AMBIGUITANCE: HOW DOUYIN'S INCONSISTENT AFFORDANCES SHAPE STREAMER-AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIPS IN CHINESE SHOWROOM LIVE STREAMING

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Introduction

In December 2023, a controversy erupted on Chinese social media surrounding Wu Liufang, a former Chinese gymnastics champion. Her Douyin account gained 3.5 million followers in a single day after a brief suspension due to posting provocative dancing clips that sparked significant public concerns about so-called "edge-ball content"—sexually suggestive content. This story exemplifies the moral panic regarding showroom live streaming—a digitally mediated performance genre where streamers (predominantly female) engage in real-time affective labor through choreographed intimacy, while audiences commodify these interactions via virtual gifting systems (Cunningham, Craig, & Lv, 2019; Zhang & Hjorth, 2019). Despite platform's carefully cultivated image of strict content governance, showroom live streaming remains one of the most popular and profitable forms of live streaming content in China's digital entertainment landscape. The controversial nature of this genre extends beyond moral concerns to the complex and often contentious relationships between streamers and their audiences. Media reports increasingly document conflicts between streamers and viewers over expectations of performative relationships and monetary transactions through tipping, with some disputes escalating to legal proceedings. However, the public mainly focuses on the moral condemnation of individual streamers and viewers, while platforms—the technological and social affordances enabling these interactions—have largely escaped both public scrutiny and legal accountability.

This pattern of selective attention is mirrored in academia, where existing research on Chinese showroom live streaming revolves around two axes: gendered performativity and platformed precarity. Studies highlight how streamers navigate patriarchal norms through strategic self-exoticization (Ye & Krijnen, 2024), perform "virtual girlfriend labor" to sustain virtual intimacy (Cunningham et al., 2019; Ye, 2021), and internalize platform surveillance as self-discipline (Ye et al., 2023). Even in studies that recognize platform

affordances, the focus is primarily on how technical and social affordances promote engagement (Meisner & Ledbetter, 2022), trust (Zhang et al., 2023), and decision confidence, shaping economic behavior (Yang et al., 2023). However, how platforms enable content that operate on the edge of regulatory risks remain unexplored. This research addresses this gap by examining how platform affordances enable the production and consumption of showroom live streaming content, and their role in shaping the relationship between streamers and audiences.

Methodology

This ongoing study employs a walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018), online observation and in-depth interviews (Boyce & Neale, 2006) to examine the platform's role in enabling showroom livestreaming and shaping relationship between streamers and audiences. By triangulating these methods, we ensure a more robust understanding of the interplay between platform affordance and user interactions allowing for cross-validation of findings. All data collection and storage comply with GDPR ethical requirements.

To understand the affordances of Douyin's livestreaming environment, we first conducted a walkthrough analysis that analyzes app interfaces, functionalities, and governance mechanisms (Light et al., 2018). The walkthrough focused on monetization features (e.g., virtual gifting, rankings), audiences engagement tool (e.g., comment functions, ranking-based exposure), and content moderation policies to examine how Douyin subtly incentivizes intimacy-driven interactions while downplaying potential risks. We are particularly concerned with the bias in affordances, for example, figure 1 is a screenshot of a showroom live streaming interface. Features that stimulate competition and consumption, such as rankings and view counts, are prominently displayed at the top of the homepage. In contrast, risk warnings appear only on the recharge page, where they are presented with high transparency and in a much smaller font compared to other information on the page.

The platform advocates for spending within one's means and making rational consumption choices.

Figure1. A screenshot of a showroom live streaming interface

Building on the walkthrough, we conducted one-month online observation of showroom livestreaming on Douyin. This method allowed us to document real-time interactions between streamers and audiences, capturing patterns of engagement, conflict resolution strategies, and the implicit role of platform governance. We employed a

snowball sampling approach for observation through two complementary strategies: first, by following known showroom livestreamers and then examining similar accounts automatically recommended by Douyin's algorithm; second, by following other showroom livestreamers who appeared on the same ranking boards as our initial sample, as well as those who engaged in PK (competitive livestreaming battles) with these streamers.Observational data provided insights into how livestreamers navigate platform-imposed constraints and audience expectations, serving as a crucial intermediary step between system design analysis and personal narratives gathered through interviews.

Following this, we conducted in-depth interviews with female livestreamers on Douyin, and this phase is still ongoing. Interviews explored their experiences with platform governance, audience relationships, conflicts, and perceptions of Douyin's role in dispute resolution. This approach was chosen because livestreaming is an affective and performative practice (Abidin, 2016), making firsthand accounts essential for capturing consent were sent to participants prior to data collection, and participants' identities how streamer navigate tensions between audiences' expectations and platform imposed constraints. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling, informed were anonymized through pseudonyms, and any identifying details were removed from transcripts.

By cross-referencing insights from walkthrough, observation and interviews, this study systematically uncovers the nuanced structure of of platform affordances and the ways in which conflicts is generated and exploited and outsourced to streamers and audiences.

Findings

Our research reveals three key findings regarding the dynamics between Douyin's platform affordances and users' practices:

First, we identify an "ambiguitance": a constellation of contradictory affordances engineered across a digital platform's policy, algorithms, and interface layers. While platform policies explicitly restrict sexually suggestive content and discourage tipping behaviors, the traffic-driven algorithmic system implicitly incentivizes edge-ball content. The interface design reflects a tension between maximizing user monetization and maintaining platform governance, with monetization features being more prominent and accessible than risk warning elements. This ambiguitance creates space where users navigate between explicit restrictions and implicit incentives, enabling the production and consumption of showroom live streaming content, particularly edge-ball content.

Second, this ambiguitance fosters a hierarchical, competitive relationship between streamers and audiences characterized by profit-driven conflicts and uneven risk distribution. For example, streamers can leverage this ambiguous space to produce edge-ball content for monetary gains through tips. However, dissatisfied viewers can weaponize platform policies by reporting such content, potentially exposing streamers to legal risks. The platform can then penalize streamers while avoiding legal liability by citing governance policies. In this sense, douyin's ambiguitance results in that risks are

disproportionately borne by certain participants.

Third, streamers' lived experiences within this ambiguitance reveal a complex dynamic where platform affordances are perceived as simultaneously empowering and restrictive. This duality shapes their content production and relationship management with audiences. Further investigation through interviews will explore how streamers understand and navigate this uneven risk distribution inherent in the platform's ambiguous affordances.

Conclusion

This research interrogates how platform affordances shape the relationship between streamers and audiences in Chinese showroom live streaming, with specific attention to Douyin's inconsistent affordance structure that we term "ambiguitance" creating a space where edge-ball content becomes simultaneously forbidden yet incentivized, regulated yet profitable. The ambiguitance framework offers a novel analytical lens for examining how inconsistent affordances across different platform layers create strategic ambiguities that serve platform interests while displacing governance responsibilities. It also advances the understanding of platform-mediated relationships by illustrating how technical features not only facilitate but fundamentally shape power dynamics between users.

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