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## **“I’M AN E-COMMERCE STREAMER, NOT INFLUENCER” ——THE LOGISTICAL STRUGGLE FOR PERFORMING AUTHENTICITY ON DOUYIN**

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### **Authenticity Section**

The body of the submission should be formatted according to the following: Arial font, size 12, single space, left align throughout, double space for new paragraph.

New paragraph starts like this, an extra space from the previous, no indent. If submitting a panel, simply repeat this formatting – minus the AoIR letterhead - sequentially for each paper on the panel.

While scholarship on the platformization of cultural production (Poell et al, 2022) mainly investigate the content creators, such as digital influencers (Abidin, 2015; Duffy, 2017), Wanghong (Cunningham & Craig, 2017), artists (Bishop, 2023), game streamers (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019) in cultural industry, the diverse platform worker figures in non-western social context are undertheorized, such as the arising e-commerce live streamers in China (Duan et al, 2023). The so-called e-commerce streamers is related to a business model called content e-commerce, invented by Douyin, the sibling version of Tiktok. Content e-commerce (Douyin, 2013) encourages sellers to present the authenticity of products through live streaming to attract consumers, and Douyin (2013) emphasizes that marginalized social groups, such as rural Chinese, could benefit by presenting themselves and their real life. Under such mobilization discourse, more than 1,100,000 e-commerce streamers are emerging in China by 2023 (People’s Daily, 2023). Many rural residents creatively stream the authentic rurality. For example, my informant Zheng, with 900,000 followers on Douyin, streams in a garlic field and says, “Hey! Check the real natural environment for organic agricultural products! I’m an e-commerce streamer, not Wanghong. They make easy money and I’m just a new farmer selling real agricultural products!”

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How do e-commerce streamers like Zheng in rural China perform authenticity? What's the difference compared to the widely discussed micro-celebrities in the Western world? These stories will contribute to a typology of platform labor and a global perspective on platformization.

To address these questions above, theoretically, I draw on the scholarship on platform labor (van Doorn, 2017; Duffy, 2017; Poell et al., 2022; Zhang, 2021) and authenticity in the social media era (Abidin, 2015; Kreling et al, 2022; Duguay, 2017; Gorea, 2021) to analyze how e-commerce streamers navigate the tension between platform technicity (Bucher, 2012) and local dwelling environment to present authenticity online, which is theorized as logistical struggle here. This notion is deployed to describe how streamers interrogate multiple stuff of authenticity (Duguay, 2017), like agricultural products, infrastructure network, and their own body to maintain the flow of data and goods (Case, 2010; Hockenberry et al, 2021; Rossiter, 2016). I argue that the logistical struggle indicates the authenticity on social media platforms is shaped by unexpected frictions (Jansson, 2022) and calibration (Abidin, 2017), which is rarely elaborated on in existing research on content creators. The logistical struggle also informs how e-commerce streaming reproduces the structural marginalization of rural China and residents because it highlights a commodified authenticity and the neoliberal ideology while covering the real rural life and the invisible labor that rural residents perform.

To collect data, I conducted one-year ethnography work in four e-commerce teams. These teams are selected based on their diverse sizes, locations, and working experience. Data are collected through semi-structure and informal interviews, participant observation, and analyzed thematically.

The logistical struggle of streamers to perform authenticity could be examined from three aspects. Firstly, e-commerce streamers should navigate the tension between the visibility politics on the platform and the materiality of agricultural products.

The visibility politics on platforms (Peter et al, 2019; Bishop, 2019; Duguay, 2016) impact what kinds of authenticity streamers will perform. For example, at the beginning of their business in rural areas, streamers A1, B1 and C1 have several products to choose from, including garlic, cabbage, and yam, all could prove their authenticity as farmers. However, they have to consider the unspoken requirements of platforms on products. A1 mentioned that, "To be recommended more by platform, your products should at least meet several requirements. One is high quality, so the consumers won't complain too much, otherwise you will get shadow ban. Secondly, select products considering the delivery cost. Shipping cost for big and easily bruised products is too much, especially when your sales increase. Thirdly, make sure you can sell consistently good products for a whole year. Every agricultural product will be at its flavor peak for only months, but if you don't stream almost every day, the platforms will think you are lazy, and then decrease your visibility. Think twice about how to sell various agricultural products in one year."

These ideas show how the platform indirectly determines what authentic rural China from a logistical level. Other informants have similar concerns and decide to describe their hometown as a traditional rural area producing authentic garlic and yam and

ignoring other possible options.

Secondly, the logistical challenges emerge in maintaining infrastructure networks. The consistent data flowing during streaming is another metric to impact these streamer's visibility and their choice of what authenticity entails. According to these streamers, during streaming, the algorithm rewards who can provide more data for a platform, such as the interactions with the audience, the sales during streaming, and the duration that the audience stay. All these data will be displayed to streamers in a real-time dashboard. If these streamers can keep their audience number increasing in the first 30 minutes, then the platform will recommend this live streaming to more followers. Otherwise, there will be only 2-5 audiences until the end even if the streaming lasts for hours.

However, in rural areas, keeping data flowing encounters infrastructure problems, including the power network and hardware. For example, the breakdown of power networks is still common in some rural areas. I witnessed a streamer screaming out and almost went crazy because she just got the largest audience after streaming for months, and it was suddenly shut down because of a power problem. After this accident, she purchased a portable power generation machine like other streamers. This machine could transfer the energy from a scooter to an internet device, like WIFI and lights.

Similar problems emerge from the hardware for streaming, such as photographic and internet equipment. Streaming in the field is difficult because the natural environment is beyond these streamers' control. They need to carefully set up the camera for a beautiful view. The insects and weather could disturb the streaming activities at times. It's common that streamers prefer an indoor place and curate it as an authentic outdoor scene.

Another logistical struggle for streamers is the impacts of intense labor on their body. Streamers endure and legitimize these requirements on a corporal level for an authentic affect. Streamers are aware that e-commerce streaming needs repetitive speaking. The platform determines whether this streaming will be recommended to more users based on the feedback of the audience, including their staying duration, sales, and likes. To have an accurate evaluation, every second platforms push new audiences and calculate their digital traces. The streamers must repeat the introduction and promotions about products again and again for hours, which is a huge challenge for their body health.

Many streamers feel pain in throats even when they stop streaming, and their voice and vocal folds usually also change because of the permanent damage from long-term streaming. To deal with this, they choose self-aware labor degradation (Braverman, 1996), meaning that they simplify and memorize introducing and stories about products. They take the streaming as a physical labor, without thinking. It's easier and surely boring, but they don't have a choice. Many streamers legitimize this labor by comparing it to the traditional farmer. "The work as a farmer is much more painful, and streaming is alright with more return." (A5)

In conclusion, the practice of these e-commerce streamers in marginalized rural China informs the diverse process to perform authenticity in the platform economy era and the multiple layers of platform labor across global scales.

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