Analysis of "Virtual Family" Influencers Operational Strategies on Douyin in China: A Case Study of "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter"

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Abstract

In recent years, the phenomenon of "Kinship Disconnection" among young people has triggered heated discussions. In the process of "Kinship Disconnection", young people are keen on "Kinship Recognition" in the virtual world, and establishing new kinship relationships with "Virtual Family". This study, employing content analysis, conducts an in-depth examination of 147 short videos posted by the "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" Douyin account from September 13, 2023, to October 22, 2024, aiming to explore the operational strategies of "Virtual Family" influencers. The findings reveal that, in terms of content, identity construction, and emotional value are provided through the presentation of warm and loving parental images, immersive scenarios, and diversified video production methods; in terms of users, the viewing group is dominated by females aged 18-30 years old, and there are more negative tendencies in the comment section, with fewer interactions with bloggers; in terms of business, advertisement implantation is the main profit-making method.

Further analysis shows that the emotional engagement and commercial strategies of "Virtual Family" influencers are closely intertwined. Influencers attract attention by offering emotional support and psychological comfort, thereby establishing an audience base for advertising placement and achieving commercial monetization. However, this operational model is fraught with challenges, such as trust issues, media dependency, and audience commodification. While virtual family influencers can partially fulfill emotional substitution needs, the potential risks they entail warrant careful consideration.

1. Introduction

During the 2024 Spring Festival, the topic of "Kinship Disconnection" became a trending subject on Weibo, one of China's major social media platforms, sparking widespread resonance and discussion among young people. "Kinship Disconnection" primarily refers to the reluctance, negligence, and disregard for engaging and socializing with relatives, particularly among the second generation (Hu & Han, 2022). Driven by factors such as urbanization, population migration, increasing life pressures, societal competition, and digital survival, an increasing number of individuals are choosing Kinship Disconnection, which is seen as a consequence of

modernization. For individuals, Kinship Disconnection helps to reduce ineffective social interactions (Chen & Zong, 2023).

However, alongside the rise of Kinship Disconnection, young people are also becoming increasingly drawn to "Digital Kinship Recognition", which involves reconstructing new kinship bonds through "Virtual Family" in the virtual world. "Virtual Family" refers to individuals on social media platforms like Douyin, who, by adopting the perspective and tone of parents or other family members, garner widespread attention and emotional attachment from young netizens through the creation and performance of an idealized kin image (Li, 2024). The family environment plays a crucial role in the physical and psychological development of individuals, and the emergence of Virtual Families reflects the young generation's search for and desire to form new types of kinship relationships (Zhao & Qin, 2024).

In contemporary China, young people are increasingly severing ties with blood relatives they dislike, while simultaneously forging "cloud-based" kinship connections with strangers on the internet. At first glance, these behaviors may appear contradictory. However, a more nuanced analysis reveals an underlying logical coherence between the two. Severing ties with certain relatives serves as a form of resistance, allowing individuals to distance themselves from negative emotions and fulfill their personal emotional needs. Moreover, establishing new kinship ties online is also a deliberate choice driven by the desire to meet emotional support needs. Both actions, whether distancing oneself from relatives or forming new connections, reflect the various ways in which young people seek to satisfy their emotional requirements.

One of the main ways young people meet their emotional needs is through social media platforms. As an indispensable part of young people's lives today, social media platforms offer opportunities for positive influence, personal expression, and social support, thus promoting positive mental health among youth (Vaingankar et al., 2022). In fact, even before the concept of Virtual Family became popular, young people had already begun utilizing social media platforms for cyber-based emotional practices. For example, digital pets and companions, as objects for emotional reliance and entertainment, provide emotional value to individuals (Zong & Chen, 2024). As the cyber emotional practices of young people have developed, their practices have become more intimate and diverse, gradually gaining wider acceptance.

A review of the literature indicates that while substantial research exists on specific subfields of youth cyber emotional practices, such as electronic companions and "buddy" socializing, there is still limited research on emotional support related to young people actively using social media to establish "cloud-based" kinship relationships. Existing studies on Virtual Family primarily focus on one key aspect of digital kinship—youth and their online emotional interactions (Li, 2024). However, research on another crucial element of digital kinship recognition—Virtual Family influencers—remains relatively scarce. This study aims to address this gap by examining the operational strategies of Virtual Family influencers, contributing to Virtual Family study and the broader study on youth cyber emotional practices. By doing so, it seeks to enhance the understanding of how Virtual Family influencers can provide healthier and more positive emotional value to young people. The rise of Virtual Family influencers not only reflects the contemporary youth's desire for kinship but also highlights issues within real-life parent-child relationships. This study offers a unique perspective on emotional connections in modern society and explores ways to foster healthier and more harmonious social relationships.

In this research, the theoretical foundations of media affordance, intimate relationships, and emotional labor will be used for analysis. Media affordance theory will be applied to explore how Virtual Family influencers leverage platform-generated affordances to shape their content and engage with followers. Intimate relationship theory will be utilized to examine the quasi-intimate

relationships that Virtual Family influencers establish with their audiences. Additionally, emotional labor theory will guide the analysis of the strategies influencers employ to manage emotional exchanges and construct idealized family personas.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a literature review, focusing on media affordances, intimate relationships, and emotional labor. In Section 3, the research methods and process will be outlined. Section 4 analyzes the strategies of Virtual Family influencers, using the Douyin account "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" as a case study, with a focus on content management, user engagement, and commercial strategies. Section 5 discusses the research findings and reflects on their implications, while Section 6 concludes the paper and offers suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Media Affordances

The concept of affordance originates from ecological psychology, which emphasizes the dynamic relationship between the environment and the organism. In 1966, environmental psychologist James J. Gibson first introduced the term *affordances* in his book *The senses considered as perceptual systems*. Later, Wellman et al. (2003) were the first to apply the concept of affordances to communication studies, defining it as the possibilities provided by technologies or objects to shape and influence daily life. Furthermore, Pan and Liu (2017) introduced the concept of affordances into the field of journalism and communication studies in China, categorizing the affordances of new media into three dimensions: production affordances, social affordances, and mobile affordances. Huang and Huang (2021), in response to the new media environment created by short-video social platforms, further decomposed media affordance into content affordance, community affordance, and communication affordance.

As a mainstream short video social application in China, Douyin exemplifies all three dimensions of media affordance: content affordance, community affordance, and communication affordance. Specifically, the content affordance of Douyin is primarily characterized by the low entry barriers and convenience for content creation. The community affordance refers to how short video platforms, such as Douyin, prioritize individual preferences and use interest-based tags for matching, focusing more on clustering rather than interaction. The communication affordance involves Douyin's integration of mobile devices with algorithmic technology, enabling content distribution through algorithmic recommendations (Huang & Huang, 2021).

In addition, Karahanna, Xu, Xu, and Zhang (2018) found that individuals' psychological needs drive their use of social media applications, which, in turn, provide affordances that satisfy these needs. As a result, platforms like Douyin strategically design their products to incorporate features that address user demands. Influencers on Douyin, in particular, actively leverage the platform's content affordance, communication affordance, and community affordance to express their own content and convey their values.

Specifically, in terms of content affordance, influencers such as the Douyin account "Heartwarming Stories" engage audiences by stimulating their perceptions through multiple channels within short video content, thereby effectively triggering emotional resonance (Ye, 2021). In relation to community affordance, Douyin influencers utilize the power of collective communication to mobilize emotions, amplifying the emotional climate (Kuang & Deng, 2022). Furthermore, with regard to communication affordance, influencers proactively harness the platform's algorithm by aligning their content with trending topics and applying relevant tags, with the aim of increasing visibility and attracting more traffic.

Hence, this study will explore how Virtual Family influencers utilize the content affordances, community affordances, and communication affordances of the Douyin platform to achieve content expression and image construction. This research will enrich the existing literature on affordances in the context of Douyin, offering valuable practical case studies for the field.

2.2 Intimate Relationship

Intimate Relationships broadly refer to the emotional closeness and interdependence between individuals, encompassing various types of interpersonal bonds, such as those between partners, parents and children, and friends. In a more specific sense, it often refers to the partner relationship, sometimes referred to as a romantic relationship by some scholars. This study adopts the broader definition, focusing on the parent-child relationship as a significant and distinct form of intimate connection.

Theoretical studies on intimate relationships can be traced back to the 1950s, particularly in the monograph *The Social Psychology of Groups* by Kelley and Thibaut (1959) , in which the social exchange theory was introduced. This theory posits that interpersonal relationships and social interactions can be understood as exchanges of resources, with both parties in an intimate relationship engaging in a process of mutual exchange. In his book *Intimacy*, Miller (2005) argues that intimacy is a behavior evolved for reproductive purposes and is a product of long-term human evolution.

With the advent of the Internet era, the unprecedented reconfiguration of time and space brought about by the network has given rise to a new form of intimate relationships: mimetic intimacy. Digital communication technologies transform social relationships by networking strangers into mediated intimate publics (Mendelson, 2024). Mimetic intimacy refers to an imagined form of closeness established in cyberspace, a new type of intimate relationship that resembles the bond of family without being family (Zhu & Han, 2017). The reason why individuals form such relationships reflects their dissatisfaction with and avoidance of intimacy in real life (Chen, 2018).

Currently, research on mimetic intimacy has predominantly concentrated on the two primary parties involved: social media influencers and their followers. From the perspective of influencers, they have the capacity to significantly shape followers' perceptions and behaviors through content characteristics and interaction strategies, thereby cultivating mimetic intimacy (Aw, Tan, Chuah, Ooi, & Hajli, 2022). This interaction not only enhances fan recognition but also exerts a positive effect on purchasing intentions. Furthermore, fans can participate in intimate publics via various means, such as uploading original content, duplicating and replicating existing content, commenting, and lurking (Mendelson, 2024). However, when mimetic intimacy relationships are damaged or exploited, the previously positive relationships are likely to deteriorate, potentially resulting in the formation of anti-fan communities (Mardon, Cocker, & Daunt, 2023). Additionally, the intensification of mimetic intimacy may lead to negative psychological outcomes for fans, such as increased feelings of loneliness and media addiction (de Bérail & Bungener, 2022).

Therefore, this provides a theoretical framework for exploring the operational strategies of Virtual Family influencers from the aspects of content features, interaction strategies, and business operations. Building on this framework, the present study aims to innovatively explore the mimetic intimate relationships of Digital Kinship Recognition that develop between social media influencers and their fans, thereby contributing to the existing body of research.

2.3 Emotional Labor

In 1983, American sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild introduced the concept of emotional labor in her book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, through a study of airline flight attendants providing smile services. Hochschild (1983) defined emotional labor as the work involved in arousing or suppressing one's emotions, creating and adjusting facial expressions and body language to maintain an appropriate external display, thereby earning compensation. Hochschild pointed out that this type of labor involves the commercialization of private emotions for profit, requiring workers to follow emotional rules and manage their feelings rather than expressing them freely. Specifically, workers engage in emotional management through two main strategies: surface acting and deep acting. While surface acting can be seen as a form of deception toward others, deep acting is more akin to deceiving oneself.

Emotional labor is not confined to traditional service industries but is also present in non-traditional occupations such as social media influencers (Kalvi & Knuutinen, 2021). Unlike traditional service workers, social media influencers must autonomously manage their emotional expressions in the simulated intimate relationships they build with followers, without direct supervision from managers. However, both groups must present an emotion that is perceived as "authentic" in order to achieve professional success (Reilly, 2022). Consequently, influencers often adopt content strategies such as actively sharing details of their personal lives, avoiding excessive photo editing, or beautifying their lifestyles to maintain a "genuine" image, thereby earning the trust of their followers (Reilly, 2022).

According to Hochschild (1983), when workers' emotional systems are embedded in commercial and organizational environments for economic benefit, they inevitably undergo transformation. To more effectively commodify their emotions, social media influencers establish emotional connections with their followers, which is crucial for maintaining their careers (Liu, 2024). Moreover, Yalın (2024) further explored this research through a study of influencers' digital affective labor in quarantine vlogs, noting that influencers interact with and manage their users in various ways. These include building emotional connections, providing care, balancing authenticity with a positive image, employing time strategies to construct a resilient self, and adjusting strategies based on audience feedback to maintain strong relationships with followers (Yalın, 2024).

In addition, regarding the commercialization of social media influencers, they can shift the commercial agenda into the private realm through "personal branding" strategies and exploit their own identities for commercialization (Heeris Christensen, Gyrd-Jones, & Beverland, 2024). For example, some influencers attract user attention by sharing personal stories and interactive question boxes, and after garnering sufficient attention, they share disguised advertisements that appear as ordinary, non-commercial content (Mirghaderi, 2022).

In conclusion, social media influencers engage in emotional labor by making efforts in content creation, user interaction, and commercial engagement to ensure the effectiveness of their emotional labor. This study, grounded in this framework, aims to explore the emotional labor performances and outcomes of virtual family influencers from these three dimensions, contributing further to the research on emotional labor.

3. Methodology and Procedures

3.1 Case Selection

As early as 2021, there were already Virtual Family. The woman from Jinan City, Shandong Province, China, known as @LoveCookingWuJie on the internet, gained popularity as a mother for creating videos of making dumplings for her picky daughter. However, this Virtual Family

behavior did not receive widespread attention at the time.

It was not until May 2024 that Beijing Youth Daily published a in-depth feature article titled *Electronic Parents and Their 1.13 Million Children*, which sparked a heated online discussion about Virtual Family. On Weibo alone, the same topic received 4.81 million views. The feature article's protagonists were Pan Huigan and Jiang Xiuping, the operators of the Douyin account "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter," who shot short videos from a parent's perspective to create a strong sense of immersion for viewers and quickly accumulated a large number of fans. As of October 22, 2024, the account had over 1.4 million electronic children.

Therefore, this paper chooses "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" as an example and conducts an in-depth analysis of the videos posted on its Douyin account to explore its features in terms of identity construction, content expression, user interaction, and commercial profit, in order to understand its specific operation strategies.

3.2 Unit of Analysis and Categories

Since the launch of the "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" Douyin account on September 13, 2023, and up until the commencement of this study on October 22, 2024, the account had published a total of 147 short videos. Based on this, the present study utilizes content analysis to examine these 147 videos as the sample, focusing on three key aspects: content management, user engagement, and commercial operations. The analysis indicators for the coding scheme (see Table 1) are derived from several existing studies, including Wang and Ma (2019) on government Douyin accounts, Ma (2021) on the media image of Northeast Chinese on Douyin, Zhou (2023) on "silver-haired internet celebrities" on Douyin, and Yang and Li (2023) on short videos in red-themed venues.

After completing the coding of the 147 samples, 20% of the samples were randomly selected for the reliability test. Based on the coding scheme, a student, who had a solid theoretical background in journalism and communication and was familiar with content analysis techniques, was invited to participate in the coding process. The results of the coder's work were then compared with the author's, revealing a reliability coefficient exceeding 0.9, thus meeting the required reliability standard for content analysis.

Table 1 Category Table and Analysis Unit of Operational Strategy Analysis
for Douyin Account "Sharing Daily with My Daughter"

Category		Specific Categories	Coding Information
Content Operation	Image presentation	the number of individuals appearing on-screen	1; 2; 3; more than 3; no one
		persona	father; mother; parents; parents and children; parents children and others
		sentimental value	neutral; non-neutral positive optimism; non-neutral negativity; non-neutral warmth and love
	Content Presentation	Subject Matter	couple's daily life; parent-child emotional care; parent-child skills teaching; parent-child situational role-playing; parent-child guided communication; self-experience introduction; self-interpretation; others

		Video Scene	indoor scenes; outdoor scenes; combination of indoor and outdoor scenes; other
		Video Character Sound	monologue; dialog; nothing
		Video Presentation Format	live action video; graphic video; mixed clip editing
	Video Production	Video Duration	less than 30 seconds; 30 seconds - 1 minute; 1 minute - 1 minute 30 seconds; 1 minute 30 seconds - 2 minutes; 2 minutes and over
		Video Music	pure music; vocal music; none
		Video Captioning	yes; no
		In-Video Copywriting	yes; no
		Topic Tags	related or created related topics; no related or created related topics
User Operation	User Engagement	Number of Video Likes	cumulative number of likes as of October 23, 2024
		Number of Video Comments	cumulative number of comments as of October 23, 2024
		Number of Video Retweets	cumulative retweets t as of October 23, 2024
	User Review Tendency	Attitude In The Comment Section	positive emotional expression; negative emotional expression; neutral emotional expression
	Level of Influencer Interaction	Influencer Interaction Degree	likes in the comments section; comments in the comments section; no interaction in the comments section
Business Operation	Influencer Business Practices	Influencer Business Practices	with commercial behavior; without commercial behavior

4. Analysis of the Operation Strategy of Virtual Family Influencers: Taking the "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" Douyin Account as an Example

4.1 Content Operation

4.1.1 Image Presentation: Warm and Loving Parents

By encoding the 147 short video samples of "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" according to the constructed categories, a table of image presentation related indicators (see Table 2) was obtained, which shows that the number of people appearing in the videos is mostly two (84%), and they are usually in the role of parents and are seen as their virtual children in front of the screen. In terms of the emotional value conveyed, almost all of them are non-neutral emotional value transmission, with non-neutral warm and affectionate values accounting for the most, at

95%. In the videos, "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" bloggers use terms such as daughter, son, and baby to refer to their virtual children in the first person perspective, using warm and heartfelt words, friendly smiles, kind expressions, warm eyes, and intimate camera language to convey parents' love and warmth, and create a warm and loving atmosphere. This also aligns with the fact that electronic parents bloggers are a form of emotional labor, managing their own emotions to provide emotional labor that meets the needs of their audience. Furthermore, their clothing and dressing style is more inclined towards the traditional and ordinary image of parents, making it easier for netizens to accept and recognize their electronic parents identity visually.

Moreover, by interacting with fans in the comment section, the bloggers further deepened the construction of their electronic parents identity. When replying to fans in the comment section, the bloggers referred to their fans as daughter and son, for example, expressing gratitude by saying "thank you, daughter." When someone in the comment section called the bloggers grandparents, the bloggers would actively come forward to express their unwillingness to be called grandparents: "Can we not be called parents, grandparents? [Crying emoji] Parents are a little sad [Crying emoji] Mom is a little sad, actually, because mom is only in her 40s [Crying emoji] Thank you, dear little baby [Hugging emoji]." This shows that electronic parents bloggers, while constructing their identities and providing emotional labor to meet the needs of their audiences, may also immerse themselves in the constructed identities and fulfill a certain degree of emotional consumption.

Table 2 Statistics on Image Presentation Related Indicators

Catalog	Number (pcs)			
The number of individuals appearing on-screen	1 (7)	2 (124)	3 (13)	3 and above (3)
Persona	father (3)	mother (4)	spouse (124)	Parents and children (13)	Parents children and others (3)
Sentimental Value	neutrality (0)	non-neutral cumulative optimism (6)	non-neutrality negates negativity (1)	non-neutral warm and loving (140)

4.1.2 Content Presentation: Immersive Scenario Interpretation

As illustrated in "Sharing Daily Life with Daughters" Short Video Content Topics Statistical Chart (see Figure 1), from a holistic perspective, the content genres of "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" short videos exhibit considerable diversity; however, their distribution is uneven. There are eight types in total. Among them, "Parent-child Situational Role-playing" accounts for the largest proportion of about 63%, followed by "Parent-child Emotional Care" and "Couple's Daily Life" with 18% and 10%, respectively. The remaining five thematic types account for a smaller proportion. Among the content types with the largest proportion, "Parent-child Situational Role-playing" refers to the fact that bloggers set up specific scenarios and engage in corresponding emotional labor: consoling and encouraging their children when they fail in exams, taking their children to the supermarket to buy their favorite snacks when they are unhappy, standing up for their children when they are bullied, etc. These real-life scenario role-plays meet the expectations of many people for ideal parents and give viewers a strong sense of immersion, as if they were present in the video and became the beloved child in the video. In such interactions, viewers feel the care and support of virtual parents and gain emotional satisfaction,

thereby further identifying with electronic parents and establishing a simulated intimate relationship.
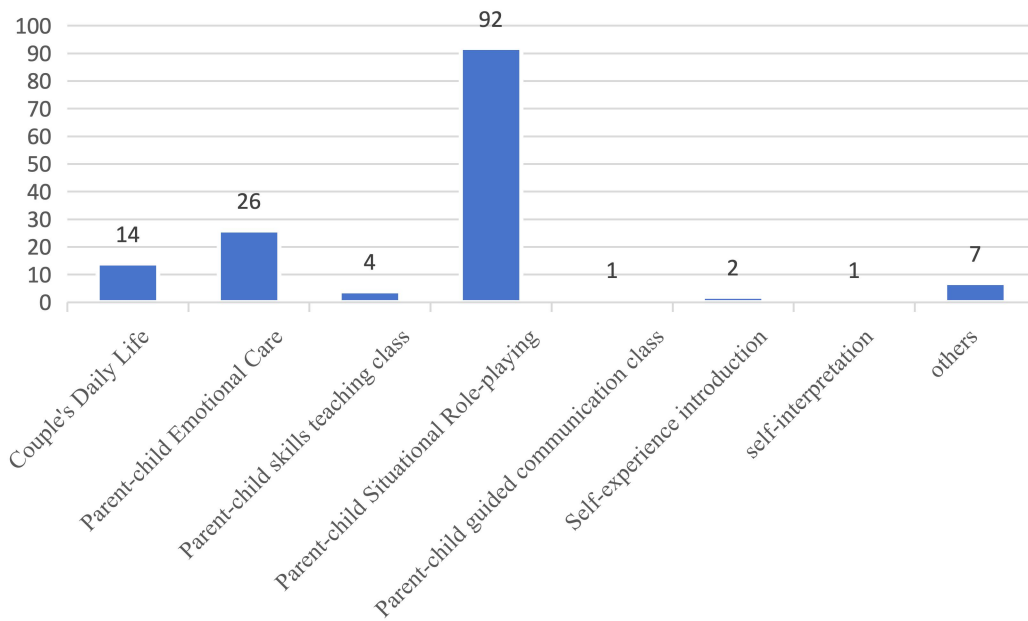

Figure 1 "Sharing Daily Life with Daughters" Short Video Content Topics Statistical Chart

As the description on the homepage of "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" states, *Creating a sweet dream for the child*, they not only creates dreams for its followers but also customizes them. In response to specific video requests from the audience in the comment section, "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" actively adopts suggestions and creates corresponding customized videos. For example, many fans look for traces of their deceased parents in "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter," so the influencers has created videos from the perspectives of both the deceased father and mother, catering to the fans' needs. This personalized service makes fans feel valued and respected, further enhancing their recognition of the influencers as electronic parents.

In terms of video presentation, majority of videos are filmed in real-life settings (97%) and often use dialogue as the primary mode of communication between characters (84%). In terms of the video settings, the largest proportion takes place indoors (48%), followed by outdoor scenes (26%), and a combination of indoor and outdoor scenes (25%). These settings are often focused on family environments or scenes related to activities with children, such as outside the school or in a supermarket, creating an atmosphere that feels close to everyday life and tangible. "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" uses the video scenes and language guidance to subconsciously lead the audience into identifying with the corresponding familial roles. For example, in one video, the language used—Come on, don't be upset, look, your mom has put on her new shirt, today I'll take you for a walk—helps construct a simulated intimate relationship.

4.1.3 Video production: exploring multiple video formats

From the statistical table of indicators related to the video production of "Sharing Daily Life with Daughters" (see Table 3), in terms of video duration, videos of various time periods were involved, showing a diversified distribution of time periods. Among them, there are 41 videos of 1 minute-1 minute 30 seconds, accounting for the most, followed by 35 videos of 1 minute 30 seconds-2 minutes, accounting for the second largest number. It can be observed that the videos of "Sharing Daily Life With Daughters" are predominantly medium-length ones. This might be attributed to the fact that their content is mainly "Parent-child Situational Role-playing", which

necessitates more time for plot development and emotional expression.

Table 3 Video Production Related Metrics

Catalog	Number (pcs)				
Video Duration	less than 30 seconds (23)	30 seconds - 1 minute (20)	1 min-1 min 30 sec (41)	1 minute 30 seconds - 2 minutes (35)	More than 2 minutes (28)
Video Music	Pure Music (86)	Vocal music (57)	None (4)		
Video Captioning	Yes (135)	No (12)			
In-Video Fixed Copy	Yes (14)	No (133)			
Topic Tags	Associate or create related topics (81)	No related or created topics (66)			

Furthermore, analysis of the video elements reveals the following: Among the videos, 86 incorporated pure music, 57 utilized vocal music, and 4 had no music at all. This indicates that the account is cognizant of leveraging music to shape the atmosphere and mood. Subtitles were present in 135 videos, while 12 lacked them, implying that subtitles are frequently employed to enhance video comprehension. Only 14 videos contained fixed copy, with 133 not having any, signifying that the majority of videos prioritize dynamic content display over information conveyance via fixed copy. Additionally, 81 videos were associated with or generated related topics, and 66 were not, suggesting that the account possesses a certain degree of awareness regarding topic strategy.

4.2 User Operation

Feigua Data, as a professional short-video data monitoring tool in China, provides a comprehensive data marketing service support system. By examining the audience profile of the "Sharing Daily Life with My Daughter" video on Feigua Data (see Figure 2), it is evident that the primary viewer demographic of the Douyin account is users aged 18-30, accounting for up to 81.13%. Additionally, the proportion of female viewers within this group is slightly higher than that of male viewers. Observing the data reveals a gradual decline in the audience proportion as the age range shifts from 31-40 to 41-50. However, an unexpected rise is observed within the age cohort of 50 and older, which may be due to younger users accessing the content through their grandparents' devices. This suspicion is supported by a comment in the discussion section: "I'm using my grandmother's account to watch. I saw it at 2 AM. I'm only 12 years old, and it feels like I've been through so much."
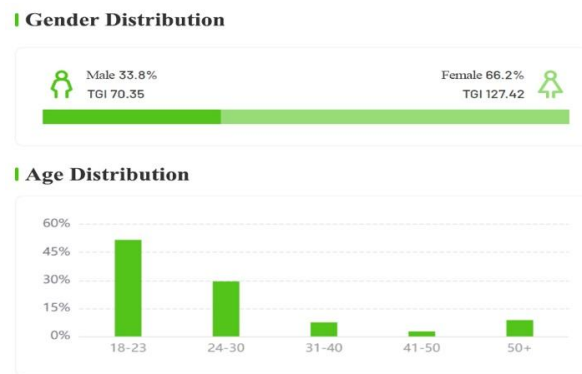
Figure 2 "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" Video Viewer Profile

Source: [Feigua Data]

The user engagement on short video platforms can be measured using three key metrics: the number of likes, comments, and shares. As shown in Table 4, the video with the highest number of likes reached 5.26 million, the one with the highest number of comments had 489,000, and the video with the highest number of shares garnered 1.83 million. Notably, the video with the highest likes and comments depicted parents expressing emotional care for their daughter before the New Year. In contrast, the video with the highest number of shares showed a scenario in which parents comforted and encouraged their child after poor exam results. This suggests that the emotional support and care expressed by electronic parents is precisely what their screen-based "children" desire and seek.

An analysis of the emotional tone in the comment section (see Table 4) reveals that the majority of comments (86%) convey negative emotions. Despite the primary intention of Virtual Family influencers' videos being to deliver warmth and familial love, the predominant emotional tone in the comment section is negative, creating a stark contrast. Further analysis indicates that negative comments mainly fall into two categories: those expressing a lack of familial affection and those related to family disputes. The first category includes comments where users express a strong longing for parental love, such as "I wish my dad could be like this," indicating an emotional void in the dimension of familial affection. The second category involves users sharing conflicts with their biological parents, seeking empathy, understanding, and support from others, as in the example: "I went to see a doctor today, and when I got back, my mom inexplicably hit me. My dad and mom had a fight, I cried my eyes out, my lips and hands went numb, and I felt so bad for spending 800 yuan on the visit [crying]." However, despite the predominance of negative comments, some viewers post positive comments, sharing their own uplifting experiences, such as cooking alone or improving their exam results, in an attempt to gain approval and affirmation from their electronic parents.

The negative tendencies observed in user comments may be intrinsically linked to the emergence and underlying causes of virtual family influencers. The rise of such influencers primarily stems from individuals' lack of familial affection and their deep-seated longing for it in real life. In the comment section, many viewers refer to their biological parents as "adoptive parents," expressing complaints and dissatisfaction. Psychologically, they regard Virtual Family influencers as their true parents and view them as an important source of emotional support. This suggests that the audience of digital parent bloggers largely comprises individuals whose emotional needs for familial connection have not been adequately fulfilled in real life. These users often articulate the difficulties they face in managing family relationships and express their desires for idealized familial dynamics in the comment section. Thus, upon deeper examination of

the root causes of negative comments, it becomes evident why such comments dominate the comment section.

Regarding the interaction situation in the comment section (see Table 4), the Douyin account "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" mostly adopts a non-interactive measure (68%), but sometimes it also comments in the comment section (30%), and very rarely likes user comments (2%). This indicates that this account adopts a limited interaction strategy in the comment section. The reason why "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" adopts a limited interaction strategy may be related to the blogger's emotional labor. Bloggers shape an idealized parental image through emotional labor in short videos, and this process requires relatively low emotional management. They can adopt either surface acting or deep acting. However, interacting with numerous users in the comment section poses higher requirements for emotional laborers, usually requiring deep acting. Therefore, limited by the emotional labor skills and personal energy of emotional laborers, it is understandable that the blogger adopts a limited interaction method for user management. In addition, since "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" creates an idealized parental image, if there is a large amount of interaction in the comment section, it is very likely to shorten the distance between the blogger and the fans, thereby enhancing the fans' sense of the blogger's authenticity, but at the same time weakening its ideality and thus risking the collapse of the ideal image.

Table 4 Statistics on the operation of users of "Sharing Daily Life With Daughter"

	Form	Maximum Values		Minimum Value
User Engagement	Video Likes	5,260,000		2460
	Video Comments	489,000		85
	Video Retweets	1,831,000		47
User Reviews Orientations	User Evaluation Tendency	Positive (11)	Negative (126)	Neutral (10)
Blogger Interaction Degree	Level of Blogger Interaction	Likes in the comments section (3)	Comments in the comments section (44)	No interaction in the comments section (100)

4.3 Commercial Operation

Profitability is the core of an account or an IP. For "Sharing Daily Life with My Daughter", it is crucial to explore its commercial operation, because it is directly related to the profitability of the account, the enhancement of IP value and long-term sustainable development. By analyzing the commercial behavior of short videos of "Sharing Daily Life with My Daughter" (see Figure 2), we found that there are 36 videos with commercial behavior, accounting for 24% of the selected videos. Most of the products implanted in the videos are beauty products, food and beverages, gift items, and movie promotions, which fit the attributes of the account and the style of the content, and are easy to be accepted and understood by the audience.
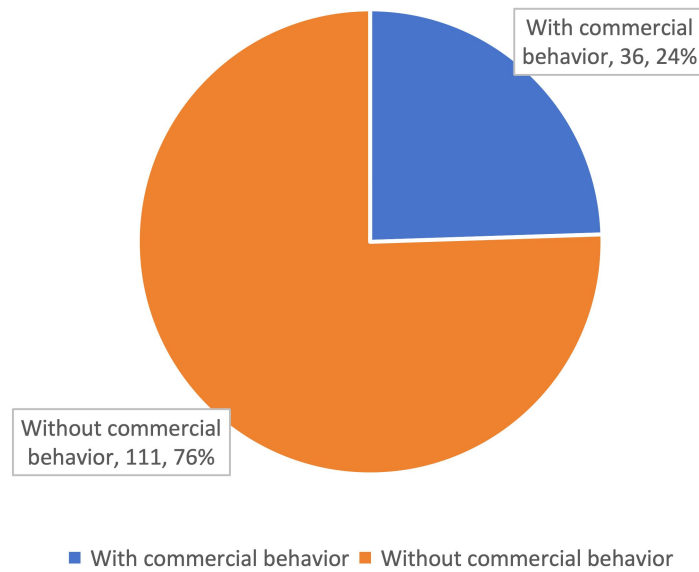
Figure 3 Business Operation Statistics of "Sharing Daily Life with Daughters"

According to Feigua Data, it can be observed that the "Sharing Daily Life with My Daughter" account has only conducted three live-streaming sales events from September 13, 2023, to October 22, 2024 (see Table 5), with all live-streams concentrated between August 5 and August 7, 2024. Based on metrics such as live-stream sales, units sold, and peak viewership, it can be inferred that the live-streaming performance has been suboptimal. According to the product display on the account's homepage, only 159 items have been sold, indicating relatively low sales volume. In conclusion, the current business model of the "Sharing Daily Life with My Daughter" account primarily relies on in-video advertisements for revenue, with live-streaming sales and the homepage showcase serving as supplementary methods. There is a need for further optimization and improvement in its commercial operations.

Table 5 "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" Live Streaming Data

Number of live broadcasts	Live Sales	Live Sales Volume	Live Commodities	Popularity Peak	Viewers	Likes
1 (2024-08-05)	0-250	0-50	27	158	10000	34000
2 (2024-08-06)	0-250	0-50	47	83	8643	25000
3 (2024-08-07)	0-250	0-50	47	91	5679	14000

Source: [Feigua Data]

5. Discussion and Reflection

5.1 Identity Recognition and Trust Crisis

Douyin, as an integrated medium possessing the affordances of content, community, and communication, has presently emerged as a predominant conduit influencing people's real lives and information dissemination, exerting an impact on aspects such as people's perception of media time and space and emotional alienation. Virtual Family bloggers like those of "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter", by means of the Douyin platform, employ verbal language (such as darling daughter, darling son), body language (such as waving, thumbs-up), and camera language (such as close-up shot, medium close-up shot) to construct specific identities within short videos

and further fortify and intensify this identity recognition during the interaction with the audience in the comment area. For example, an audience member left a comment in the comment section stating "I no longer have a father", to which the blogger of "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" replied, "If you don't mind, I could be."

Freud's concept of *substitutive satisfaction* in psychoanalysis suggests that when desire energy encounters obstacles with its initial object, it will redirect to other objects. If it faces further barriers, it will continue to shift until it finds a substitute object that alleviates tension and satisfies the desire. The identity construction of Virtual Family influencers offers audiences an emotional substitute for satisfaction: when viewers encounter difficulties in managing intimate relationships in real life, they can seek emotional comfort and encouragement from the Virtual Family figures, providing emotional compensation and fulfilling their psychological need for support. The Virtual Family serves as an outlet for emotional release, enabling viewers to express feelings that may be difficult to share in real-life intimate relationships. This can contribute to promoting individual psychological well-being and social harmony.

Virtual Family influencers construct their identities through various means, while audiences form corresponding identity recognition based on their own needs. In this process, audiences gradually develop trust in virtual family influencers. Kim and Kim (2021) found that such trust is instrumental in fostering audience loyalty, which in turn leads to better commercial marketing outcomes for social media influencers. However, it is important to remain vigilant, as trust built upon virtual family identities may pose risks to the personal and financial safety of the audience. Some Virtual Family influencers exploit the trust of their audience to encourage offline meetings, which can result in sexual assault—incidents of this nature have occurred, seriously jeopardizing the safety of the audience. Furthermore, certain virtual family influencers leverage this trust to engage in commercial activities, and when audiences lack sufficient discernment and self-control, excessive consumption may occur. Therefore, while virtual family influencers provide valuable emotional support and healing, we must remain cautious of the potential threats that may arise from the trust established between influencers and their audiences.

5.2 Emotional Value and Media Dependence

The Media Dependency Theory posits that the more individuals or societies use media, the greater the sense of satisfaction derived from it, and consequently, the deeper their dependence on media. Initially, media dependence stems from seemingly "harmless" habits; however, when such habitual usage becomes uncontrollable, it can lead to personal and societal problems (Wang, Lee, & Hua, 2015).

Virtual Family influencers, by constructing and performing idealized familial relationships, provide emotional support and psychological comfort to many young people, fulfilling their emotional needs. However, this also intensifies their dependence on social media. Some audience members have become aware of this media dependency and have taken measures to resist it, such as deliberately selecting "not interested" in algorithmic recommendations as a form of resistance. Yet, others may choose to indulge in it, with some viewers commenting, "Digital parents, digital sisters... I really wish I could live in this world forever. I don't want to go back to the outside world... I just want to live in this world forever."

Yuan, Cheng, and Duan (2024) found that the higher the degree of media dependence on chatbots, the worse users' self-disclosure and social integration in real-life interpersonal communication became. It is important to note that a similar pattern may exist between Virtual Family influencers and their followers. The mimetic intimacy formed between virtual family influencers and their followers can be described as a "pseudo-utopia"—beautiful, illusory, but

unattainable. Virtual Family influencers present an almost perfect, artificially constructed relationship, making it easier for audiences to immerse themselves in the fictitious dream world, seeking temporary relief.

However, this virtual relationship can never truly replace real-life intimate relationships and may even lead to the weakening and deterioration of such relationships in the real world. Excessive immersion in the mimetic intimacy created by virtual family influencers can negatively affect one's relationship with biological parents, resulting in a weakened parent-child bond. If this becomes widespread, the traditional kinship-based social networks in China may gradually disintegrate, altering the structure of close-knit societies. Moreover, the traditional Confucian concept of "filial piety" may face significant challenges.

5.3 Emotional Economy and Audience Commodity Theory

The commercial operation model of "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" primarily relies on short video advertisements, where the advertised products are integrated as props into the narrative of the video. In this process, the influencers provide emotional value through performances, engaging in emotional labor, while the audience expends time and energy, consuming emotions by watching the videos. This reciprocal process results in the covert exploitation and emotional transaction of the audience.

The theory of audience commodity theory is put forward by the famous Canadian communication political economist Dallas Smythe for mass media. Within a capitalist framework, the application of Information and Communication Technologies has given rise to the "consciousness industry," mobilizing production capabilities on a comprehensive scale, blurring the boundaries between work and leisure time. As a result, leisure time becomes subordinated to consumer "labor" (Manzerolle, 2010). In this context, the act of scrolling through Douyin and watching short videos during one's leisure time also becomes a form of implicit labor, an understated exploitation.

However, new media platforms possess distinct characteristics. Unlike in the traditional media era, where audiences were passive recipients of information, audiences in the contemporary new media era possess a degree of subjective agency. This is evident in the comment section of the "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" Douyin account. Observing the comment section of the advertisement-integrated short videos, it is apparent that most users adopt a nonchalant attitude toward the advertisements, prioritizing instead the sharing of personal grievances and frustrations. A portion of the audience, however, demonstrates understanding of the Virtual Family influencers' advertisement integration, posting comments such as "Let them earn." This indicates that within the commodification process, there exists a "active audience" with some degree of subjective agency.

Hunter (2015), in his research on audience commodification and mommy blogs, found that as mommy bloggers commercialized and audiences were commodified, the nature of mommy blogs shifted from genuine community sharing to profit-driven motives, undermining the trust between the blogger and the audience and disrupting the original community atmosphere. This suggests that during the process of audience commodification, the value originally sought by the audience may be replaced by commercial interests, thus failing to effectively meet the audience's needs. Moreover, audience commodification necessitates behaviors such as watching videos, liking, commenting, and sharing, while platforms, aiming for maximized commercial profits, leverage algorithms for precise recommendations, continuously prompting the audience to engage in these behaviors. The powerful algorithms persistently push content favored by the audience, causing them to become more immersed in the virtual world. This leads to the virtualization of social

relationships, weakening interpersonal connections in real life, and thereby contributing to the phenomenon of " alone together," where the more people scroll through short videos, the more they feel isolated.

6. Conclusion and Suggestion

This paper analyzes the Virtual Family influencers, using the "Sharing Daily Life with Daughter" Douyin account as an example. It is found that in terms of content operation, through the presentation of warm and loving parental image, immersive scenario interpretation and diversified video production methods, the bloggers build their identity and provide emotional value. Regarding user engagement, the primary audience consists of females aged 18-30, with negative emotional expressions prevalent in the comment sections, and limited interaction from the influencers. In terms of commercial operations, the main revenue source is through advertising placement, with live-streaming and product showcases serving as supplementary methods, though their effectiveness remains suboptimal.

This study makes significant academic and practical contributions through an in-depth exploration of the operational strategies employed by Virtual Family influencers on the Douyin platform. In the academic realm, Virtual Family influencers, as an emerging phenomenon, have not yet received sufficient scholarly attention. By analyzing their operational strategies, this research fills a gap in the field of Virtual Family influencer studies and enriches the existing academic literature. Furthermore, the study expands the application of emotional labor theory, particularly revealing innovative forms of emotional labor within the ecosystem of short video platforms, thus providing new perspectives and empirical evidence for the development of the theory. From a practical perspective, the findings offer strategic insights for the operation of short video platforms. Additionally, the study helps brands and advertisers better understand the emotional connections between Virtual Family influencers and their fans, thereby enabling them to more effectively leverage these influencers for activities that promote product sales and brand awareness.

While Virtual Family influencers fulfill the emotional needs of young people, there are concerns related to trust issues, media dependency, and the commodification of audiences. Although these virtual familial relationships provide temporary emotional satisfaction, they cannot replace real-life intimate relationships and may even have negative consequences for them. Therefore, future research should further explore how to balance virtual and real-world relationships and how to guide young people in establishing healthier, more authentic interpersonal interaction patterns. Additionally, the business strategies of Virtual Family influencers should be examined to identify more diversified and sustainable development paths.

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