016). For example, Srnicek (2016) in *Platform Capitalism* points out that the core competitive force of platforms is 'network effect,' that platforms rely on the number of users on board and their activity to 'produce' data to facilitate a platform's capability in data collection and value extraction. Critical political economy scholars argue that users are free 'digital labor' (Burston *et al.*, 2010; Scholz, 2013) for platforms, and the time they spend on platforms is not merely consumption or leisure time, but productive time (Fuchs, 2016). Others focus on the process of datafication and data extraction and point out that platforms are transforming previously non-commodified and non-monetized social life into capital and tradable commodities through the datafication process (Moore, 2015; van Dijck *et al.*, 2018).

Political economy studies give considerable weight to asymmetric power relations between platform and users regarding data ownership, data value extraction, and power of control. Users have to give up their data ownership, in part or in whole, to platforms. There is criticism that end-user licensing agreements are non-negotiable and indeed require a form of compliance rather than permitting any meaningful consent (Hutton and Henderson, 2017). On data value extraction, it is argued that platforms have dominant advantages over users in the knowledge of converting data into economic capital (Sadowski, 2019). For example, data may

not be easily converted into economic capital at the individual level, but can be immensely valuable at the aggregated level. Wixom and Ross (2017) categorize three ways a company can derive value from big data: to improve internal processes; to enrich products, services, and customer experiences; and to monetize through selling data to external parties. Taking the data broker industry for example, it is estimated to generate \$200bn in annual revenue (Crain, 2018). In terms of control, platforms consistently track, monitor, categorize and probe users in their enclosed ecosystem (Srnicek, 2016; Schneier, 2016). Plantin *et al.* (2018) add to this discussion by illustrating how platforms lock in users and third-party developers through infrastructuralization, making it difficult to escape a platform's operational logic and values. In various terms of 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2015), or 'surveillance society' (König *et al.*, 2020; Lyon, 1994), scholars express common concerns about the private sector's data power and collaboration between the private and public sectors in systematically collecting and probing information about users. Reliance on the private sector in measuring social traffic through data collection, as van Dijck(2014) argues, is a power transfer from the public to the private sector.

Though political economy studies also examine the social whole or the totality of social relations (Mosco, 2009), a better connection is still to be made to the social study of technologies to comprehend the full strength of this continuing transition towards a datafication and platformization society. For example, political economy is strong in interpreting the network effects in terms of the exploitation of digital labor and market monopolization (Srnicek, 2016); however, it provides relatively insufficient interpretation in terms of the transformation of cultural commodities and the operations of the cultural industries (Turow, 2011; Nieborg and Poell, 2018). Moreover, political economy scholars should work more closely with other social studies to reveal the implications on social life. Relevant works include, for example, the impact of platform strategy on encoding sociality and its construction of the 'tradable social everyday' (Alaimo and Kalliniko, 2017), and on the appropriation and dispossession of social life (Couldry and Mejias, 2019).

Data Extraction of the Social

Data extraction is essential to the platform mechanism. It is not a new phenomenon, however. As early as the 1980s, corporations already conducted data extraction from consumers via credit cards and customer loyalty cards for marketing purposes (Gandy, 1993). What makes today's platform data extraction striking and central to the discussion is, firstly, the unprecedented amount of available data given the development of Web 2.0 and social media platforms featuring user-generated content and interactions; and secondly, the gradually normalized process of datafication (Mayer-Schoenberger and Cukier, 2013), through which social actions are transformed into quantifiable data. Van Dijck (2014: 198) further deconstructs the ideological grounds of datafication and argues that underlying is the ideology of dataism, which justifies the quantification and potential tracking of 'all kinds of human behavior and sociality through online media technologies' and 'involves trust in the (institutional) agents that collect, interpret and share (meta) data' through social media platforms.

These mechanisms and logics of platforms for data extraction, as scholars argue, *produce* new social structures and social norms (Gehl 2011; Couldry and Hepp, 2017; van Dijck *et al.*, 2018). Platforms not only capture data from online interactions, but they '*create* the actions' that users perform and encode everyday life into quantifiable data for value extraction (Alaimo and Kallinikos, 2017: 176). On the one hand, social interaction and communications on the platforms are drastically abstracted for computability. The extraction process reduces the social and cultural density of human interactions, blurs the distinguishable features of individuals, and constructs users as new social objects according to platform metrics (Alaimo and Kallinikos, 2017; Espeland and Stevens, 1998). On the other, 'the boundaries between human connections and commercially and technologically steered activities are increasingly obfuscated,' as van Dijck and Poell (2013: 8-9) argue. Platform mechanisms, such as community building, personalized recommendation, and group formation, have expedited connections between individuals. Under the claims for better connections, social behaviors and interactions have been consistently transformed and bound up according to the platform's logic of 'connectivity'.

Couldry and Mejias (2019) interpret this intrusion on social life by commercial actors through a colonial lens. By paralleling data extraction of platforms with claims of *terra nullius* in historical colonialism, they argue that just like historical colonialism, which labelled territories that belonged to 'no one' and just were there for the taking, platform data extraction in a similar way, intrusively appropriates and transfers previously uncommodified social life for data extraction. This continuous data appropriation, as they warn, decisively 'changes humanity's relations to external infrastructures' and erases 'the boundary between the flow of human experience and the environment of economic power that surrounds it' (2019: 8). If we recall what Karl Marx (1976: 168-169) termed as 'commodity fetish,' it could be argued that if capitalism previously 'conceals the social character of private labor and the social relations between the individual workers,' which is an indirect way of monetizing social relations through commodity exchange, contemporary data extraction goes further and 'abstract[s] value from life processes, even when they are not directly productive activities,' leaving open the prospect of 'a new social order for capitalism' (Couldry and Mejias, 2019).

Notably, data extraction has a crucial influence on the social media ecosystem regarding both content production and distribution. Turow and Couldry (2018: 421) rightfully observe that the 'media-centered data extraction regime' has a critical role in platform surveillance, discriminatory profiling of users. They trenchantly point out that media content often serves as the bait to attract user attention for data extraction. However, they did not explain in further depth how this popularity-driven logic transforms the media ecosystem in return. Alternatively, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017: 217) point out that financial motivation is one of the main reasons for the production of fake news, as 'news articles that go viral on social media can draw significant advertising revenue'. Heyman and Pierson (2015: 7) also notice that the editorial and promotional content on social media platforms are usually mixed, and content providers are coaxed to personalize content, to entice users and 'sell more attention to advertisers'. This platform logic, echoed by Gillespie (2018: 203), facilitated 'the circulation of falsehoods', and 'algorithmically rewarded the most popular and outlandish over more

substantive journalism'. These practices have a devastating impact on the public space and public values, as will be discussed in the next section.

Public Values

Recent years have witnessed increasing research attention on the relationship between social platforms and public values against the background that social and cultural activities have become intensely intertwined with the techno-commercial infrastructures of platforms (van Dijck and Poell, 2015). Specifically, the data-extraction-and-analysis feature of platforms adds to the concerns that platforms produce the social structure and shape how we live and how society is organized (Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Gehl, 2011). On the other hand, in order to avoid controversies, companies typically make their business models opaque from public scrutiny (Turow and Couldry, 2018) and strategically blur public and private interests by claiming that their services benefit 'the public' in general while concealing their own interests (Hoffman, Proferes, and Zimmer, 2016). Thus, it is critical to investigate how platforms intervene in and reshape value regimes and what public values are at stake (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018).

Before unfolding the discussion on platform and public values, it is beneficial to review the concept of public values. Despite increasing research interests in public values, there is still no agreed definition and scope about what values should be included in the list (Rhodes and Wanna, 2007; Jørgensen and Bozeman, 2007). This is partly because public values shift across different historical stages and social contexts, partly because the entities involved in creating and safeguarding public values are not exclusive. Besides the traditional view that public values should be the matter of public policy and administration, some point out that the private or social sectors also contribute in one way or another (Meynhardt, 2009). For example, technologies can also contribute to the creation and change of public values. In addition, citizens' involvement and self-development also matter as values include dialogue and responsiveness (Jørgensen and Bozeman, 2007).

Instead of viewing public values through a normative approach, it is more illuminating to treat them as bound to evolving relationships (Meynhardt, 2009). In this sense, public values are 'a result of evaluations about how basic needs of individuals, groups and the society as a whole are influenced in the relationship involving the public' and 'any impact on shared experience about the quality of the relationship between the individual and society can be described as public value creation' (Meynhardt, 2009: 212). This definition dynamically evaluates public values and allows examination of the private actors' role in the process, which echoes communication scholars' concerns about the increasing role the private sector plays in shaping social relations and social order (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018; Couldry and Mejias, 2019). More importantly, its emphasis on the 'basic needs of individuals, groups, and the society' resonates with the ongoing concern about agency and autonomy alongside technology innovations in the communication field (Garnham, 2000; Coudry and Mejias, 2019).

Connecting platform studies and public values, Gillespie (2018) focuses on content moderation and argues that platforms should be more transparent and responsible to the public. He points out that content moderation sets platforms apart from the open web - that through moderating, recommending, and curating content, platforms tune users' participation and social exchange, with consequences not only on the individual level but also on the public and institutions. Gillespie argues that social media platforms are not just the conduit of content, but each contribution means a tiny value assertion from each user. Content moderation of platforms thus plays a fundamental role in this 'collective assertion of value' (2018: 210). Similarly, Van Dijck *et al.* (2018) accent the importance of platform responsibilities to public life. They examined the role platforms play in the organization of public values through mechanisms of datafication, commodification, and selection, with a particular focus on transportation, news, health, and education sectors. Both Gillespie and van Dijck *et al.* agree upon the private sector's sharing of responsibility in creating public values alongside state and civil society, which resonates with arguments from the public policy and administration field. Van Dijck and co-authors also notice no universal guidelines or recipes for articulating public values. Instead, they believe that 'articulating which values are contested by whom in which

context' may be helpful to hold the platform ecosystem more responsive to public concerns (2018: 140).

Two factors need specific attention when we discuss the platform and public values. First, the public sectors at both the international and national level increasingly rely on private platforms in data collection, analysis, and algorithmic facilitated decision making, which endow the private sector with worrisome power over people's lives (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018; Lyon, 2014; Taylor and Broeders, 2015). This 'intrusion' of private corporations into public space and governance challenges the power distributions in creating public values. Secondly, there are complex relations between users' agency and platform design. Gillespie (2018: 209) rightfully points out that platform innovation about users' participation should focus more on the governance level in addition to content, and platforms should take responsibility to design structures to facilitate opinion and judgment from users. Van Dijck *et al.* (2018: 146) also call for a 'value-centric design' platform society. However, questions remain to be answered to what extent we can rely on this platform-selected-and-designed value system. It lays bare the fact that perhaps we rely more, not less, upon a platform-dominated public value discourse.

Platforms and Public Values in the Context of China

There is a growing awareness that studies of platforms and their implications for society should adopt a global scope even though dominant studies have been focused on western society (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018; Coulry and Mejias, 2019; de Kloet *et al.*, 2019; Zhang, 2020). As Zhang (2020: 116) well put it, 'the process of platformization is shaped by the mutual constitution between platform mechanisms and the specificities of the societies in which they are situated'. Thus, a non-western perspective can help interpret platformization more comprehensively. With the acknowledgment of studies focusing on other non-western societies, the following discussion will focus on the Chinese context, including history, platform development, and governance.

De Kloet *et al.* (2019) from the dimensions of infrastructure, governance, and practices to analyze platformization in Chinese society. They argue that what makes the platformization

of Chinese society distinct from the US and Europe is the central involvement of the state. The Chinese government has played a complex role in developing the internet in China since the 1990s. On the one hand, the neo-liberal economic policies of the Chinese government view the development of ICT as high priority and the key driver for modernization and globalization (Hong, 2017); on the other, the Chinese government has been consistently monitoring and controlling the digital space out of fear of the 'potential destabilizing consequences of open information flows' (Yang, 2012: 52).

When China joined the WTO in 2001, the Chinese government made several reforms to promote commercial use of the internet and greater transparency of business operations to comply with Western market norms (Weber and Jia, 2007). After the 2008 global economic crisis, the Chinese government, in its 12th Five-Year Plan¹, linked economic restructuring with ICT development (Atkinson, 2014). Networked ICTs and network connectivity have been regarded as central to the economic restructuring scheme. For the first time, the 12th Five-Year Plan aimed to turn cultural industries into an economic pillar (Hong, 2017). Supporting the government's ambition for industrial modernization and economic transformation, the 13th Five-Year Plan calls for integrating ICTs deep into the economy and social life and supporting the fast development of the information economy. As a policy continuation of the 12th Five-Year Plan, the government aims to stimulate the development of culture and create a 'commercially bustling information and communication hub' within its acceptable political-cultural parameters (Hong, 2017: 1767). As of December 2020, China's internet penetration had reached 70.4%, with netizens reaching 989 million and 99.7% of them accessing the internet through mobile phones (CNNIC, 2021).

This entanglement between the state and corporations facilitates the penetration of platform infrastructures into the fabric of everyday life. In order to foster the new economy and fulfil the national big data strategy, the Chinese government is allying with the tech giants and implementing measures to commercialize public data and legalize disruptive competition by

¹ The Five-Year Plans are a series of social and economic development initiatives issued by the Chinese government since 1953.

tech giants in hitherto regulated social services sectors, such as education and health care (Hong, 2017). Chen and Qiu (2019) argue that China has become an infrastructural state as it relies on the datafication of platforms. Wang and Lobato (2019) also identify that state governance has become intertwined with video-sharing platforms. Concerns about this transformation of economic and social life in China echo the concerns of Western scholars (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018; Hong, 2017). After all, the underlying commercial and profit logics dominating the Chinese platforms are similar to their Western counterparts, which base their business models on data surveillance and value extraction (Fuchs, 2014; Jin, 2013; Davis and Xiao, 2021).

Some claim that Chinese platform users exhibit 'cultural specificity' tolerance for surveillance (Davis and Xiao, 2021). Chong links this tolerance to China's modernization project and argues that concerns about data surveillance in China are often superseded by discourses about convenience, innovation, efficiency, security, and collective aspiration for 'the good life' (Chong, 2019: 4). This statement risks obscuring the power of state and commercial alliances in framing an unquestionable 'modernizing' process. It reflects 'developmental rationalities' covering data colonialism as a civilizational project for progress and safety (Couldry and Mejias, 2019). Echoing what Couldry and Mejias categorize as 'cultural rationalities' and 'technical rationalities,' the above argument reflects the consequence of the state and its commercial alliances' efforts to lower the value of privacy and frame data appropriation as a legitimate goal of scientific progress.

At the same time, it should not be concluded that netizens or platform users in China have no agency at all. Though government regulations and companies' practices channel users' behavior in specific directions, users also develop their own creative reactions (Yang, 2012). Chinese netizens negotiate internet control in various ways, such as using innovative expression methods to bypass keyword filtering censorship. Xu (2020) also observes a rising awareness of privacy protection among Chinese citizens due to widely used facial recognition and camera surveillance systems in recent years. In 2020, China issued the draft *Personal Information Protection Law*, the first comprehensive personal data protection legislation to

regulate collecting, processing, and transferring personal information. Xu comments that it remains tricky to balance the increasing needs of citizens for personal information protection and the utilization of data by the state and private sector.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTION

This study brings the political economy studies of platforms into dialogue with social studies to unpack transformations of social interactions, cultural production, and value shifts brought by platformization. The political economy studies and social studies of platforms take different approaches to unravel the platform's impact on society and human autonomy (Mosco, 2009; Couldry and Mejias, 2019). The political economy of communications is of critical importance to understand the accumulative and exploitative nature, power relations, and control of platforms, more towards the 'causes' of the platform society; while social studies, on the other side, pay relatively more attention to the 'effects' of the same phenomenon - they examine changes of social norms and public values. Both approaches are of critical importance and indispensable to scrutinize social and cultural transformation in the platform society. It is not the purpose of this study to examine the differences of these two approaches in their respective interpretations; instead, this study hopes to bring them together to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the platform's impact on social interactions and values, bringing the 'causes' to meet the 'effects.'

This study follows recent concerns about platforms' increasingly important role in the public sector and public values (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018; Gillespie, 2018). It borrows concepts about public values from the public administration field to buttress its arguments about platforms' mechanism and discursive strategies on shaping public values. It extends from van Dijck and her co-authors' concerns about public values in specific sectors, such as health and education, and adopts the concept that public values are about 'basic needs' and 'shared experiences' which are influenced in the relationship involving the public (Meynhardt, 2009: 212).

Based on the above conceptual frameworks and research objectives, this study intends to answer the following research questions:

RQ: How does Douyin's corporate discourse justify its data extraction and shape public values in the platform society?

SQ1: What discursive strategies can be identified in these public utterances and what are their relations to the platform's data extraction mechanism?

SQ2: What public values are influenced by the platform's mechanism and discursive strategies?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Methodological Justification

Discourse has been widely used in social theory and analysis about the structuring of knowledge and practice. It is believed that discourse not only represents or reflects social entities and relations but also 'constructs' or 'constitutes' them. From a social constructionism perspective, changes in discourse will, or may, 'lead to changes in other elements of social practices through processes of dialectical internalization'. Changes in discourse will (or may) trigger consequential changes in social and economic relations, as well as shifts of values (Fairclough, 2003: 22). Furthermore, the production of discourse is not still but rather a dynamic process: understanding the existing discourse helps to illuminate the forming of new discourse, an important way to investigate the continuous process of social and cultural transformation (Fairclough, 1993: 3-4).

Among various discourse analysis approaches, critical discourse analysis is distinct from other approaches as it underscores power and ideologies and the constructive effects discourses have on social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and belief (Fairclough,

1993: 12). This study will adopt Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse analysis. The strength of this method in drawing together the 'text-and-interaction' and 'social-theoretical' sense of discourse(Fairclough, 1993: 4) satisfies the study purpose of exploring social and cultural transformation through meaning construction. In this three-dimensional discourse analysis framework, any discursive 'event' is examined at the level of text, discursive practice, and social practice. It enables assessment of the relationship between discursive and social change and allows systematic examination of the 'detailed properties of texts' and the 'social properties of discursive events' (Fairclough, 1993: 8).

Specifically, discourse analysis echoes two main concerns of this study. Firstly, discourses construct and contribute to changes in knowledge, social relations, and social identity. Language not only represents reality but simultaneously enacts social relations and establishes identities (Halliday, 1978). The process of datafication involves the construction of new roles and identities, and it is critical to investigate how powerful entities construct new social relations in the platform society. Secondly, as Fairclough(1993: 9) points out, the relationship between discursive, social, and cultural change is not evident for most people involved; thus, critical discourse analysis can be seen as an intervention and help those who may be disadvantaged through change. From this perspective, discourse analysis can be a valuable tool to reveal the ongoing changes and facilitate possible counter-discourses.

Additionally, as this study focuses on the Chinese context, whose discourse and social context varies from Western society, where CDA originated and is mainly used, it is necessary to justify using CDA to study social transformations in China. Tian (2008, 2009) reflects on discourse and critique in China and the West and proposes recontextualize CDA in this Chinese context by adopting a 'wider angle' of CDA to study social practices in China. In the context of Chinese society, the focus of a discourse approach analyzes the Chinese language and its use in the unfolding transformations of Chinese society (Chilton *et al.*, 2010). From this perspective, this study hopes to add an empirical contribution to the dialectical dialogue in the field of CDA, and more broadly, of methods, concepts, and values, between Chinese and Western scholars (Shi-xu, 2009).

Research Design

The analysis will follow Fairclough's (1993) three-dimensional discursive analysis on texts, discursive practice, and social practice.

- 1 Text dimension: This level focuses on the language analysis of the text, which includes the selection of words, active or passive verb voice, rhetorical forms, and structure that constructs the narrative. Texts here refer to both written and spoken materials, including for example the transcription of interviews or speeches.
- 2 Discursive Practice dimension: This level examines the process of text production and interpretation. It will focus on the situational context and the intertextual context factors that influence the production and interpretation of the text.
- 3 Social dimension: This level extends the analysis to the institutional and organizational situations and reflects on how these factors shape the nature of the discursive practice and how they contribute to the constitutive and constructive effects of discourse. Specifically, broad 'forms of knowledge' such as political and cultural context will be examined (Fairclough, 1993).

This three-dimensional analysis will be applied to the analysis of the sampled texts. The author acknowledges that not all parts of the sampled texts are relevant to this particular study; thus, detailed analysis will be devoted to content pertinent to the purpose and theme of this study. To analyze the discursive practice dimension and social dimension more solidly, the author familiarises herself with relevant official reports, including the companies' annual reports and statistics, media reports, and government documents, to enable better judgment and interpretation.

Sampling

This study adopts a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) to enable detailed analysis around the central themes relevant to the research question. Douyin was first released in China in September 2016. This study collects the public utterances made by Douyin's CEO Zhang

Nan across the period from 2018 to 2021 on its milestone events: in March 2018, Douyin announced its new slogan 'record the beautiful moments in life', and Zhang Nan for the first time spoke about the stories behind the origin of Douyin and its vision; in August 2019, Douyin hosted the first creator conference, and Zhang Nan talked about Douyin's product positioning and social value; in September 2020, at the second creator conference, Zhang Nan announced a new initiative to support creators' development; and in January 2021, Zhang Nan discussed the nature of Douyin at the 2021 Innovation Conference. Though quantitatively, the number of available public speeches by Zhang Nan is not very significant, yet qualitatively, the contexts are information-rich and analytically generative, permitting in-depth understanding and analysis (Patton, 2002). Douyin's parent company, ByteDance, puts 'Inspire Creativity, Enrich Life' as its mission, and as Douyin's CEO, Zhang Nan talks about the nature, new initiatives, and platform positioning around this mission at the above-mentioned milestone events. These thematically concordant utterances enable interrogation into how the platform organizes user activities and constructs values that support its operation.

When Zhang Nan's public utterances do not cover Douyin's important initiatives that are relevant to the research topics, for example, the initiative of 'interest e-commerce' that was released this year, supplemental material delivered by Kang Zeyu, President of Douyin's E-commerce, was collected and analyzed instead. The author also acknowledges that the breadth and depth of analysis may be restricted by the currently available materials, and future materials may generate new insights into the research question.

Methodological limitations and Reflexivity

Critical discourse analysis is not without limitations: first, the interpretation of text may vary according to different contexts and interpreters, since patterns and variations in social distribution, consumption, and interpretation do matter and influence interpretation. Moreover, researchers tend to take their ideological effects as natural once an ideological meaning for a text is established (Fairclough, 1993: 28). Some also argue that discourse analysis researchers carefully select and make partial interpretation of whatever linguistic features suit

their own ideological position and disregard the rest (Widdowson, 1998: 146; Stubbs, 1997; Schegloff, 1997), or in the words of Hodge and Kress, 'involve suppression and distortion'. In this sense, the researcher must be 'reflexive and self-critical about its own institutional positions and all that goes with it' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999:9).

Secondly, as critical discourse scholars recognize, discourse *may* construct and reconstruct social practices, social structures, and social life; it is no guarantee of such constructive effects (Fairclough, 2003: 24). The social constructive effects of discourse are contingent upon resistances of two aspects, the relative permanence of institutions and structures and the relative permanence of habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Though research through CDA may not necessarily provide an absolute explanation, it still allows insightful analysis to understand social changes. Additionally, though an individual study may not provide perfect answers or solutions to the research questions, it can add to the discussion and stimulate future research.

Thirdly, adopting CDA in analysis of Chinese discourse and social changes needs to consider the differences in the composition and function of language and social context. For example, in contrast to European languages that are grammatically analytic and low-context, the Chinese language is synthetic and high-context. Thus, CDA requires the researcher to analyze beyond the text itself and consider other factors, such as historical and cultural context, imagination, and moral values (Shi-xu, 2009). Also, research about discourse in China should bear in mind the social and historical factors that may relate to changes in the discourse (Chilton *et al.*, 2010).

Complementary Methodologies

With acknowledgment of the limitation of CDA, the author believes it is still well suited to address the concerns of this research project. Future studies could also conduct interviews with Douyin's management team, architecture designers, and engineers, as interviews provide the opportunity to learn about their worldview and their position within society (Berger, 1998) and provide first-hand information about how their value systems influence the design of the

interface of Douyin. In addition, as the constructive effects of discourse are not guaranteed, it is also beneficial to look into how platform users experience this platform architecture and how they interact with the value systems built by the platform. In this regard, future studies could conduct in-depth interviews or questionnaires to learn from the user-end and generate a more comprehensive picture.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

'Enrich Life' : Rethink about the private and the public

In 2018, Douyin changed its slogan from 'let worship begin here' to 'record the beautiful moments in life,' representing a strategic transition from appealing to younger generations to attracting a more extensive user base. In the speeches analyzed, Douyin CEO Zhang Nan frames the recording and sharing of life moments as individuals' needs and desires; Douyin 'sees the needs of users' (Appendix 4), and it empowers people to present themselves and share their lives on its platforms. For example, she remarks that 'the good in life is always fleeting,' and Douyin 'helps store the most beautiful and happiest part of life, and those moments have touched so many people' (Appendix 1). In this way, she positions the platform as a service provider to empower users (Appendix 4) and facilitate sharing and connectivity among individuals. This discourse of empowerment purposefully hides both the underlying economic motivation of the platform and the potential negative implications of data collection. It misleads users into viewing the platform as technically neutral, while in fact, platforms 'embody a politics' (Srnicsek, 2016). As Srnicsek points out, the rules of the product, services development, and marketplace interaction are all set by the platform owners. Platforms gain not only access to users' data but also 'control and governance over the rules of the game' (2016: 25).

This promotion of 'sharing' reflects the strategy of cultural rationalization of platforms, which intentionally raises the value of self-presentation while lowering the value of privacy (Couldry

and Mejias, 2019). Zhang Nan expresses that Douyin 'helps' users to 'share and circulate' the beautiful moments to 'warm the people we love and who love us so that more people can find their own beautiful moments in life as well' (Appendix 1). Again, the word 'help' positions Douyin as a tools provider, with users acting out of their own wish and desire. Beyond the previously discussed discourse of empowerment to individuals, it further attaches social benefits to platforms, that Douyin plays a positive role in people's social lives by opening up the possibility of seeing other's 'beautiful moments' so that they can realize their own. Apparently, not all contents circulating on Douyin are positive and inspiring; by emphasizing the benefits while avoiding any mention of the potential harms, Zhang Nan intentionally builds a positive product image of Douyin and makes it attractive to potential users. This framing moves beyond the individual level to the social, further naturalizing the platform's business model of data extraction by making association with 'large-scale outcomes that seem to offer unquestionable benefits'. (Couldry and Yu, 2018).

In reflection of Douyin's development from 'a way of entertainment' to 'a way of socializing', then 'a way of life', Zhang Nan describes this evolution as a 'natural process' and credits it to 'users' feedback' and 'needs' (Appendix 4). She repeatedly mentions that 'we have underestimated Douyin's possibility' (Appendix 2, 3 and 4), and says 'it has the ability to evolve by itself. It has life' (Appendix 4). Zhang describes the role of Douyin's product management team as just to 'unearth users' real existing needs,' not to 'strategically set the direction'. Moreover, Zhang said in a way that it is a 'pressure' for Douyin to 'undertake the increasing usage scenarios, serve users' diversified needs, and create more value for users and society' (Appendix 3).

It (socializing on Douyin) happens because of users' needs, not anything else. We see the needs, and we empower the users. When users use it, they feel they have new experiences, new reasons, and new scenarios. It is a natural process. (Appendix 4)

The evolution of a product is not what you think it is, rather, (we) should respect the objective reality, and respect the self-evolution ability of the product, as well as its boundary. Let it evolve naturally; it is the best. (Appendix 4)

What Zhang Nan describes as 'natural process' and 'self-evolution' is, in fact, digital platforms' network effects (Srnicsek, 2016), which are built into the platform's DNA and works as the core of the platform's business success. Network effects refer to the fact that 'the more numerous the users who use a platform, the more valuable that platform becomes for everyone else'. It usually leads to platforms' natural tendency towards monopolization and 'lends platforms a dynamic of ever-increasing access to more activities, and therefore more data' (Srnicsek, 2016: 24-25). Besides, it encounters 'few natural limits of growth' due to pre-existing infrastructure and cheap marginal costs. This increasing of users' activities on a platform from 'entertainment' to 'socializing' even to 'a way of life' reflects users' increasing dependence on a particular platform. It is the result of the platform's business strategy to 'lock-in' users to their enclosed ecosystem for data collection and value extraction. In Zhang's speech, by crediting Douyin's evolution as out of user's needs, and something beyond their own imagination and even a 'pressure' to undertake, she reverses the platform's role from active to passive, from *action* to *reaction*. In this way, she hides the platforms' business strategy from users and blurs its purpose of appropriating more aspects of users' lives. Further, by personification of platforms as 'it has life' (Appendix 4) and calling to 'respect the self-evolution ability of the product,' she forestalls people's inquiry into the platform's intrinsic logic and the role Douyin's management team and designer have played in terms of the product's functions, mechanism, and business model.

Beyond the frame of naturalization, the calls to 'respect the objective reality' and 'let it evolve naturally' reveal that Douyin is redefining the 'social' and the boundary between 'the flow of human experience' and 'the environment of economic power that surrounds it' (Couldry and Mejias, 2019: 8). Zhang portrays Douyin as having evolved into 'a way of life', representing that not only human entertainment activities but also their social activities and relations have been gradually moved onto Douyin. To put it in another way, Douyin's continuous data

appropriation has expanded into people's everyday life. What Zhang Nan really asks by referring to 'respect the objective reality' is, in fact users' abandonment of the previous boundary between humanity's relations and external infrastructures. In this 'objective reality,' as Couldry and Mejiias interpret it, platforms act as colonizers that monetize social relations by deploying connection infrastructures, and the colonized are users who rely on platforms to maintain their social relations and enact their social lives (2019). By referring to 'let it evolve naturally, it is the best' (Appendix 4), Zhang Nan exemplifies the technical rationality and developmental rationality that frame data appropriation of the social as a legitimate goal of scientific and developmental progress.

Ironically, despite her own claim of 'let it evolve naturally,' Zhang Nan admits, 'as a product manager, one needs to think about what functions your product can include' (Appendix 4). She explains that 'one cannot add all usage scenarios to the product, which may lead to the loss of the core and essence of the product (Douyin)' (Appendix 4). In other parts of her speech, it is not difficult to identify that 'the core of Douyin is its users' (Appendix 4). This contradictory expression between 'let it evolve naturally' and think what it 'can include' clearly reveals that the seemingly 'natural process' of the platform's 'self-evolution' actually involves purposeful intervention from the platform. Douyin selectively enables certain functions to attract users and appropriate the social, as far as it can without provoking users to drop out from the platform.

'Inspire Creativity' : Creation and agency on commercial-mediated platform

As some scholars argue, social media has facilitated the production and distribution of user-generated content, enabling the emergence of 'peer production' (Benkler, 2006) or 'participatory cultures' (Jenkins *et al.*, 2006). This can also be identified in Zhang Nan's description of what Douyin is about.

Douyin is actually a tool, which helps users to deliver information. What short-video and Douyin bring is a significantly lower video production and distribution

threshold, more speedy information flow and connection, and the value of information inclusiveness. (Appendix 2)

This 'lowering of the threshold of video production' is then further supported by the case of 'wenshu de san' (Account: Uncle Wen's umbrella), an amateur producer who makes short-video to introduce the process of making oiled paper umbrellas, an intangible cultural heritage. Though amateur producers such as Uncle Wen contribute original content to the platform, it is questionable to infer that most users on Douyin contribute innovatively as well. In fact, critics of Douyin argue that many of its contents imitate those high-ranking works in terms of content, gesture, even video background. In this sense, lower content production and distribution thresholds may also facilitate emulation and content homogenization instead of diversity. Though user-driven cultural production is thriving, it is still constructed by the economic logic and 'platform capitalism' driven for network effect (Srnicsek, 2016) that favors viral content. The autonomy of cultural producers is increasingly compromised as they become more dependent on and subject to the political economy of platforms (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). Meanwhile, it is also misleading to argue that all creators on Douyin are grassroots like Uncle Wen and without professional content production teams and capital support. In fact, grassroots and organization-supported professional producers coexist on Douyin. Douyin contains key opinion leaders (KOL) or 'online celebrities' cultivated and supported by Multi-Channel Network (MCN) to manage content creation, distribution, and monetization. It is estimated that more than 90 percent of online celebrities in China have signed with MCN (Liu, 2020). Even though Douyin lowers the threshold for grassroots to produce and distribute content, they can hardly compete with professional producers in terms of quality and quantity of content, impacting their opportunity to be seen.

Social media represents a 'transformational force' for the content industry (Oestreicher-Singer and Zalmanson, 2013: 593) not only in terms of how content is produced and distributed, but also in how it is criticized and appreciated (Literat, 2019). Just as worries about the lack of gatekeeper online leads to the spread of misinformation and fake news, scholars argue that the less selective displaying field of social media platforms and its absence of 'aesthetic

‘censorship’ also leads to good art drowning in a sea of banality (Groys, 2015; Literat, 2019). The metric of evaluating creation in terms of viewers, likes, and comments can be contentious, as it echoes long-lasting debate between the very notion of creation and market art (Jones, 2006). Rankings and other mathematical indexes encourage creators to cater to market preference instead of insisting on their own independent judgment. Also, transforming the audience’s reception into numerical metrics disrupts the wholeness of artistic work and deprives the audience of the opportunity for reflection and meaningful interpretation (Hall, 1973). ‘More speedy information flow and connection’ (Appendix 2) do not necessarily result in more inspiring experiences. Zhang Nan also acknowledges that ‘a single dimension of data cannot help the product development’ and ‘how many times and how long it (video) is viewed cannot fully represent users’ satisfaction with a product’. (Appendix 3). At the second creators’ convention, she admits Douyin should shift from focusing on short-term data to long-term value creation.

Mosco classifies the commodification of communication mainly using three types: content, audiences, and labor. Besides content creators, audiences also deserve equal importance when thinking about agency of platform users. Audiences’ behaviors contribute to Douyin’s core business operation of algorithm analysis (Ma and Hu, 2021). Their viewing activities, the accounts they follow, their searching history, how long they stay for a short video, all contribute to the metrics of the content recommendation system of Douyin. In other words, users work as arbiters of content (van Dijck, 2009) for Douyin. Echoing Mosco, van Dijck (2009) proposes to rethink users’ agency not only in terms of content production but also consumption and data generation, especially what role platforms play in directing users’ agency. In Zhang Nan’s speech, sometimes a reflection on ‘putting people at the core of content and algorithm’ (appendix 3) can also be identified.

In the early days, we paid more attention to the quality and diversity of short-video content, and how to achieve better-personalized content distribution through recommendation algorithms, and thought about how to make distribution more efficient and more accurate. Indeed, it has made Douyin more attractive, and people

can see a diverse world through Douyin, the window. However, we sometimes also worry about whether this product design is too friendly for content consumption, too immersive so that the 'ordinary people' behind this great content are ignored. (Appendix 3)

In this statement, though Zhang Nan admits that 'ordinary people,' in contrast to online celebrities working with MCN, are 'ignored,' she does not link this to Douyin's responsibility; instead, she invites users to share, if not take, the responsibility. By referring to 'content consumption' and 'immersive,' Zhang Nan implicitly links users' behaviors to the result of ignoring 'ordinary people' and downplays Douyin's role to steer and direct users. Though discursively downplaying Douyin's role in directing users, Zhang acknowledges technically they have adjusted the evaluating index to better 'observe users' satisfaction' (Appendix 3), reflecting the platform's power to manipulate users. By referring to the design as 'too friendly' and 'too immersive,' Zhang Nan also slyly responds to criticisms that Douyin's AI-based algorithm creates tailored information distribution in an endless scrolling mode, resulting in audiences' addiction (Elegant, 2019; Koetsier, 2020). Douyin is designed to cater to and trap users on its platform (Zhao, 2021), as the more time users spend on Douyin, the more data they generate, and the more they feedback to Douyin's algorithm, as the 'network effects' illustrate. Audiences' choices and attention become profitable products in the marketplace (Mosco, 2009). Their real-time feedback data, along with their interest and identity characteristics, all contribute to Douyin's algorithm (Ma and Hu, 2021; Cao, 2018). When Zhang Nan juxtaposes 'create value for users' and 'user is our first pursuit' (appendix 2), it lays bare the tension between viewing human labor as a source of individual fulfillment and social benefit and as a marketable commodity, an ongoing conflict identified by Karl Marx (1976).

The issue of creator and creation on Douyin becomes more complex if we take Douyin's e-commerce into consideration. In addition to social media content, Douyin also enables users to shop through and on its platform (Herrman, 2019). Though social shopping is not really taking off yet in western society, it has engrained in Asia (Weissman, 2019). At Douyin, merchants can introduce and promote their products through live-streaming or short-video,

and the advertisements also comingle with other content that appears in audiences' video streams. Douyin's algorithmic analysis thus recommends not only personalized media content but also personalized advertisements to potential consumers. Social computing and social interactions then directly influence the purchasing decision (Oestreicher-Singer and Zalmanson, 2013; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Huang and Chen, 2006). Zhang Nan hides this monetization intention of the platform by covering it under the creator's motive and describes its own role as a mere 'helper'. For example, 'Our platform is to provide such creators with more creative tools, more precise content distribution, and better means of monetization' (Appendix 2).

If previously the monetization mechanism of e-commerce is implicitly embedded into social media content, it becomes evident when Douyin openly brings out the idea of 'Interest E-commerce' in 2021. According to Kang Zeyu, President of Douyin E-commerce, interest e-commerce is 'driven by people's passion for quality life and aiming to satisfy consumers' implicit needs while improving their life quality' (Appendix 5). In alignment with Douyin's strategy to cover its business intention as a service provider, what interest e-commerce really represents is personalized commercial recommendations, commercial-immersive interactions, and content produced for popularity instead of creativity.

Being positive: Values' alignment with the state's political goals

The Chinese government plays a critical role in platform development. The volatile Chinese commercial and political environment requires tech companies to align digital architectures with state regulations (Keane and Zhao, 2012; Wang and Lobato, 2019). Following the logic of other major Chinese media companies, social media platforms also need to deliberately balance their commercial pursuit and the Chinese state's interventions (Zhao, 2008). In April 2018, Neihanduanzi, an app that belongs to Douyin's parent company ByteDance, was shut down because of its vulgarity, and the company was sanctioned by China's media regulator (Ho, 2018). This event is believed to have forced ByteDance to consider how it could better align with the state's dominant ideology (Chen *et al.*, 2021).

Zhang Nan describes Douyin as 'the warmest product in the world' (Appendix 1), and she associates Douyin with values of 'optimistic' (Appendix 2), 'beautiful' (Appendix 1, 2), and 'heart-warming' (Appendix 1). In 2018, Douyin changed its slogan to 'record the beautiful moments in life.' Despite the intention to expand its users base, this move also reflects the platform's strategy to better align with the state's political agenda, which emphasizes the values of positive energy. 'Positive Energy' (zheng nengliang) has been a popular expression in Chinese political discourse since 2012. The term originates in grassroots, and its meaning is believed to have been efficiently appropriated and associated with the ideological or value systems of the Chinese communist party (Yang and Tang, 2018). Douyin also creates a Positive Energy section for state accounts, actors, and patriotic users to post related videos. The two major themes of the Positive Energy section includes the positive representation of the nation at the macro level and the positive representation of the people at the micro level, representing a new form of playful patriotism that facilitates the promotion of the Chinese state's political agenda (Chen *et al.*, 2021).

By defining 'optimism' (Appendix 2) and 'beautiful' as Douyin's core values, the platform faces challenges to justify other conflicting values such as 'diversity' and 'authentic', which it also claims to embrace (Appendix 2). To address these challenges, Zhang Nan tries to redefine and enlarge what 'beautiful' means.

Beautiful things must be diverse. Natural is beautiful; flawed truth is also beautiful; positive is beautiful, going with the flow is also beautiful. Of course, life is not always beautiful, but sometimes the hardships in life make beautiful more precious.
(Appendix 2)

This redefinition and interpretation of 'beautiful' illustrate Douyin's struggles in balancing its alignment with the state's value and its business development. On the one hand, Douyin tries to align with the state's value systems by imbuing its platform with the values of positive energy (Chen *et al.*, 2021); on the other, it also risks losing users, 'the core' (Appendix 4) of its platform, if it intervenes too much on content regulation. By providing users with new

definitions of 'beautiful,' Douyin tries to inform users about what is acceptable and encouraged to post and share, though the definition itself is subjective and incomplete. As Gillespie points out, platforms buttress these definitions with 'an array of logical principles and borrowed value systems', to legitimate their imposition and to support later intervention (Gillespie, 2018: 47).

Zhang Nan admits 'not all content deserves or should be seen by everybody' (Appendix 2), reflecting top-down governance of platforms and its efforts to assert authority over users (Gillespie, 2018). Platform governance and politics (Srnicsek, 2016) of Douyin mean not only market-oriented interventions but politically-oriented regulation as well. In fact, the political strategy of platforms is critical for the platform's survival and development in China, as they must adhere to state governance and the 'compliant culture' online (Lin and de Kloet, 2019: 4). Despite platforms' promotion of the participatory culture, in practice, it reconstructs what is appropriate and what values should be present according to its developmental needs (Gillespie, 2018). Zhang Nan articulates, 'while pursuing authentic is valuable, it should not be the excuse for platforms to avoid the responsibility of content regulation' (Appendix 2). She uses 'excuse' and 'avoid' to affirm the platforms' right to take action. The platform uses content regulation to produce the 'right' feed for users, the 'right' social exchanges, and the 'right' kind of community, while in contrast, users have little power to negotiate at the level of governance (Gillespie, 2018).

Douyin also aligns its business strategy of e-commerce with the state's political goals for poverty relief and economic development to seek government support and legitimate its business expansion from social media platform to livestreaming marketing and e-commerce.

The popularity of Douyin and short videos has significantly lowered the threshold of natural and cultural promotion and will bring new city promotion opportunities and poverty relief through culture and tourism. (Appendix 2)

The (COVID) pandemic has led to the stagnation of the offline economy. In this special period, livestreaming e-commerce helped the economy to recover.' 'Many

local governments also try livestreaming marketing because of the pandemic.

(Appendix 3)

This state-business interaction is believed to be 'a key variable in the evolving Chinese economy' though the bonds between the two are also 'complex, evolving and contingent' (Hong, 2017: 1758). Wang and Lobato (2019: 364) argue that Chinese platform theory begins with ontology in which 'state and market are different facets of a common entity'. Understanding the government's plan and initiatives is thus essential to interpret the platform's business strategy. In the 2021 Government Work Report (State Council, 2021), the Chinese government articulates its plan to speed up digitalization to facilitate the digital economy and develop 'a digital society, digital government, and healthy digital ecosystem' as part of the Digital China initiative. The Covid-19 pandemic further pushes the Chinese government to spur greater domestic consumption to drive economic development. It announces in the report that the Internet Plus model will be used to promote 'integrated development of online and offline business in more fields and create new forms and models of business'. This signals both opportunities and the government's support in the development of the platform economy. Then only one month later, Douyin released its plan of 'Interest E-commerce,' a business strategy following the government's call for 'improving people's consumption capacity and the environment for consumption'. By aligning its business developmental strategy with governmental goals and social benefits, Douyin legitimates its expansion into more aspects of everyday life.

The (covid) pandemic has made most aspects of people's everyday life integrated into Douyin, such as entertainment, shopping, study and even work. After the peak of the pandemic, these needs and situations continue. How can Douyin undertake these situations, serve users' different needs, and create values for users and society is very stressful. (Appendix 3)

While during the pandemic, many aspects of people's social life have to be moved online, it is a *claim* rather than a *fact* that this situation 'continues'. By describing the trend as direct and

irreversible, Zhang Nan tries to naturalize and solidify the narrative of a digitalization future. As previously discussed, Douyin positions itself as a service provider and reactor, which can also be proved from the word choices of 'undertake' and 'serve'. Its emphasis on creating public value for 'users and the society' then further blurs the distinction between for-profit and nonprofit, helping the platform to reconcile competing regulatory, cultural and financial demands (Gillespie, 2010). This blurring of private interests with public values undermines the possibilities for citizens to evaluate the 'competing interests and values at every level of negotiation' (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018: 142).

CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed Douyin CEO's public utterances as a way to illustrate how the platform constructs values that support its appropriation of the social life, its distortion of creation and agency, as well as its strategic alignment with the state's political goals. By adopting critical discourse analysis at the lexical, discursive practice, and social dimensions, it has revealed how the platform naturalizes its data extraction process and constructs its role as empowerment. Besides, it has examined users' agency of production, consumption, and data generation (van Dijck, 2009) in an algorithmic-dominated creation environment. Moreover, it has inspected the platform's content moderation and developmental strategy in alignment with the government's political and developmental goals. With its focus on a non-western context, this research adds to the current western-centric studies of platforms and public values and contributes to the understanding of platformization at a global level.

As Alaimo and Kallinikos (2017) well put it, social media platforms are ultimately data-based organizations that extract value and make profit from the social everyday they themselves engineer. This study has examined the underlying tensions between the platform's for-profit logic and its for-public framing from a discourses perspective, instead of focusing on any specific technical mechanisms of data extraction and algorithms, albeit they are important as

well. It follows Fairclough's emphasis on the power of discourse in 'construct[ing]' or 'constitut [ing]' social relations (1993: 3). By focusing on the case of Douyin's discursive analysis, it has examined the construction role of platforms' discursive strategies on social relations, knowledge, and beliefs (Fairclough, 1993).

This study has also paid attention to human autonomy in a platform-mediated communication environment. It has investigated how the platform discursively blurs the boundary between the private and the public, is interposed into the texture of human life and invades the space of the self (Couldry and Mejias, 2019). By examining the platform's discursive strategies in constructing sociality and public values, it has rejected the implication that data extraction is natural; instead, it has interrogated the underpinning cultural, technical, and developmental rationalities that support this naturalization frame. It is essential that we do not 'subordinate human autonomy to system autonomy' (Couldry and Mejias, 2019: 191). Through discourse analysis of the platform, it has helped articulate the ongoing social and cultural change that may not be evident for all and inspired critical responses to a platform-dominated value system.

This study has focused on the specific case of Douyin within the social and political context of China. Future studies interested in the Chinese context could also conduct discourse analysis on other major platforms in China to complete the knowledge of platforms' discursive strategies on data extraction and public values. More broadly, it is also valuable to compare the platforms' discursive strategies in western and non-western contexts to articulate their roles in an emerging social and economic order.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

抖音张楠：希望帮助用户记录美好生活 温暖更多人 [Douyin Zhang Nan: Hope to help users record beautiful life and warm more people] (20/03/2018)

URL: <https://smart.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnK706m> [Last consulted 1 September 2021]

Appendix 2

抖音总裁张楠：抖音的美好与价值 [Douyin CEO Zhang Nan: The beauty and value of Douyin] (26/08/2019)

URL: http://www.360doc.com/content/19/0826/06/7230427_857081361.shtml [Last consulted 1 September 2021]

Appendix 3

张楠：生活成就抖音，抖音丰富生活 [Zhang Nan: Life makes Douyin, Douyin enriches life] (16/09/2020)

URL: <http://www.rmzxb.com.cn/c/2020-09-16/2669521.shtml> [Last consulted 1 September 2021]

Appendix 4

关于抖音的社交、本质和未来 [The social, nature and future of Douyin] (29/01/2021)

URL: http://www.360doc.com/content/21/0129/13/8291254_959557107.shtml [Last consulted 1 September 2021]

Appendix 5

抖音电商总裁康泽宇：兴趣电商的价值和机会 [Douyin e-commerce CEO Kang Zeyu: The value and opportunity of e-commerce] (08/04/2021)

URL: <https://36kr.com/p/1173160938990984> [Last consulted 1 September 2021]

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